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Social Marketing and the Meaning of Cool

PEER REVIEWED

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ABSTRACT

Commercial marketers have long understood the value of cool in designing and selling their products, and have invested heavily in keeping in touch with the latest trends among their consumers. In this article, we contend that social marketers could use "cool" to achieve goals of behavioral change, especially with teenagers. We trace the history of cool through to its current role in consumption before exploring how commercial marketers keep track of cool trends. With a focus on teenagers, typically cool consumers but also those most likely to embrace risky behaviors, we consider the potential and pitfalls of using cool for social marketing. We conclude with a practical discussion of how to use cool, and how to stay in touch with cool consumers in a social marketing context.

Introduction

The word "cool" was apparently first used by the young, black jazz musician Lester Young, one of the most important tenor saxophonists of all time. Young played with Billie Holliday and other greats of jazz from the 1920s to 1950s but succumbed to drink and malnutrition, dying in 1959.

The very word "cool" suggests the rebellious and illicit, and it is perhaps telling that the man who coined the word also smoked tobacco, was caught smoking marijuana while in the army, and died from the effects of alcohol. "Rebellious" and "illicit" are not concepts generally compatible with the aims of social marketing, yet we must ask whether social marketers can afford to neglect cool. Indeed, commercial marketers have long realized the value of cool, and have invested heavily in identifying cool trends: Perhaps there are lessons to be learned.

This article charts the rise of "cool" and its extensive influence on modern society. We look at how it became embedded in modern consumption and how commercial marketers use cool to appeal to consumers. We then ask whether

social marketers can do the same to combat the pervasive influence of cool in encouraging young people to smoke, drink, take drugs, and indulge in other anti-social or unhealthy behaviors. We conclude that, as social marketers sometimes struggle to change attitudes toward the behaviors they promote, an understanding of cool could increase their chances of communicating with teenagers and perhaps wider audiences.

The Origins of Cool

The word "cool" may have originated in the US jazz scene of the 1920s, but it captured a sense of originality and fashion that had long existed in various guises (Pountain and Robins 2000). This more modern concept of cool was embodied by black musicians who resisted racial prejudice and exclusion by embracing their own slang, the use of drugs, and a sense of detachment from the restrictive society in which they lived (Shapiro 1999). The wealthy white community discovered cool as Prohibition led them to mix with the underworld in search of illicit alcohol (Nancarrow, Nancarrow, and Page 2002). Cool evolved as, following the second World War, soldiers returned home, but disillusionment with the values of society led some to join motorcycle gangs, embrace rock and roll and "live fast and live now" (Pountain and Robins 2000). Through the 1950s, white bohemians, the "Beats," reified cool in American literature. Norman Mailer, in his essay "The White Negro," asserted that the only way to resist the conformity of the 1950s United States was by being a "Hipster, and 'American existentialist' whose tastes for jazz, sex, drugs, and the slang and mores of black society constituted the best means of resisting the encroachments of Cold War oppression" (Frank 1997, 12).

The 1960s and 1970s saw the rise of the US liberal movement and counter-culture, fuelled by the anti-Vietnam protests, civil unrest, and the growing use of hallucinogens. It is perhaps ironic then that this anti-establishment, hedonistic movement symbolized by the adoption of hippy fashion also heralded the adoption of cool by the masses (Frank 1997).

Cool Comes to the Masses

> "We saw this trend coming a million consumer-miles away. It was inevitable: The protest Generation comes of age as the Generation of Super-Consumers."
> – *Faith Popcorn*, 1991 (*cited in Frank* 1997, 225)

The hippy generation grew up, but never relinquished cool: As they took on responsible roles as parents and wage earners, these Baby Boomers saved cool

for their weekends (Frank 1997). Meanwhile, marketers fought their own creative revolution against the men in grey flannel suits, as they co-opted hip values to themselves and their brands though the 1960s (Frank 1997). Cool was no longer the preserve of the young and, over time, the concept of cool has been incorporated into dominant consumer ideology. Cool values, such as self-expression, sexual permissiveness, and hedonism, have been intrinsically interwoven into consumption (Frank 1997), and Nancarrow and Nancarrow assert, "cool is now best described as an advanced form of knowledge about commodities and consumption practices" (2007, 135).

New generations of teenagers have continued to adopt and adapt cool to their twenty-first century lives. Black culture and music such as R&B have returned as major influences, but a vast array of sub-cultures exist, each with their own distinct idea of cool. Marketers have continued to monitor trends and incorporate them into their products and communications, and it is now possible to buy cool off the shelf. Cool is no longer the preserve of the repressed, and is now valued by the majority but especially by teenagers (Frank 1997).

What is Cool?

> Tom Ford was asked . . . to define the word "cool." "I think it's not using that word," said Ford. (*Jones* 2007)

The word "cool" may not be cool anymore, but it still seems the best word to describe that elusive, exclusive quality that makes behaviors and objects so hip, desirable and symbolic of "being in the know." If we don't have a suitable term for this characteristic, perhaps it is not surprising that no succinct definition exists either.

Pountain and Robins described cool as "intrinsically anti-social, anti-family, pro-drug, anti-caring and most of all anti-authority" (2000, 13). This identifies the rejection of moral values and mores of the "establishment" that often characterize cool. The risky, illicit, and subversive are also implicit in the meaning of cool, with drugs, guns, sex and a taste for the forbidden often associated with the hippest of people.

Values of ironic detachment, hedonism, and narcissism have been linked to the concept of cool by Pountain and Robins (2000), while Nancarrow and Nancarrow (2007) cite a taste for the post-modern ideas of pastiche and retro, and distaste for mass culture. Meanwhile, others argue that authenticity is "the truest hallmark of cool behavior" (Southgate 2003). Such traits reveal an element of having underground knowledge about the latest consumption practices, often

precipitating social space races to create and follow new trends. However, as soon as the masses adopt such a trend, it is obsolete.

Cool Brands, a list of the United Kingdom's coolest brands compiled by Superbrands, choose the following six characteristics to describe cool: stylish, innovative, original, authentic, desirable, and unique. However, the brand topping the Cool Brands list, Aston Martin, offers a more enduring vision of cool that many desire but few can afford. Despite such longevity, this list of fast cars, even faster motorbikes, alcohol, sexy underwear, and loud music still carries the allure of the illicit and risky.

The list of adjectives implied by cool is changeable and extensive, betraying its "chameleon-like quality" (Nancarrow and Nancarrow 2007, 129). Gladwell, in his 1997 article "The Coolhunt," claims that there is no "coherent philosophy of cool," yet there is a constant race to pin down the latest chimera of cool in the name of consumption.

Why is "Cool" Cool?

Even the least cool of us will have observed the distinct teenage tribes with their own ideas of cool. Currently, Emos and Nu-Ravers are two groups which illustrate Pountain and Robins' observation that "there is a tendency in cool that encourages the formation of tight peer groups and subcultures, unified by a shared definition of what is cool" (2000, 9).

O'Donnell and Wardlow (2000) believe cool originates in "the fluctuating discrepancy between actual and ideal selves in early adolescence" and the "use of external props to shore up the faltering sense of self" that they attribute to young people of that age group. This theory may explain why young people follow cool, but not why trends start in the first instance, nor why they become so quickly outdated. Neither does it explain why cool is still valued by older generations, or why such tight peer groups should form.

These groups are also defined by their strong rejection of what is *not* cool: the passé, older generations, or anyone or thing that tries too hard to be cool. This drive for distinction from other social groups is strongly reminiscent of Bourdieu's observations of how the French bourgeoisie distanced themselves culturally from the hoi-polloi. Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital centered upon the "legitimate culture" of the elite: "reading books other than for a job," "theater-going," "listening to classical music," museum and art gallery visits, and "no TV" (1984, 118). It could be argued that modern teenage rebels accrue a different kind of cultural capital based upon "illegitimate culture": reading about icons in magazines and on the internet, cinema-going, listening to alternative music,

creating new fashions, drinking, smoking, and sharing the elusive knowledge of the latest trends. This new elite is not defined by money or class, but by disrespect for, and indeed perception of superiority to, the rules of society. They reject "the man," i.e., authority, and reward the savvy risk-takers who develop their own rules.

Thornton (1995) saw the creation of cool as a form of subcultural capital, though this implies that legitimate capital is more important than illegitimate capital. Here it is proposed that cool is an alternative form of cultural capital, nonetheless valuable. Indeed, cool is so valuable that commercial marketers will pay dearly to capture its essence.

Commercial Marketers' Pursuit of Cool

> A cool lifestyle can be achieved, to a large extent, through selective consumption – which is why cool is so interesting to marketers. (*Nancarrow et al.* 2001, 311)

Southgate describes cool as "the anvil on which many brands are made or broken. Cool is the currency all brands can profit from when they trade in it" (2003, 453). Many marketers, in categories such as fashion and music, realize that their brand is unlikely to prosper if they're not a step ahead of cool. Others also use cool as a tool to interact more successfully with consumers and stand out from the clutter of modern day marketing (Kerner and Pressman 2007). To this end, a gamut of techniques and tools has been employed to pin down cool in the name of marketing.

Coolhunters appeared in the 1990s and became a phenomenon in television documentaries and news articles. These "cultural spies . . . penetrate the regions of the teen landscape where corporations aren't welcome" (Frontline 2005), and seek out the seeds of future cool by interviewing trendsetters in the "in clubs," at skate parks, and other hip hangouts. They then sell this elusive knowledge to marketers who pay dearly for such an insight into their target markets. Some accuse coolhunters of portraying themselves as alone in understanding "cool's abstruse, obfuscated and opaque rules" (Southgate 2003, 453), in order to demand the substantial fees that companies pay for their insight. Kerner and Pressman (2007) question whether clients are not better advised to engage more closely with consumers themselves, and call for marketers to stop chasing cool "like a greyhound after a fake rabbit" (2007, xiv). Coolhunters have also been implicated in accelerating the never-ending race for cool (Gladwell 1997). Coolhunters still exist under many names, and are valued by some but derided by others.

Many marketers use more conventional market research to achieve the same ends, using traditional approaches such as interviews and focus groups, but also ethnography, online forums, and telephone debates among other techniques. By keeping in touch with their consumers, marketers can not only see what is cool, but how it fits into people's lives.

And so marketers engage in a never-ending quest for cool, frustrated by its ephemeral nature and the fact that, as soon as marketers identify what's in and bring it to the masses, it's out. Any betrayal of a marketing hand in a cool campaign instantly renders it undesirable. Furthermore, with or without marketing, cool moves on as "[n]ew generations obsolete the old, new celebrities render old ones ridiculous and on and on in an ever-ascending spiral of hip upon hip" (Frank 1997, 235). Nonetheless, cool has proved a valuable tool for commercial marketers, and it is worth considering whether it may prove the same for social marketers.

Why Do Social Marketers Need to Understand Cool?

One of the principal reasons that social marketers need to understand cool is because they need to speak the language of one of their most important target audiences. Teenagers are vulnerable to "a range of health issues, including drug usage, smoking, safe sex, physical activity, binge drinking, healthy eating, and sun safety" (Peattie 2007), as well as wider issues such as environmental concerns and anti-social behavior. Adolescence is when new habits, often harmful, are taken up and established for the long-term. This is the time when young people seek to gain acceptance by peer groups, often facilitated by tobacco, alcohol, and drug use as a means of passage to the adult world (Jackson et al. 2000). Hastings, MacFadyen, and Stead describe this "starter's interest in tobacco [as] social rather than biochemical. They smoke to belong, to rebel, to express their individuality, to take risks, to appear more grown up, to be more cool" (1997, 439).

This is also the age at which teenagers are first targeted by the tobacco and alcohol industries, and by less legitimate drug sellers, to encourage experimentation and generate brand loyalty (Jackson et al. 2000; Ling and Glantz 2002). The alcohol industry defines children as young as eleven as "starter" drinkers, and as "established drinkers" by the age of 16 (Jackson et al. 2000). Meanwhile "tobacco companies study young adults' attitudes, social groups, values, aspirations, role models, and activities then infiltrate both their physical and their social environments" (Ling and Glantz 2002, 908); i.e., tobacco companies seek out what is important to young people, and what is cool, and act upon it.

If this is what the purveyors of alcohol and tobacco are doing, with obvious success, social marketers would be foolish to ignore its potential. As Hastings (2007) asks, "why should the devil have all the best tunes?"

By establishing counter-marketing and social marketing interventions for this age group, social marketers may stand a chance of preventing behavior uptake in the first instance, and perhaps gain significant long-term savings compared to interventions later in life when habits are firmly established.

Can Social Marketing Ever Be Cool?

Social marketers have a problem. The messages, means, and managers of social marketing are often the antithesis of cool, and it may seem an insurmountable barrier to change these perceptions.

In the first instance, the behaviors we seek to address are often aspects of the cool image that teenagers seek to adopt. These illicit behaviors represent rebellion against the establishment and are attractive precisely because they contravene the laws and mores of dominant society. It may be the risk that is alluring, or the expression of independence or associations with style, but all are aspects of cool. At this age, social pressures significantly outweigh any long-term health concerns, as young adults have little sense of their own mortality (Pechmann 2001); consequently, long-term messages often have little impact. Furthermore, risk can be perceived as attractive and threatening messages seen merely as challenges rather than realistic outcomes (Brody 1998).

There is also evidence that the kind of young people who indulge in such behaviors, known as sensation seekers, are not only more likely to use drugs but also react more negatively to "public service announcements" denouncing drug use (Schoenbachler and Whittler 1996). Therefore, the very means by which social marketers communicate may "turn off" the most vulnerable groups.

To many teenagers, the people managing social marketing agendas represent authority, for instance government, health services, or law enforcement agencies. To young people, these represent "the man," and a figure to rebel against rather than a source of useful advice. Maybe you remember the time your dad said he liked your new record? And how that record just wasn't so cool anymore? Any perception of trying too hard, or trying to be "down with the kids" is likely to alienate the target audience, as it smacks of lack a of authenticity.

Furthermore, cool is difficult to control, and there is a risk that it could backfire, as teenagers "react against . . . unconvincing attempts at 'cool'" (Peattie 2007). On the other hand, lack of consideration of cool can backfire too, as with the "Heroin Screws You Up" posters that, despite their anti-drug message, were

thought so cool by teenagers that they were stolen, put up on bedroom walls, and hailed as icons of heroin chic (Hastings and MacFadyen 2002).

Internal barriers also exist. Anecdotal evidence supports these authors' experiences of social marketers frustrated by the censorship of hard-hitting, straight-talking campaigns by conservative or politically sensitive stakeholders. Many campaigns have been diluted in this way, despite being born from thorough research with the target market, to identify the language they use to discuss sex or drugs and the triggers required. This only serves to further damage the image of social marketing in the eyes of teenagers.

These many barriers may explain why social marketing is so unsuccessful with this age group, as evidenced by a review of 34 interventions to reduce teenage smoking, which found them to be "largely unsuccessful" (Sussman et al. 1999). Without an understanding of teenagers' lives, social pressures, and concerns, we are unlikely to develop effective interventions. So, too, there is a role for cool in social marketing. We need to understand this in order to develop effective interventions that do not "turn off" our target market by triggering reactions associated with what is, or is not, cool.

Implications for Social Marketing

A central argument for the use of social marketing is its focus upon the consumer. The consumer lies at the heart of any strategy, intervention, or communication that social marketers devise and implement in the pursuit of behavioral change, and to do this successfully marketers must understand consumers' lives and desires. The mass adoption of cool values means that social marketers must acknowledge that their interventions cannot ignore these social pressures.

It is unlikely that we can reframe behavioral goals, such as smoking cessation or prevention, as being truly cool, and such endeavors are likely to sound lame and appear contrived. However, Pountain and Robins point to an alternative means to persuade, since "[a]mong prepubescent and early teenagers, cool has immense appeal as the antidote to their ultimate fear, of being embarrassed" (2000, 12), i.e., the threat of *not* being cool.

Such social threats have already been proposed as an alternative to the physical threats, such as the often-used photos of smokers' blackened lungs. Some assert that such fear campaigns can alienate, habituate, and lead to downright rejection of the messages by consumers (Hastings, Stead, and Webb 2004), and there is evidence that social threat may be more effective.

A study of 371 students showed that social threat was more persuasive than physical threat in attitude toward the communication, attitude toward drug use,

and behavioral intention to use drugs (Schoenbachler and Whittler 1996). Furthermore, social threat was shown to be more persuasive for the hard-to-target, sensation-seeker audience. Similar results have been shown by Tanner, Hunt and Eppright (1991) for encouraging safe sex, and by Pechmann (2001) for smoking prevention. Pechmann concluded that advertisements featuring social threats were more effective in influencing intention than those featuring physical threats because "they enhanced adolescents' perceptions that smoking poses severe social risks, in that it could lead to social rejection and/or social sanctions, whereas non-smoking could lead to social acceptance and respect" (2001, 179). In an environment where the opinion of friends and peers outweighs most health concerns, and as tobacco companies identify the erosion of the social acceptability of smoking as a major threat to their business (Ling and Glantz 2002), it seems timely to reinforce these values of counter-cool.

An alternative approach has been to transfer the rejection of authority, inherent in teenage concepts of cool, away from health services or similar authority figures, on to the real bad guys – the purveyors of cigarettes, alcohol, or drugs. The marketers behind the hugely successful Florida "truth" campaign positioned the tobacco corporations as "the man": manipulative, calculating, and preying upon teenagers for profit. Working closely with teenagers themselves, they saw that "if 'truth' was to be aspirational, relevant and 'cool,' it had to be more than a poster contest," to challenge consumers' concepts of tobacco as socially desirable (Hicks 2001). The intervention tuned in to young people's reality, taking a truck to raves and beaches and offering cool media and promotion as well as cool messages. The use of post-modernist pastiche and irony contributed to the cool associations of the campaign, which achieved a 7.4% decrease in tobacco use in middle schools, and 4.8% decrease in high schools, over 30 days (Hicks 2001). Ironically, this campaign stole not only the devil's tune but also their money as it was funded from the tobacco settlement for the state.

As demonstrated by the "truth" campaign, social marketing interventions can use cool to minimize dissonance with consumer's real lives. Discussion of sex or drugs should be authentic, frank, and open, all values of cool, rather than medicalized or prudish. The use of irony and self-deprecating humor (Hastings, Stead, and Webb 2004), contemporary language, and hip role models can help remove the tarnish of previous paternalistic, patronizing health campaigns.

Finally, social marketers should also acknowledge that young adults have more aspirations than to simply "be cool": Successful careers and meaningful relationships with partners and friends are important to them – and many illicit practices could jeopardize them. Smith (2006) offers the promising thought that

social networks might be more important than being cool: perhaps another opportunity for social marketers.

How Do Social Marketers Comprehend Cool?

Not every social marketer has Florida's tobacco settlement to spend on his or her intervention, but this does not mean that cool cannot be used and, as for the "truth" campaign, must still be based upon careful market research.

Coolhunters are expensive, but most social marketers do not need to know the latest trend or the next big thing. They do need to understand their target market, whether that is teenagers or older generations, and to ensure that interventions are rooted in consumers' real lives; if cool is important to the target consumers, the intervention must be compatible with that. Research is becoming ever more imaginative and diverse and techniques such as ethnography, small panels, immersion hikes, "up to fives" and room shopping are suggested by Smith (2006) in a social marketing context, as are more traditional one-to-one interviews. Smith questions the value of focus groups because of the impact of peer influence; however, this may offer valuable insight into the socially mediated concept of cool. New media also provide new opportunities such as online forums and the development of innovative interactions through social networking sites.

Supporting agencies can also be selected to contribute to understanding of the target market. The social marketers behind the "truth" campaign chose to use an agency with a strong history of successful youth-targeted launches such as Sega and Vans, rather than a social marketing agency.

As Smith (2006) reminds us, teenagers are as diverse a group as any, and careful segmentation and targeting, based upon reliable research, is essential in order to develop effective interventions. Each teenage tribe will have its own idea of what is and what is not cool. Understanding the wider social landscapes of young people is essential, as they have bigger concerns than the health issues associated with their behaviors, and understanding how cool affects them is a crucial element of this.

Conclusions

In our view, the best way for social marketers to use cool is not to try too hard to be what they cannot be. Social marketers can distinguish themselves from traditional health education patronage not by trying to "get down with the kids" but by offering eye-catching yet thoughtful alternatives to (damaging) behaviors. One approach seems to be based on highlighting social rather than physical danger, but contexts will vary depending on the cause. Copying the devil's tunes may

be too simplistic: The meaning of cool for social marketers may be to compose songs with which our audiences are happy to sing along.

About the Authors

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