Keepin’ It Cool: the Behavioral Effects of Wearing Sunglasses

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Wearing sunglasses changes people’s behavior. When people wear sunglasses, they express less intense emotional responses and violate social norms by ‘slacking’ on performance and indulging on consumer choice. We propose that sunglasses have these effects by activating a cool schema—a set of beliefs and behavioral scripts associated with coolness.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Do people behave “cooler” when they wear sunglasses and, if so, why does this occur? According to our framework, consumers develop beliefs about the kinds of people who use certain products (e.g., caregivers wear aprons, athletes wear athletic shoes, and cool kids wear sunglasses). These beliefs are incorporated into consumers’ schemas for various social identities. Thus, when consumers use a product that is strongly linked to a particular social identity schema—the way sunglasses are linked to the cool identity schema—consumers will exhibit other schema-linked behaviors as well. This view does not imply that consumers deliberately and strategically modify their behavior when they wear sunglasses. Rather, we propose that wearing sunglasses automatically activates a cool identity schema, which causes people to behave cooler without consciously intending to or realizing it.

In support of our theorizing, survey and experimental research demonstrates that (1) sunglasses are part of young adults’ schema for a cool identity, and (2) young adults who wear sunglasses exhibit hallmarks of a ‘cool kid’. While these behavioral effects occur without conscious awareness, they depend on the strength of the association between sunglasses and the cool identity schema. That is, chronic or temporary associations to health (i.e., UV protection), rather than coolness, attenuate these behavioral effects.

The meaning of cool has been linked to several characteristics and behaviors, including emotional control (Erber et al. 1996), disregard for authority (Nancarrow et al. 2002; Pountain and Robins 2000), disengagement, or ‘slacking’, at school (Czopp et al. 1998; Milner 2004), disregard for the opinion of others (Belk et al. 2010), behavioral autonomy (Warren and Campbell 2013), and impulsive-ness (Frank 1997). The cool identity is also linked to certain consumption practices. Smoking and drug and alcohol use are the most notorious among these, but even unhealthy eating can convey coolness. Young adults see unhealthy food choices as a way to express personal autonomy to peers (Bassett, Chapman, and Beagan 2008) and rebel against parental control (Hill 2002; Stevenson et al. 2007; Stok et al. 2010). In addition, the cool identity is linked to a certain dress code, which, across subcultures, includes wearing sunglasses (Belk et al. 2010; Dinnerstein 1999; Mercer 1997; Moore 2005). Thus, prior research suggests an indirect link between sunglasses and various ‘cool’ behaviors via the cool identity schema. To test our hypothesis that wearing sunglasses causes people to behave cooler, we examine participants’ tendency to ‘slack’ on performance tasks, report weaker emotions (i.e., ‘keep their cool’) in response to positive or negative feedback, and make indulgent consumption decisions.

Study 1 was a survey study. Using factor analysis, we established, first, that participants define coolness in terms of contrarian behaviors, including a tendency to control emotions, ‘slack’ on performance tasks, and disregard social norms. Second, relative to other fashion accessories and garments, such as scarves or jeans, participants consider sunglasses particularly cool. In sum, this study established the basic associations we rely on in subsequent studies: sunglasses are considered cool, and coolness means contrarian behavior.

Study 2 tested the prediction that wearing sunglasses causes students to ‘slack’ on an academic test—on which most university students would try to do well—and to express less intense emotions in response to (positive or negative) feedback about their performance. In the lab, participants were informed that they would complete two unrelated tasks, an English language ability test and a product (i.e., sunglasses) evaluation task. Half were informed that their product evaluations would be more accurate if they wore the sunglasses prior to evaluating them. The other half were not instructed to wear the sunglasses. Instead, the sunglasses remained on their desk, in plain sight, throughout the study. For the language test, participants received 5 minutes to generate as many words as possible from a set of scrambled letters (Dewall et al. 2011). Then they were randomly assigned to receive positive or negative feedback about their performance. Next, they completed Tangney and Dearing’s (2002) State Shame and Guilt Scale, which measures feelings of shame, guilty and pride. Lastly, participants completed the ostensibly unrelated product evaluation task (keeping with the cover story). The results indicated that participants who wore sunglasses performed worse on the test than participants who did not wear sunglasses. They also expressed less intense feelings of shame, guilt, and pride in response to performance-related feedback. Importantly, performance did not predict emotions. This suggests that, as predicted, wearing sunglasses produced two independent effects: ‘slacking’ behavior and muted emotion expression.

Study 3 provides evidence that these behavioral effects depend on the perception that sunglasses are cool. All participants wore sunglasses and viewed an advertisement and magazine article that suggested that sunglasses are either an important fashion accessory or an important tool for UV-protection. As our dependent variable, we assessed ‘slacking’ behavior on a matrices task (Gino et al. 2010). We measured the number of matrices completed and the time spent on the task. The results showed that when participants associated sunglasses with health, rather than coolness, the effect of wearing sunglasses on contrarian behavior was attenuated. Similar effects were obtained for performance and time spent on the task, suggesting that sunglasses affect motivation to persist, not actual ability, as we would expect. Importantly, because all participants wore sunglasses and only their beliefs about sunglasses were manipulated, we rule out the possibility that sunglasses are affecting ‘slacking’ by imposing cognitive load or distraction. Instead, the results support the hypothesis that sunglasses exert their effects by activating a cool schema, which leads to contrarian behavior.

Study 4 sought to generalize the behavioral effect of wearing sunglasses to a different measure of coolness: unhealthy eating. We used a procedure similar to study 1’s, but with a different dependent variable. The dependent measure consisted of a series of hypothetical menu choices (i.e., appetizer, entrée, dessert, and drink) among options that were either healthy or unhealthy (Fischbach and Zhang 2008). We also tested the hypothesis that the effect of wearing sunglasses depends on impression management (Paulhus 1984). Impression management involves two processes: the selection of self-images for public portrayal and the strategic conveying of those images (Leary and Kowalski 1990). As self-presentations become more habitual, people select self-images and manage their self-presentation without consciously realizing that they are doing so (Paulhus 2002). Moreover, the effect of impression management on behavior depends on the particular self-image selected. For example, under baseline conditions (i.e., when responding to a typical research survey), people with high-IM tendencies report stronger intentions to eat healthily compared to those with low-IM tendencies (Sun, Horn, and Merritt 2009). But under conditions that prompt one to portray
an image of coolness, the healthy food preferences of high-IM compared to low-IM respondents should diminish because healthy eating is inconsistent with the cool image (Stok et al. 2010). The results supported this prediction.

REFERENCES


