Rebel With a (Profit) Cause: How Rebellious Brand Positioning Leads to the Perceived Coolness

Alessandro Biraglia, Leeds University Business School, University of Leeds, United Kingdom
J. Joško Brakus, Leeds University Business School, University of Leeds, United Kingdom

In five experiments we test the effect of a disadvantaged brand biography and rebelliousness on consumers’ perception of coolness. Results consistently demonstrate that expressing rebelliousness is considered cooler when a person or a company comes from a disadvantaged background. Furthermore, brand authenticity mediates the relationship between rebelliousness and coolness.

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Alessandro Biraglia, University of Leeds, UK
J. Joško Brakus, University of Leeds, UK

EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Coolness has been studied by scholars from different disciplines: semiotics (Danesi, 1994), psychology (Dar-Nimrod et al., 2012), and consumer research (Warren and Campbell, 2014). Before its commercialization, the concept of coolness was originally related to rebellious attitudes and behaviors (Frank, 1997). We contribute to the literature on coolness by linking rebellious behaviors to disadvantaged financial, social or cultural backgrounds. Such backgrounds are often presented in the companies’ narratives about the background of their founders (e.g., Steve Jobs “home brewing” computers in a garage). Gladwell (2013) refers to people with disadvantaged backgrounds who ultimately managed to be successful as “David,” alluding to the young shepherd who defeated the giant Goliath in the episode from the Bible.

Telling stories about a disadvantaged background and narrating how difficult and hard was for the owner to establish the venture has been shown to increase consumers’ connection with the brands (Paharia et al., 2011). We claim that when a brand is positioned in a rebellious way, consumers will perceive the brand as cooler if the brand has a disadvantaged rather than and advantaged biography, because disadvantaged brand biography seems more congruent with rebellious positioning.

We argue that brand authenticity mediates this relationship. Napoli and colleagues (2014) point out how consumers perceive a company as authentic if they think that it consistently behaves in accordance with its values and beliefs. In other words, the more a brand acts in congruence with these values at all stages—production, promotion, or customer care—, the more this brand is perceived as authentic by consumers. We believe that for a rebellious brand being perceived as an underdog may justify acting against the mainstream rules in order to succeed, increasing the authenticity of the rebellious claim and boosting, in turn, coolness.

Consumers may, nevertheless, evaluate rebelliousness in different ways depending on how important it is for them to be connected with or to be independent from other consumers. We therefore argue that self-construal can act as a potential moderator of the relationship between rebelliousness and brand authenticity, with consumers with higher level of independence finding the rebellious positioning more diagnostic (Aaker, 2000).

We conducted five experiments to test the hypotheses. In Experiment 1 (n = 116) we presented respondents with four descriptions of a person, manipulating his background (disadvantaged vs. advantaged) and his behaviour (rebellious vs. compliant). We found that the interaction between a disadvantaged background and a rebellious behaviour significantly impacts on the perception of coolness ($M_{Disadvantaged, rebellious} = 3.46$, $M_{Advantaged, rebellious} = 2.67$; $M_{Disadvantaged, compliant} = 2.48$, $M_{Advantaged, compliant} = 2.80$; $F(1, 112) = 4.13$, $p < .05$). This result was replicated in Experiment 2 (n = 150), asking respondents to evaluate the coolness of a painting called "Revolution." We found that an artist’s disadvantaged background significantly influences perceived coolness of the painting ($M_{Disadvantaged} = 4.12$, $M_{Advantaged} = 3.58$; $F(1, 149) = 3.14$, $p < .05$). We also introduced feedback about the authenticity of the artist inner feelings through the comment of an art critic. Results showed that a negative feedback about the authenticity of the artist inner feelings influences the perception of an artist with an advantaged background, but not the one with a disadvantaged background ($M_{Positive, advantaged} = 3.48$, $M_{Positive, advantaged} = 3.98$, $M_{Control, advantaged} = 3.28$ vs. $M_{Negative, disadvantaged} = 4.38$ vs. $M_{Positive, disadvantaged} = 3.68$ vs. $M_{Control, disadvantaged} = 4.36$; $F(2, 143) = 3.59$, $p < .05$).

In Experiment 3 (n = 160) and Experiment 4 (n = 127) we found the same effect of the previous two studies in a marketing context, testing the relationship between a disadvantaged company background and coolness (Experiment 3: $M_{David} = 4.74$; $M_{Goliath} = 3.27$; $M_{Control} = 3.98$; $F(2, 157) = 10.62$, $p < .000$). In Experiment 4, we also tested if this condition influences Coolness when the company becomes a big multinational corporation after having started from humble origins through a brand biography named Rags to Riches. The results confirmed this effect ($M_{Goliath} = 3.69$; $M_{David} = 4.83$; $M_{Rags to Riches} = 5.12$; $F(2, 125) = 5.34$, $p < .001$). Notably, the Goliath and Rags to Riches conditions contained the same information about company performance and sales, differing only for the presence of a disadvantaged brand biography in the latter.

We then tested the mediating role of brand authenticity on the relationship between perceived rebelliousness and perceived coolness of the brand together with the moderating role of consumer independence in a moderated mediation analysis (Hayes, 2013). Results showed that perceived authenticity indeed mediated the direct effect of rebelliousness on coolness and that consumers’ level of independence moderated the relationship between rebelliousness and authenticity.

Lastly, Experiment 5 (n = 127) examines the relationship between the disadvantaged company background and the perception of coolness in the context of more functional products (appliances). Notably, the effect of the company biography across conditions remained significant ($M_{David} = 4.88$; $M_{Goliath} = 4.21$; $F(1, 126) = 6.40$, $p < .05$). Also, when asked if it was appropriate to advertise the product as rebellious, the respondents in the David condition expressed a significantly higher agreement than the respondents exposed to the Goliath condition ($M_{David} = 4.95$; $M_{Goliath} = 3.87$; $F(1, 126) = 15.65$, $p < .000$).

This research extends the literature on brand coolness, brand biographies, and brand authenticity, demonstrating how these constructs can be applied to different domains and how they impact consumers’ evaluation of advertising clues (such as a rebellious positioning). On a managerial level, this research demonstrates that the use of a disadvantaged brand biography in presenting the company enhances the level of coolness for its brands no matter the size of the company and the product category.

REFERENCES


