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CONSUMING COOL: BEHIND THE UNEMOTIONAL MASK

Russell W. Belk, Kelly Tian and Heli Paavola

ABSTRACT

Purpose – *We use data from the United States and Finland, a literature review, and historical analysis to understand the concept and role of cool within global consumer culture.*

Methodology/approach – *This is a conceptual review and qualitative analysis of data from depth interviews, journals, and online discussion groups in two U.S. locations and one Finnish location.*

Findings – *Cool is a slang word connoting a certain style that involves masking and hiding emotions. As cool diffuses we find that it is both distilled and diluted. The concept itself has also evolved. What was once a low-profile means of survival and later a youthful rebellious alternative to class-based status systems has become commoditized.*

Research limitations/implications – *The study has been conducted in two cultures with a limited range of ages thought to be most susceptible to the appeal of being cool.*

Practical limitations/implications – *Marketers may not yet have exploited cool as effectively as they have exploited sex, but mainstream consumers now look for cool in the marketplace more than within themselves. The result is a continuous race to offer the next cool thing.*

Originality/value of chapter – *It is argued that coolness is a new status system largely replacing social class, especially among the young.*

Oh to be cool! To have that presence, that magical mask of bored indifference that makes our every movement and glance a pronouncement of what is good, true, and worthy of lust by those who would be cool. We would be loved, admired, and sought after. The people and things we touch would be blessed. For cool is their religion and we would be their gods.

Or so it seems at those points and periods in our lives when we seem cursed by insecurity and feelings of inferiority that exclude us from fraternizing with the really cool people. Our parents love us, but they are far from cool. We know the hierarchy of cool people and we can recognize cool when we see it on the screen. But to actually be cool is something that only a few of us can pull off. For the rest of us, the best we may hope for is to avoid the stigma of being considered totally uncool. In large part we pursue this goal through imitating the consumption of cool people. Even if we do not have the script and stage business just right, if we buy the right props and costumes, at least strangers may mistake us for cool people.

Cool is a particular impression-related verbalized and embodied performance. Like any performance, it requires validation by an audience. The relevant audience may be specific subsets of our classmates, friends, children, neighbors, colleagues, or the social networking site to which we belong. Although cool is not inherently tied to consumption or brands, these props have become increasingly central to the successful performance of cool. More than identity is at stake. Cool has arguably become a chief source of status in consumer culture, especially, but not exclusively, among adolescents.

Cool has been studied, directly and indirectly, from diverse perspectives. One approach interrogates socially constructed images of cool articulated within a particular subset of consumption practices such as fashion (e.g., McRobbie, 1988), music (e.g., Kitwana, 2005), transportation (e.g., Hebdige, 1988), or art (MacAdams, 2001). This is often nested within the study of particular youth subcultures, especially in cultural studies (e.g., Hall & Jefferson, 1985). In this approach, subcultural appropriation and reconfiguration of marketplace meanings is generally seen as an assertion (or discovery) of an identity that is shaped by class, race, and gender politics.

Another approach to the study of cool emerged within African American studies starting in the 1960s and 1970s when emphasis was placed on defining a distinct black aesthetic and tracing its impact on broader cultures (e.g., Gayle, 1971; Osumare, 2005). Music, entertainment, literature, dance,

art, poetry, theater, film, language, and sports are all recognized as areas of unique black aesthetic contributions. The term cool has been increasingly applied to characterize this aesthetic. The influence of these cool styles is a focus of much discussion, both critical and celebratory (see Caponi, 1999).

A third cultural approach to the origins, transformations, and consumption of cool focuses on the creation of cool branded objects by commercial institutions including advertising (Frank, 1997), retailing (Zukin, 2004), and media (Arvidsson, 2006). Frank's (1997) analysis focuses on advertising of the 1960s and the cooptation of hippie cool with ad slogans like "Join the Dodge Rebellion." He concludes that the process is more complex than simple cooptation. Nevertheless, the importance of a cool image to sell a product became firmly established in the era in which the hippy counterculture emerged and embraced the concept of cool (Bird & Tapp, 2008; Nancarrow, Nancarrow, & Page, 2002).

The importance of cool has also been indirectly examined within the sociology of fashion which theorizes the importance of emulation and the "trickle down" of fashions (Simmel, 1904) from more to less elite segments of the population (leading the more elite to innovate and propelling the wheel of fashion). Although the origin of cool fashions in marginalized groups like minorities, gays, and countercultures has been labeled as a case of inversion or "status float" (Field, 1970) where styles "float" from the bottom toward the top of the status hierarchy, this may not be the case. If we instead see coolness as having its own status hierarchy as Heath and Potter (2004) suggest, then the movement of style remains from top to bottom. However, just as Davis (1992) criticized the reductionism of a trickle-down theory of fashion focusing solely on social class, we should also recognize that cool conveys more than status.

Research and theorizing on cool has consistently focused on the origins rather than the destinations of cool. In this chapter, we seek to reverse this emphasis and consider what happens to cool as it moves from its largely American minority and countercultural origins to mainstream and world audiences.

THE PERSISTENCE OF COOL

Some argue that cool originated in Africa several thousand years ago and was refined by slaves as a survival strategy using the cool mask of emotional imperviousness (Majors & Billson, 1992). As cool continues its peregrinations in the United States and throughout the world it undergoes changes in

its specific meanings and manifestations, but it seems likely that its general meaning remains largely intact. That meaning is generally thought to originate in certain African American urban locales. Music, television, films, magazines, tourism, and the Internet then tell us who, what, and where is currently cool and help diffuse cool trends.

Although Gioia (2009) argues that cool is now dead and has been replaced by a new earnestness, this judgment remains very premature. Remarkably, in the United States the term ''cool'' has had subcultural popularity since the 1930s and mainstream cultural currency since the 1950s (Moore, 2004). For any slang term to have such staying power, something more than global media influences must be involved. In order to explain cool's longevity we integrate our empirical findings with a diverse literature and history. We argue that the quest to be cool is now a major driver of global consumer culture.

CHARACTERISTICS OF COOL

Emotional Control

Stearns (1994) emphasizes that cool is distinctly American and involves dispassionate control of intense emotions together with an air of disengagement and nonchalance aimed at creating an impression of unflappable superiority. He contrasts this ideal with the former Victorian ideal of pursuing good character through the capacity for deep feelings deployed in appropriate contexts like romantic love, participant sports, grief rituals, and maternal sentimentalism. But Stearns (1994) is more interested in a general cultural history of emotions and gives little attention to the urban African American youth whom most other treatments of cool emphasize as the major source of cool attitudes and styles.

Connor (1995) explains the incentive for cool emotions for African Americans both during slavery and under subsequent racism and discrimination:

> Internalizing emotions became, for many African American males, their only means for survival. It is this internalization process that is the beginning of cool. Anger, love, happiness, hatred – these emotions were all potentially dangerous if expressed. Love meant certain disappointment and it left you emotionally vulnerable. An open display of hatred or even anger meant certain punishment. An open demonstration of happiness might mean the removal or destruction of whatever made you happy. (p. 7)

Suppressing overt displays of emotion remains a way of retaining pride, dignity, and masculine ideals of toughness (Holt & Thompson, 2004; Smith & Beal, 2007). But as Majors and Billson (1992) note, the mask of coolness can also be a pathway to dropping out of school, drug and alcohol abuse, delinquency, gang activity, crime, and imprisonment. As Hooks (2004) contends, because they learn to hide their emotions, cool black men have a difficult time showing love as fathers and mates. Pursuit of cool masculinity is something Fraiman (2003) sees equally in cool white men. Recent studies of male university underachievement attribute this decline to "the Bart Simpson model": "For men, it's just not cool to study" (Lewin, 2006). Thus, coolness may extract a high price for the sense of masculine dignity it enables.

Cool Style

In Stearns' (1994) view the cool control of emotions and avoidance of excess is a part of the same civilizing process of progressively refined manners that Elias (1978) analyzed in post-medieval Europe. But control of emotions and avoidance of excess are not necessarily the same thing and the two seem to have decoupled in contemporary cool. Suppressing and hiding emotions does not mean avoiding emotion altogether. People can be flamboyant in their clothing, furnishings, and lifestyle and still be cool, so long as they do not appear to be passionate about these things (e.g., see Smith & Beal, 2007). We believe that cool performance is highly emotional and evocative; it is only delivered with a style that appears nonchalant and easy. This style is most strongly articulated by African American males, although females and other minority groups contribute to cool style as well. Cool style is expressed in music, dance, sports like basketball, and distinctive ways of walking, talking, gesturing, dressing, and grooming. Within the mask of indifference and exaggerated masculine bravado, a smirk is permissible, but never a cheerful smile or a painful grimace.

Thanks to film, television, and music videos, currently cool gestures, clothing styles, hairstyles, and vocabulary are now widely known. An earlier style of cool walk was described by Majors and Billson (1992):

> In contrast to the white male's robotlike and mechanical walk, the black walk is slower – more like a stroll. The head is slightly elevated and tipped to one side. One arm swings at the side with the hand slightly cupped. The other hand hangs straight to the side or is slipped into the pocket. (pp. 73–74)

Such performances of cool evolve and change with culture, but the underlying attitude of ironic detachment remains.

Knowingness

A further element of cool is privileged insider knowingness of what is going on and how to act in a given environment (Lacayo & Bellafante, 1994; Moore, 2004). This involves social competence and mastery of a set of skills enabling survival in the face of risk (Majors & Billson, 1992). It comprises a shared knowledge denied to squares (Pountain & Robins, 2000; Holbrook, 1986). Cool is an attitude of mastery and not merely an appearance. This involves being streetwise or having street cred (credibility).

Lyman, Scott, and Harré (1989) distinguish three types of risk in everyday life toward which a cool person responds in a knowing and detached manner by showing poise under pressure: physical risk (e.g., law enforcers and soldiers), financial risk (e.g., gamblers and captains of industry), and social risk (e.g., those in dating and courtship situations). They suggest keeping cool has become everyone's challenge.

Other Manifestations of Cool

Elements of cool like emotional control are not exclusive to African Americans. Barthes (1979) and Leland (2004) note the cool *sangfroid* of the real world and film gangster, and Harris (2000) and Leland (2004) observe the *savoir faire* cool of the detective of fiction and film. Barthes' (1979) homage to the "icy mockery" of the gangster is a harbinger of current admiration of gangsta rap.

Both Harris (2000) and Cross (2004) observe that, for male children pursuing cool is a coming of age gesture that rejects seeking parental approval in favor of autonomy, self-control, and the admiration of peers. As Pountain and Robins (2000) emphasize, "Cool is a rebellious attitude, an expression of a belief that the mainstream mores of society have no legitimacy and do not apply to you" (p. 23). Heath and Potter (2004) add that the cool person strives to set himself apart as a nonconforming individualist. This sense of contradicting order and rejecting societal normalcy suggests a trickster figure who introduces the chaos of clever new ideas (Hyde, 1998; Leland, 2004).

The trickster figure (usually male) uses his mischievous intellect to fool and trick superiors and gods. A case in point is the Signifying Monkey trickster of the Yoruba people of Nigeria (Gates, 1989). In numerous tales the Signifying Monkey gets the better of the lion (taken to be the white colonialist) through tricks and language. It is easy to see why the trickster element of cool appeals to oppressed minorities as well as to adolescents struggling to break free of

authority and establish their own identities. It is also easy to see how the ritual insults by the signifying monkey, carried to the United States by African American slaves and embellished in the ritual insults of "the dozens," provided a prelude to rap music and especially the rap competitions known as battle rap. In the ritual insults of the dozens, slurs against the other's family and especially his mother are used to try to get the one being attacked to "lose his cool" and respond with anger and violence rather than managing his emotions and returning an even better ritual insult (see Wooten, 2006). This helps build a thick skin to withstand racial prejudice and insults, and was commoditized in the MTV program "Yo Mama."

The originators of cool have always been outsiders including ghetto dwellers, disenfranchised minorities, gangsters, tricksters, revolutionaries, countercultural leaders, Jews, gays and lesbians, transgressive comedians, hackers, obscene misogynistic rappers, juvenile delinquents, and other disempowered groups on the margins of society (Leland, 2004; Pountain & Robins, 2000; Liu, 2004). Not coincidentally, these are also the groups that are the fashion innovators who precipitate new style trends (McCracken, 1986). Cool is a way of substituting a particular cultural capital for economic capital, although with the commodification of cool we shall see that economic capital is also increasingly needed.

THE EVOLUTION OF COOL

Origins

Majors and Billson (1992) place the origin of cool in Africa in approximately 2000–3000 BCE. Thompson (1966) places the origin of cool with the Ibo and Yoruba people of Nigeria in first half of the 1400s. Coolness was taken to mean "grace under pressure" (Thompson, 1983, p. 16). Major (1994) traces several cool-related jazz words to the Wolof in what is now Senegal. These include the Mandingo *hepi* (to see), *hipi* (to open one's eyes), *jev* (to talk falsely), and *dega* (to understand), which became hep, hip, jive, and dig in jazz and beat argot of the 1940s and 1950s, with meanings close to the eighteenth-century Mandingo words.

Although less well researched, other predecessors of contemporary cool may include Italian courtiers of the Renaissance, the proper English gentleman, Anatolian Turkish merchants, and nineteenth-century romance poets (Pountain & Robins, 2000), Tokyo youth cults (Leland, 2004), aristocrats after the French Revolution (MacAdams, 2001), and Japanese

Samurai (Richie, 2003). But contemporary cool grew first and foremost out of African American culture.

Blues

African American cool is seen in a succession of musical genres. Recorded blues, then called "race music," started in the 1920s, but related blues, rags, and field hollers go back to slave days. In contrast to African American gospel music, which is steeped in Christianity, the blues were considered the Devil's music and came to be associated with sex, hedonism, unemployment, crime, violence, imprisonment, and prostitution (Oliver, 1990). Pountain and Robins (2000) suggest that while the white suburban middle class teenager and the black Mississippi Delta sharecropper may seem to have little in common, "psychologically they share the same sexually confused passive aggressive tone of the blues" (p. 45).

Jazz, Basketball, and Hip Hop

Cool style and vocabulary are most heavily associated with jazz. Although Gioia (2009) makes a good case for white jazz cornetist Bix Beiderbecke as the progenitor of cool, black tenor saxophonist Lester Young is generally credited with making jazz cool (Dinnerstein, 1999). He would say "I'm cool" to mean "I'm calm," wore sunglasses on stage, dressed in sartorial splendor, used marijuana and alcohol prodigiously, and introduced a unique expressive sadness in the music he made. His cool style of jazz influenced many others and music differed from the hot jazz of the 1920s by being unhurried, balanced, and imperturbable, both in musical rhythm and in stage presence. As Dinnerstein (1999) puts it, "He [Young] generated excitement without getting excited; he stayed cool" (p. 250).

The cool sounds, mannerisms, and jargon of the black jazz musicians were not mere affectations however. Reacting to a prior era of minstrelsy and entertaining black musicians performing to please white audiences, cool jazz was a political act as well as a musical act. Artists like Lester Young, Miles Davis, and Charlie "Bird" Parker would distance themselves from audiences behind sunglasses and jived up language, would decline to introduce their music to their largely white audiences, and would often turn their backs on the audience (Ellison, 1964). The white would-be hipster audience, often sensed the arrogance, rudeness, and surliness of the musicians, and not only

accepted it, but came to expect it as part of the entertainment (Ellison, 1964). These whites were also seeking a rebellious expression of individuality within the frustratingly inhibiting atmosphere of the 1950s. And musicians such as Parker were all the more appealing because of their outlaw image, use of illegal drugs, and isolation from mainstream society. Their cool persona, slow dragged out speech, and suppression of active aggression was also aided by widespread use of heroin among black musicians of the period (Sidran, 1971).

Basketball has been compared to a jazz performance and has been singled out as an example of the black aesthetic (Novak, 1994; Boyd, 1997). Novak (1994) refers to the "cool shaded mask" the player must put on in this game full of disguise, fakery, feints, steals, contrivance, deceptive wiggles, and changes of direction. We can again recognize the traits of the trickster. The slam dunk came out of black street basketball and was initially banned when Kareem Abdul-Jabbar (then Lew Alcindor) began using it at UCLA in 1967 (Caponi, 1999).

Rap music and the hip-hop culture from which it emerged are generally accepted as the latest instantiations of coolness (e.g., Kitwana, 2005). Rap music continues the basic character of cool: it is rebellious; romanticizes the outlaw and trickster; and starts trends in fashions and grooming styles. Even sunglasses continue in rap as part of the cool mask. But rap has also modified cool, as Connor (1995) argues:

> Cool had previously been a method of eventually avoiding violence; once accepted as cool a young man was not challenged every minute of the day. However, beginning in the eighties guns and violence took the place of attitude, style, and simply "proving" oneself. Cool was not being dictated solely by the boys on the block. With the advent of crack and the rise in popularity of rap music, money and the requisite organized crime faction began to prevail in a heretofore unheard-of way in the inner city. (p. 119)

And Hooks' (2004) indictment is even more scathing:

> Though [Todd] Boyd and many of his cronies, like to think that calling themselves "niggas" and basking in the glory of gangsta culture, glamorizing addiction to drugs, pussy, and material things, is liberation, they personify the spiritual zombiehood of today's "cool" black male. (p. 153)

But rap's popularity has spread far beyond black males.

Stealing Cool

Highly successful white rapper Eminem has been called a "culture bandit" (Kitwana, 2005) and a culprit in the "white theft of black cultural art forms"

(Watkins, 2005). Since rap originated in the heavily black South Bronx and continues to be regarded as a key part of the new black aesthetic, Eminem's ascendance to the top of the music charts is curious. Eminem recalls that while he was growing up he would put on sunglasses and lip-sync to Run-DMC songs while looking in the mirror and dreaming he was Dr. Dre or Ice Cube (Watkins, 2005). For street cred, Eminem draws on his impoverished childhood, much of which was spent in heavily black Detroit, his start in battle raps, and his discovery by Dr. Dre, the legendary black rap producer. Eminem's lyrics share the misogyny, sex, gun play, and obscenity of black rap musicians, but he does not use the "n-word" bandied about by black rappers, nor can he fully draw on some rap themes derived from regular encounters with pimps, drugs, racial discrimination, and crime (Kitwana, 2005).

Paralleling Eminem in rock n' roll was Elvis Presley who is frequently described as "the white boy who stole the blues" (e.g., Leland, 2004). When Elvis recorded Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup's "That's All Right Mama" in Sun Studios in 1954, owner Sam Phillips recognized that "a white singer who could ride the beat and sound like a black singer … [presented] the perfect opportunity to carry the music … to a larger and much more lucrative market, young white music buyers" (Watkins, 2005, p. 102).

Elvis Presley was not the first or last to appreciate black culture as a source of cool. Other artists accused of being culture bandits who have exploited black culture include Al Jolson, Mark Twain, Benny Goodman, Irving Berlin, Keith Haring, Tom Waits, and Bob Dylan (Leland, 2004). The beats were more open appropriators of black cool. In the classic work of the beat generation, Jack Kerouac's alter ego, Sal Paradise, says:

> I wished I were … anything but what I was so drearily, a "white man" disillusioned … . I was only myself, Sal Paradise, sad, strolling in this violet dark, this unbearably sweet night, wishing I could exchange worlds with the happy, true-hearted, ecstatic Negroes of America. (Kerouac, 1957, p. 180)

To be fair, Kerouac, Alan Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs, and other beats also drew on Buddhism, jazz musicians, and drug addicts, but their general identification with the marginal and outcast drew them to blacks as an important source of cool, to which they then added their own outcast cool persona.

Other Sources of Cool

The beats were not defined only or even primarily in terms of borrowed or stolen black cool. This is even more true of other countercultural groups like

hippies. Countercultural groups are by definition outsiders and are likely to be looked to as a source of cool for that reason alone. This includes both true revolutionaries and outlaws like Che Guevara, Bonnie and Clyde, and the Black Panthers, as well as with film outlaws like black leather-jacketed Marlon Brando in "The Wild One" and James Dean in "Rebel without a Cause." Cool countercultural examples in art include Andy Warhol and Keith Haring (MacAdams, 2001).

A recent source of cool is cyber cool – not just countercultural hackers, but even some corporate computer gurus (e.g., Leland, 2004; Liu, 2004). This should not be too surprising given the countercultural roots of the personal computer and especially the trickster founders Apple computers, Steven Jobs and Stephen Wozniak (Belk & Tumbat, 2005; Kahney, 2004). The same rebellious and leveling spirit of early computer inventors can be seen in the Internet. For a time, Napster and its successors made it possible to throw a sabot in the corporate music machine and showed the way to carry the rebellion by using the simple act of file sharing (Giesler, 2006). Linux and other open source software suggest that cyber-cool rebellion continues (e.g., Goffman, 2005; Hemetsberger, 2006).

There are other influences on what is cool including Japanese manga (McGray, 2001), Australian surfer culture (Beatie, 2001; Canniford & Shankar, 2007), and American skateboarding (Moon & Kiron, 2002). But in part because of its global media, pop culture, and consumer corporate dominance, the U.S. and especially African Americans are seen as the key source of global cool (Leland, 2004).

Marketing Cooptation and Creation of Cool

When marketers try to copy cool, the process has been described as cooptation (Frank, 1997). But when an "establishment" company affiliates itself with cool, this should be the kiss of death for the source of coolness and for whatever or whomever it promotes as being cool. As Hebdige (1979) puts it, "As soon as the original innovations which signify 'subculture' are translated into commodities and made generally available, they become 'frozen'" (p. 96). Besides the loss of cool when something becomes mainstream, cool people and cool subcultures and countercultures historically set themselves up as opposing and rebelling against commercialism and the consumer culture it promotes (see Holbrook, 1986). But the Sixties changed cool and made it more commercially mediated, blurring the distinction between authentic counter-cultural cool and inauthentic commercial cool (Frank, 1997).

The marketing research technique of "cool-hunting" is also problematic (e.g., Gladwell, 1997; Kerner & Pressman, 2007; Lopiano-Misdom & de Luca, 1998; Nancarrow & Nancarrow, 2007; Southgate, 2003). Through observation, depth interviews, and focus groups with trend-setting cool kids, cool-hunting research agencies try to find the next cool thing quickly enough for marketers to bring out their own version and capitalize on its coolness by taking it to a larger mass market, which in turn makes it uncool. In an effort to dissipate or negate the cool-killing effects of commercializing and popularizing cool things, several "cool" advertising techniques have arisen. Antiadvertising is based on intertextuality and self-referential awareness. Such advertising mocks its own commercial purposes with a knowing wink (Goldman & Papson, 1998). Antiadvertising was pioneered in the early 1960s by Volkswagon's humorous campaign portraying the car as ugly, unstylish, and funny-looking (Frank, 1997). Such antiadvertising messages seek to be cool by seeming to share a hip knowingness with the consumer. Other advertising techniques in this vein include under-the-radar marketing (Boyd & Kirshenbaum, 1997), peer to peer or viral marketing (Quart, 2003), and product placement (Shrum, 2004). Such techniques show advertisers' urgent attempts to make their commercialization and commoditization of cool appear less obvious.

An alternative to trying to discover and copy the next cool thing is to create it (Kerner & Pressman, 2007). This was the technique followed by MTV in throwing parties at which they hire hip teenagers to dance to the music of an ascendant hip-hop band introducing a new album, all the while filming the party to subsequently be shown on MTV (Goodman, 2003). While Sprite succeeded earlier with an antiadvertising campaign mocking the importance of style (George, 1998), they too have sought to participate in the creation of cool by cosponsoring these MTV soirees.

Sometimes a company gets lucky enough to have their brand become cool with no effort on their part, as with the 1986 rap hit "My Adidas" by Run-DMC (de Longville & Leone, 2006) or when the British skinheads and subsequent youth subcultures adopted Dr. (Doc) Martens boots (Roach, 2003). Klein (2000) reports that brands like Nike, Pony, and Stussy were so anxious to have cool kids and rap musicians wear their clothing that they gave them free clothing and did nothing to stop counterfeiting of their brands. And even by age 10 or 11, children are quite aware of cool and uncool brands (Nair & Griffin, 2007).

Apple is one company that was able to maintain its image of producing cool products through a series of innovative and stylish products including the iPod, iPhone, and iPad. Despite the market success of these products

([Kahney, 2004](#)), the cult-like following and cool reputation of Apple products after Steve Jobs returned to the helm has remained strong. This was helped by several factors, including Apple's own historic reputation as a renegade underdog company fighting against dominant corporations like Microsoft. Consumers in a study by Belk and Tumbat (2005) even believed that buying Apple products was striking a blow against corporate capitalism.

The evolution of cool outlined above has been largely devoid of a consumer focus on what cool means. It has also focused more on cool subcultures and countercultures rather than on more mainstream consumers. In the present research, we sought to examine more mainstream manifestations of cool as well as its global proliferation. We focus on consumers' involvement with cool during their adolescence and young adulthood.

METHODS

Our grounded theoretical account of cool used multiple methods at multiple sites. We elicited participation of both male and female consumers of various ages, ethnic identities, and national citizenships, collecting data in the United States (in two different Western states) and Finland. They are predominantly middle class white consumers in their teens and twenties. Global and local media are the primary means by which foreign notions of cool reach Finland. Although this allows consideration of how "cool" culture changes as it spreads globally, we do not assume that Finnish cool is the same as cool in other world cultures.

In Finland in addition to interviews, data were collected via Internet chatrooms and (primarily) discussion groups over a period of 10 days. The discussion groups included an intellectual group focused on social issues, religion, and media issues and involving adults aged 16–35, a group setup by a TV-network, a group run by a teenage magazine for girls between 12 and 16, and a discussion group for young women.

FINDINGS: MEANINGS OF COOL

Two participants in an online discussion of cool in Finland had the following reflections on the nature of cool:

> **Scorpius:** A cool person is cool not only in his attitude but also in his behavior. Coolness is … [a] street-credible image and certain style of speaking. A cool person has a good

sense of style and a certain kind of an attitude. A relaxed, casual look and informal, unconventional style creates the image of cool. At least Mickey Rourke and Pierce Bronson (as James Bond) fulfill the criteria of cool. There are others, of course; for example poker-face Humphrey Bogart with a cigarette hanging loosely from the side of his mouth in *Casablanca* is one of the icons of cool.

Acousticus: Coolness involves insensitivity (or hiding feelings) and strong self-confidence, but being really cool means being "cool, calm and collected" and it presupposes a perfect capability to act fast and correctly … in the most surprising situations; and it doesn't happen if you are a blundering novice. Being cool requires knowledge, talent and experience …

Elements of cool seen in this discussion include attitude, performance, style, uniqueness, nonchalance, being streetwise, hiding emotions, and possessing talent and knowingness. The exchange also suggests that American films and actors are a key way of learning about coolness.

Both the U.S. and Finnish informants agreed on many things regarded as cool including rap music, jazz, extreme sports, sunglasses, *The Matrix* (film), trendy clothes, expensive and trendy brands, tattoos, smoking, drugs, and alcohol. There were some local variations in both countries regarding who and what is cool as well as some country-specific differences in regard for certain cool traits. For example, cool rebellion was more appealing to Americans than Finns. Finnish informants recognized rebellion as being part of the mediated image of cool, but they were less apt to report such behavior themselves. They also recognized elements of these mediated images of cool that did not translate well in Finland:

I think in Finland coolness is more quiet, narrow and poorer than in the U.S. Rap-stars with gigantic gold necklaces, exaggerated manners, and silicone blonds who are cool in the States seem ridiculous in Finland. (f29, Fin)

These same images would likely seem strange in many American suburban high schools as well, but our American informants recognized that the exaggerated consumption seen in music videos and MTV programs like "Pimp my Ride" and "Cribs" was not what most of America was like. Nevertheless Americans were far from exempt from media influences. As one 23-year-old woman said, "If Britney Spears is wearing midriff, it must be cool."

The controlled emotions aspect of cool was evident in both countries, but the Finnish informants were more likely to report this in the third person as being evident in other's cool behavior rather than their own:

I think that coolness is connected to the need to protect oneself from the evaluating and criticizing eyes of others. A model on the catwalk does not just represent a perfect figure but also the attitude, disinterest toward others and their criticizing looks. (f21, Fin)

Both Finns and Americans chose many products as being cool that seemed to isolate them from the ''criticizing eyes of others'' – handheld devices like mobile phones, remote controls, and iPods (all of which give the user a focus that precludes having to meet the gaze of others), as well as sunglasses.

In Finland we also found a focus on bits and pieces of cool that seem to reflect a distilled or essentialized notion of cool.

> The Afro-American walking style (Negro-walk) and the position of the head is very much cool, even without sunglasses. (m23, Fin)

> Neo in the Matrix-movie is cool. I think that all Eastern things are cool. Buddha, ninja or karate-heroes or samurai-warriors are cool. A samurai who is ready to die at any moment is cool. A Zen-monk who totally controls his mind is cool. (m25, Fin)

The first example locates cool close to its African American roots, but the second draws on film representations and Japan. Although not as commonly recognized by our American informants, Japan and especially the *iki* character of Tokugawa era samurai share the mask of emotional control, stylized performance, and knowingness that characterize Western cool, lacking only its trickster spirit (Richie, 2003). These distilled versions of cool can be seen as stereotypes of cool. Because media representations need to communicate quickly, they too rely on exaggeration and stereotypes of cool (e.g., Gray, 2001). As cool travels farther from its roots such mediated stereotypes distill portrayals of cool.

Cool Vocabulary

We found a buffering phenomenon that may help cool achieve the staying power that it has had across four or five generations. This is the phenomenon of cool synonyms. When we asked informants for words that they currently or previously used in place of cool, we encountered large sets of terms and expressions in both cultures (e.g., butter, da bomb, bitchin', dope, fly, niiice, off da hook, phat, pimp, sweet). Informants also provided cool antonyms, some of which also appeared on the synonym list, including bad, crazy, and shit. This reflects changes over time as well as geographic areas. In Finland, besides the English word cool, some other terms used for the concept include viileä (chilly), kolea (colder weather, usually in autumn), and jäinen (icy). Finns also use phrases like ''it was icy stylish,'' ''sure as ice,'' and ''ice cool.'' In each case ice or icy is taken to mean calm, self-controlled behavior, that is, cool. Here too we can see some distillation of the concept. Similarly, one of the words that American men recalled using to refer to or acknowledge cool

people within their microcultures was "dude," a term derived from surfing and skateboarding subcultures. Kiesling (2004) found that this term is used by college-age to convey as shared sense of cool masculinity. But our American informants suggested that dude had also become too widely used and was beginning to signal uncoolness. The wide variety of ever-changing synonyms for cool and uncool, like the ever-changing array of styles, brands, and music considered to be cool, help those who are cool to distinguish their cool knowingness from that of less cool followers.

At the other extreme of mainstream usage from distilled cool are instances where the term means little more than "good," as seen in these comments:

> Unselfish actions are cool. … Serving other people. … I think friends are cool, and Grandparents are cool and the Gospel is cool. (f19, US)

> I always thought going to music concerts were so cool, and then my experience living in New York City was so cool. And also marrying my high school dream guy. Spending time in Italy learning about art was also really cool. I think its cool to be independent, and financially self-sufficient. I think graduating from college and working in the field that I studied is cool. (f25, US)

If stereotyping is distilled cool, this mainstreaming is best characterized as diluted cool. When cool is diluted into a bland honorific, it threatens the persistence of the term in edgier cool contexts. It is arguably for this reason that informants suggested that although the concept of cool remained, its synonyms were more commonly used. In fact, to use the term cool rather than a synonym was generally considered to be uncool.

> To be seen as cool, performative style was also important.

> With tattoos, sunglasses, and cool clothes even an uncool person seems a bit cooler (at least until the moment when he opens his mouth and expectations prove him wrong) … If you don't have the attitude, self-confidence, pride of your body, and calmness, clothes don't make you cool. (f23, Fin)

There was consensus that in an anonymous context someone might appear cool based on having cool possessions and the right tastes, preferences, and knowledge, but that at the peer group level of what Wulff (1995) terms a microculture, cool performance is also required. This is also consistent with findings by Milner (2004) that cool kids must evidence self-confidence, recklessness, effortlessness, and "an air of invincibility" (p. 59).

Cool Consumption

A telling indicant of the commoditization of cool is that when asked what was cool in clothing fashions, 62% of our American informants provided brand names rather than styles or looks. Based partly on their belief that the truly cool person should evince an ironic detachment, nonchalance, and the appearance of indifference to the opinions of others, informants distinguished the individuating consumption of the cool person and the emulative consumption of others who would be cool. A Finnish informant aptly characterized this difference:

> Then there is coolness that is based on consuming cool things. … In this sense being cool among teenagers requires identifying and accepting popular things and brands. This sort of coolness is not about standing out, it's more like fitting in. (f23, Fin)

Nevertheless personal emulative attempts to be cool were commonly recalled, as with this American man looking back on his adolescence:

> In the 80's mullets were cool and everyone was wearing spandex. I once myself had a small mullet and I thought that I was so cool. I looked like the guys my oldest sister was dating, and they were in high school, could drive, etc. Man was I cool. (m31, US)

Trivial though they may seem in retrospect, such consumption badges were seen as crucial to social acceptance in adolescence. One 21-year-old man recalled that in junior high school he moved from New Jersey to Illinois. He had been regarded as one of the "cool kids" at his former school but found he was not accepted by the cool kids at his new school until he realized they were all wearing high-top Keds basketball shoes with the laces untied (something that comes from prison culture – de Longville & Leone, 2006). After he convinced his mother to buy him a pair as well as some Colorado leather hiking boots like those the in-group wore in the winter, he recalls that he was embraced as a cool kid. A 26-year-old American man recalled that in junior high school a friend lent him his Girbaud jeans and this allowed him to be accepted by the cool kids. Such brands act as marker goods establishing boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. In one school, two primary groups contending for cool status were called "skaters" and "punks." Affiliation was signified by wearing the mutually exclusive clothing that designated each group. In a survey of college students, Labov (1992) found numerous high school microcultures including jocks, motorheads, flea bags, intellectuals, politicos, rah-rahs, freaks, druggies, toughs, and tree people. Such names also signal cool, uncool, and shades in between.

Sometimes the right attitude and the right marker goods used in the right way (e.g., shoes with laces untied) are still not enough. There is also what Thornton (1996) calls subcultural capital or what we encountered as microcultural capital. This is similar to Bourdieu's cultural capital, but rather than operating within the status systems of social classes, it operates within the cool status system of microcultural groups or cliques (see also Nancarrow & Nancarrow, 2007; Ostberg, 2007). Those studied here described how in some junior high and high school groups, membership depended on knowing about the right musical groups, following or participating in the right sports, or having experience with and knowledge of the right drugs. We can also see here that although the heroic model of the individual cool person anointing things with coolness sometimes applies, mainstream cool is more often socially constructed by the group.

DISCUSSION

We find that cool has shifted from being disdainful of consumption to celebrating consumption. Bling or bling bling (the ostentatious consumption first popularized by rap musician Brian ''Baby Birdman'' Williams in 1999) is anything but subtle. High-end brands like Cristal champagne, Gucci, and Mercedes are mentioned with great frequency in rap lyrics (Hip Hop, 2003). Advertisers also borrow bling to lend cool status to their brands (Kerner & Pressman, 2007). For example, an ad for The Game athletic shoes by 310 that appeared in the hip-hop magazine *Vibe* in April 2006 shows the shoes draped around the neck of a heavily tattooed young black male standing with a menacing look in front of a Bentley Continental GT Coupe (see Belk, 2006, p. 85). This too suggests that cool has changed from low key to high key; from subtle to conspicuous; from avoiding envy to provoking envy. These advertising images rely on stereotypes to distill cool for mainstream consumption.

This consumption-driven spread of cool can be seen in the popularity of black rap musicians like 50 Cent among our white American informants. Surveys indicate that 70% of rap music sales are to the white community (Gibbs, 2003). Signs like hip-hop fashions in suburban schools and a rapping Barbie Doll affirm that rap has gained considerable popularity among young middle class Caucasians. Some white fans report that they *want to be* black (Roediger, 1998; Zukin, 2004), while others regard themselves *as actually being* black (Kotlowitz, 1999; Sunderland, 1997). They mimic not only rap musical preferences and fashions, but also

language, gestures, and facial expressions seen on programs like *Yo, MTV Raps* (Harris, 2000). Many believe that a key reason that middle class white kids like music derived from the black ghetto is that the hip-hop movement has conflated blackness with coolness (e.g., Kitwana, 2005; Rodriquez, 2006). In hooks (1992) phrase, it is a case of ''eating the other'' in which ''ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning the dull dish that is mainstream white culture'' (p. 21). Watkins (2005) sees it as the pursuit of an exotic Otherness filled with perceived iniquity. There is rebellion and seduction in the outlaw mystique here as well as a pursuit of something that seems more authentic and exciting than the suburban shopping mall. But still, there is no direct interaction; only vicarious purchased consumer contact with black cool.

We should expect to find both distillation and dilution in the process of white youth consuming black coolness. Local adaptation also occurs, especially in Europe. Our Finnish sample frequently cited Mr. Lordi as a cool person after the monster-costumed Finnish singer and his group won the 2006 Eurovision song competition. Similarly, the baggy trousers, oversized shirts, and baseball caps worn backwards by American rap groups have been adopted by Polish teens (Antoszek, 2003), but many American rap words and phrases like ''the hood,'' ''homies,'' ''the yard,'' and ''yo,'' translated badly into Polish rap. And although hip-hop culture is also quite popular in the Netherlands, gangsta rap is not, since a lack of inner-city ''hoods,'' gang violence, and guns make it hard to identify with these American gangsta rap themes (Krims, 2002). Instead a new hybrid form of music and culture called Nederhop has arisen (Sansone, 1995). Cool and some of its products may be global, but meanings are locally adapted.

The spread of cool has hardly been limited to North American suburbs and Europe. Youth subcultures in India (Karkaria, 2004), Australia (Martino, 1999), Greenland (Kjeldgaard & Askegaard, 2006), New Zealand (Mitchell, 2001), Japan (Condry, 2001), China (Wang, 2005), and Korea (Morelli, 2001), for example, have also embraced the concept and its associated consumption patterns. In each case, there is also local adaptation – for example with Greenlandic youth coveting cool snowmobiles. This suggests that the status that coolness conveys is not a universal currency that can be used anywhere. Rather, it is a microcultural capital that can only be converted into economic, social, and sexual capital within the peer group to whom one is cool. To gain this sort of cool capital, it is necessary not only to stand out and be different, but also to be, or at least appear to be, indifferent to the opinions of others. Milner (2004, p. 60), notes that such pursuit of power through indifference to worldly sanctions is otherwise reserved for saints or holy men. But unlike saints it involves no renunciation of worldly pleasures; only a seeming

indifference toward them. Such indifference may scale up to a jaded consumer culture that truly cannot be satisfied.

The commoditization of cool and this take on the cooling of our pleasure in consumption lead us to a more cynical take on contemporary cool. Connor (1995, p. 137) calls advertisers' use of cool appeals "the bastardization of cool." As we move farther from the putative roots of cool and closer to corporate cooptation of the concept, this charge resonates and converges with other discourses critiquing consumer culture. Lasn (1999) laments:

> "Cool" used to mean unique, spontaneous, compelling. The coolest kid was the one everyone wanted to be like but no one quite could, because her individuality was utterly distinct. Then "cool" changed. Marketers got hold of it and reversed its meaning. Now you're cool if you are *not* unique – if you have the look and feel that bear the unmistakable stamp of America[TM]. Hair by Paul Mitchell. Khakis by The Gap. Car by BMW. Attitude by Nike. Pet phrases by Letterman. Politics by Bill Maher. Cool is the opiate of our time, over a couple of generations we have grown dependent on it to maintain our identities of inclusion. (p. 113)

If Lasn were completely correct in suggesting that the fitting-in consumer conformity of mediated cool has replaced the standing-out nonconformity of earlier versions of cool, it seems doubtful that the concept of cool could survive. A truly cool referent is needed in order to sustain the illusion that mimesis can make us cool. Still, there is a tension between standing-out cool and fitting-in cool. And it is this tension, as imitators eat away at cool differentiation, that drives uniquely cool people to continue to innovate regardless of whether or not the new consumption innovations bring pleasure.

CONCLUSION

Sex, love, respect, money, friends – they would all be ours if only we were cool. The illusion is alluring. Knowing marketers often try to endow their brands with coolness or at least take advantage of the cool imparted when cool people happen to use their brand. Tommy Hilfiger clothing, Timberland boots (Tims), and Adidas sneakers have all enjoyed cool success for a time as they moved from ghetto-initiated condensed cool to distilled cool to diluted cool. But creating the next cool thing is much more difficult. And it is difficult to research because cool things have few inherently cool characteristics and because today's cool becomes tomorrow's uncool. However, as discussed earlier, clever marketers can create or influence cool, at least for a time. For example, in the May, 2006 issue of *Transworld Skateboarding*, Vans introduced a shoe called the Hosoi SK8-HI

(see Belk, 2006, p. 83). A high-energy Dutch angle photo shows the shoe's namesake, Christian Hosoi, catching big air off the side of a swimming pool as he performs a seemingly impossible skateboard trick. The only message is tiny body copy reading ''very limited edition'' and a photo of a high-top shoe festooned with a prominent red Japanese rising sun referencing Hosoi's Japanese-Hawaiian heritage. Hosoi is cool in skateboarding subcultures, but not just because of his outsider heritage or his considerable skateboarding skills. When the ad ran he had just finished four years in prison for trying to bring a suitcase full of methamphetamines into Hawaii. Skateboarding itself has a cool outlaw image, as chronicled in a 2001 Vans-financed documentary film, *Dogtown and Z-Boys* about the start of skateboard culture in Southern California. Vans is steeped in this image due to its long relationship with skateboarding, its prominence in the cool teen film *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, and it's sponsorship of a competitive musical/skateboard tour called Vans Triple Crown Series (Moon & Kiron, 2002). Skateboarding cool may be less luxurious than the ostentatious bling celebrated in rap, but it is no less commoditized.

Rather than elite status or sex appeal, the currency that is being coined here is that of cool. Coolness remains a rarity, but its rarity is that of the high-priced limited-edition branded commodity rather than the difficult-to-perform cool persona. At the height of Michael Jordan's athletic and celebrity prominence, in a series of TV ads Gatorade showed MJ's athletic feats and challenged the advertising viewer to ''Be like Mike.'' It followed this challenge with a rather improbable strategy for acquiring Jordan's singular skills, finesse, and coolness: ''Drink Gatorade.'' But such advertising is not invoking logic; it is invoking sympathetic magic (Mauss, 1972). The magician (in this case the cool Michael Jordan) relies on his association with the object (Gatorade) to invest it with cool power in the eyes of the audience. If Jordan could make baggy knee-length basketball shorts cool, why not a sports drink? In the words of the theme song for the commercials, ''Sometimes I dream, that he is me.'' This is not a new formula. What is new is that the *mana* we seek is coolness and the locus is a mass produced branded object. It is an easy dream to dream: Oh to be cool!

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