Is Concealing Emotional Expression Cool?

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Although the literature argues that people become cool by concealing emotion, this relationship has not been empirically tested. We found that concealing emotion has a negative effect on perceptions of coolness and that this negative effect has downstream consequences for the products associated with individuals that conceal versus express emotion.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Despite a widespread belief that coolness sells products and drives marketplace trends, it is unclear what influences perceptions of coolness (Frank 1997; Heath and Potter 2004; Kerner and Pressman 2007). Researchers have argued that things (products, brands, trends, etc.) become cool through association with cool people, such as a brand’s spokesperson, employees, or consumers (Gladdwell 1997; Southgate 2004). Therefore, in order to understand what makes things cool, it would help to know what makes people cool.

A number of authors have argued that people become cool by concealing or controlling emotional expression (Bird and Tapp 2008; Connor 1995; Pountain and Robins 2000; Stearns 1994). Thus, according to this view, concealing emotional expression should have a direct, positive effect on perceived coolness. Despite the widespread belief that concealing emotional expression positively relates to coolness, this relationship has not been the subject of empirical testing. Further, the social psychology literature casts doubt on this view since research suggests that concealing the expression of emotion has a negative effect on how individuals are evaluated (Cunningham 1986; Weisbuch, Ivecic, and Ambady 2009).

We conducted three experiments to test whether concealing emotion makes people seem more or less cool. In addition to examining whether concealing emotion has a direct, positive effect on coolness, we examined the contrasting hypothesis: concealing emotions make people seem less cool by making them less likeable. Studies 2 and 3 also examined whether product evaluations are affected by the emotional expression of individuals associated with the product.

Study 1 tested the competing predictions in the context of an introductory conversation between two people. In this study, graduate students (n = 74) at a European university rated the coolness of a confederate that was posing as another study participant. Based on random assignment, the confederate either expressed or concealed his or her emotions during a three-minute introductory conversation. Contrary to the belief that concealing emotion is cool, participants considered the confederate less cool when he or she concealed emotions than when he or she expressed emotion (M = 4.66 vs. 5.35; F(1, 66) = 6.53, p = .01). Moreover, a mediation test (Hayes, 2013) confirmed that the confederate’s likability mediated the effect of concealing emotion on perceived coolness (indirect effect = -.14, 95% C.I. = -.34 to -.03).

Study 2 served two purposes: (1) to determine whether the negative effect of concealing emotional expression on perceived coolness would generalize to an advertising context and (2) to determine whether the effect of concealing emotions on the coolness of a product spokesperson would affect product attitudes. Participants (n = 193) recruited from Amazon’s Mechanical Turk website viewed a print advertisement for Franco Rossi, a real but relatively unfamiliar brand of men’s clothing. Participants were randomly assigned to see an advertisement in which the spokesperson concealed or expressed positive emotion. Participants evaluated the spokesperson and the product.

Consistent with study 1, participants perceived the spokesperson to be less cool when he concealed emotion than when he expressed emotion (M = 3.49 vs. 4.09, F(1, 191) = 8.35, p < .01). Concealing emotion made the spokesperson seem less cool by making the spokesperson less likeable (indirect effect = -.58; 95% C.I. = -.75 to -.43). Furthermore, the perceived coolness of the spokesperson had a positive effect on attitudes towards the product (b = .39, t = 5.70, p < .001). Also, the indirect effect of concealing emotional expression on product attitudes through both likability and perceived coolness was significant (indirect effect = -.23; 95% C.I. = -.36 to -.13). This indirect effect indicates that concealing emotion made the spokesperson less likeable which then made the spokesperson seem less cool, which in turn negatively affected attitudes towards the advertised product.

Study 3 examined whether the negative effect of concealing emotional expression on coolness would extend to situations in which negative emotion is concealed. Establishing the effect of concealing negative emotions on perceptions of coolness is important since keeping ones cool is a phrase typically used for people who control or conceal the expression of negative emotions, like anger or fear. Similarly to study 2, study 3 also assessed whether the emotional expression of a person affects evaluations of products with which they associate.

To test the effect of concealing negative emotion on perceptions of coolness, we hired a professional actress to make six brief videos. The actress pretended to be responding to a conversation on Skype in which her neighbor said something to evoke fear, sadness, or anger. She expressed or concealed the emotions thus creating videos corresponding to the 2 (expression: express, conceal) x 3 (emotion: sadness, fear, anger) between-subjects design. Based on random assignment, undergraduate students (n = 272) were told of the emotionally evoking situation the woman was responding to and then viewed the corresponding video. Afterwards, they evaluated the woman and the hat she was wearing.

A 2 X 3 ANOVA revealed that the only significant effect was the effect of expression (conceal versus express) on coolness. Concealing emotion had a negative effect on coolness (M = 2.56 vs. 5.35; F(1,266) = 301.08, p < .001). Consistent with studies 1 and 2, a mediation model indicated that concealing emotion made the actress less likable which in turn made her appear less cool (indirect effect = -.39; 95% C.I. = -.55 to -.28). Furthermore, the coolness of the actress had a positive effect on attitudes towards the hat she was wearing (b = .31, r =.46, p<.001). An analysis of the mediation model showed that concealing emotion affected how the hat was evaluated through likability and then perceived coolness (indirect effect = -.12; 95% C.I. = -.20 to -.06).

Despite the belief that people become cool by concealing emotion, we found that concealing emotion makes people seem less cool by making them less likable. Our research suggests that brands and people can become cool by associating with people (spokespeople, employees, consumers, etc.) who freely express their feelings, not those who attempt to mask or control their emotions.

REFERENCES


