

# A Theory on the Origins of Coolness

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## ABSTRACT

Marketing practitioners have long understood the importance of identifying emerging trends for products which are "cool." This paper posits a theory that "coolness" originates in the fluctuating discrepancy between actual and ideal selves in early adolescence (narcissistic vulnerability), which motivates teens to reduce this drive through strategies of peer-group affiliation. Within-group semiotic codes evolve (signifying osmosis) which function to maintain a group identity. These within-group codes determine what is "cool" and "uncool" within the group. Aggregating commonalities across groups results in a metacode of coolness which is amenable to diffusion through the general population.

## INTRODUCTION

*"You can try to be cool, but it only lasts a minute."*

- Russell Simmons, hip-hop impresario and chairman of Phat Fashions, Inc.

(*New York Times*, 1999a)

Practitioners of marketing have long understood the importance of identifying trends in products and fields as diverse as food, fashion, music, technology, advertising, and cinema (Danesi 1994; *New York Times* 1999b). The trends themselves sometimes can have origins in what is considered "cool" or "uncool" by teenagers (Gladwell 1997; Zollo 1995). "Coolness" is a set of shared meanings (e.g. language, self-presentation, artistic expression, values, attitudes) within a peer group which signify group affiliation. Marketing researchers who specialize in discovering nascent trends, so-called "coolhunters" (Gladwell 1997; e.g. Zollo 1995) have emerged as influential sources of knowledge for marketers such as Nike, Guess, Levi Strauss, and the Gap. Using methodologies that range from traditional questionnaires and focus groups to videotaping teens on the street, coolhunters provide expensive periodic snapshots of what's cool right now (Gladwell 1997). While desire to obtain coolness may be a universal motivator for teens (Aloise-Young and Graham 1996; Aloise-Young and Hennigan 1996; Danesi 1993, 1994; Gladwell 1997; Zollo 1995), the attitudes, opinions and behaviors that signify cool appear to differ across groups and over time (Danesi 1993, 1994; Gladwell 1997). Though potentially valuable to a marketer poised to act quickly, this anecdotal information changes constantly, rendering it obsolete (and likely uncool) by the time the reports are published.

Coolhunters' research suffers from the researchers' positions as observers of coolness. Effectively, they are outsiders peering into the fishbowl of cool, reporting on what is already important to teens. In this paper, we attempt to go inside this fishbowl by developing a theory of the psychological and social origins of coolness. While knowing what teens consider cool at any particular point in time is undoubtedly interesting, developing a clearer understanding of how the coolness construct works as a motivator for teen behavior would appear to offer more enduring insights for practitioners and academic researchers alike.

In our theory, we posit that a particular developmental stage, arising concurrently with the onset of the physiological changes of puberty, is the origin of this drive. The essential associated drive-reduction strategy used in this developmental stage involves social processes, a by-product of which is coolness. Thus at the heart of the attainment of coolness is the notion that various people and groups

exist which have established norms for coolness, the adoption of which validate the teen group member.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Three Perspectives on Preconditions of Narcissistic Vulnerability

The onset of adolescence proper brings with it a series of physiological, cognitive and sociological changes that render childhood self evaluation mechanisms useless, and consequently lead to a destabilization of self esteem (termed "narcissistic vulnerability") that lasts until early adulthood (Joffe and Sandler 1967; Wolf, Gedo and Terman 1972; Bleiberg 1988, 1994; Pliner, Chaiken and Flett 1990).

The first perspective is the psychodynamic. Adolescence marks the beginning of an individuation process which begins when the child feels the need to disengage from newly-dysfunctional internalized infantile objects, and to look to external objects as sources of safety, security and sexual attachment (Blos 1967; Freud 1958). In early adolescence (ages 11-13), the biological actualization of reproductive capacities revives the oedipal longings of childhood, and the resulting need to repress such urges is considered by some to be one of the central tasks of adolescence (Freud 1958). As a defense against their oedipal longings, most adolescents find "safety" in the transfer of their libido to parent substitutes, or friends (Joffe and Sandler 1967). The act of idealizing a best friend allows the adolescent to resume self evaluation and once again feel complete (Bleiberg 1988).

The second perspective is cognitive. Adolescence brings important cognitive changes, as teens construct their own sets of categories, systems, languages, and theories to interpret the world around them, and as they are increasingly able to envision the possibilities of the future (Bleiberg 1988, 1994). Adolescent egocentrism results in increased efforts to validate the new vision, by bringing others into the envisioned realm, while gaining additional reinforcement by pulling supporting ideas from culture through reading, television, music, art, etc. (Anthony 1982).

The rejection of pre-adolescent worldviews (which parents typically perceive as rebellion) is highly functional in what Wolf, Gedo, and Terman (1972) describe as the essential task of adolescence: to use new-found abstract thinking to construct a new set of ideals and standards of achievement, to replace the old ego ideal, and ultimately to be able to temper it in relation to real talents and characteristics.

The third perspective, the family/psychosocial, suggests that as children enter puberty, their parents may also experience regressive drives which may cause jealousy, rivalry, desire, confusion and guilt about the adolescent child's newfound nubility, causing them to cling to harder than ever to their adolescent children (Adelson and Doehrman 1980). This clash of drives is inherently uncomfortable for both parents and child, and almost inevitably facilitates the child's desire for distance, as new roles are negotiated within the family (Adelson and Doehrman 1980; Bleiberg 1988).

### Narcissistic Vulnerability

The three previous perspectives inform us about the essential psychological phenomena which spawn a desire for coolness. Developmentally, teens have elaborated senses of self including the



actual self as well as the ideal self, which must be somewhat stable in order for self evaluation to occur. When this stability is lacking (as when the adolescent strives to separate himself from his family), the incongruence between actual and ideal selves leads to a painful state of self-appraisal known as narcissistic vulnerability (Joffe and Sandler 1967; Bleiberg 1988, 1994). Manifestations of adolescent narcissistic vulnerability include proneness to embarrassment, shame, acute self-consciousness, shyness, and painful questions about self-worth and self-esteem. Clearly this internal dissonance is an uncomfortable state.

As they feel the need to separate themselves from their families at the end of adolescence, teens' narcissistic well being is threatened by a number of factors. First, the physiological, cognitive and psychosocial changes that occur at puberty are likely to cause dramatic and unpredictable instability in teens' actual selves. Second, as they distance themselves from their real and internalized parents (childhood ideal selves), they must pursue new ideals (and a new ideal self) so that narcissistic balance is maintained (Kohut 1971).

While a moderate level of discomfort associated with narcissistic vulnerability is a normal developmental symptom (Bleiberg 1994), motivations ensue to reduce this drive. One social mechanism used to reduce the internal discomfort of narcissistic vulnerability is "signifying osmosis" (Danesi 1993, 1994).

### Signifying Osmosis

As old internal ideals become inappropriate, self evaluation becomes impossible until transitional ideals are found. Fortunately, the disengagement from internal objects opens the way for external love/hate objects (Blos 1967, Joffe and Sandler 1967) which facilitates self-evaluation and thus allows the adolescent to derive some measure of self-esteem (Pliner, Chaiken and Flett 1990). Dressing a certain way, listening to certain music, appearance, behavior, and belonging to peer culture are all used by normal adolescents as external props to shore up the faltering sense of self, and to provide a source for self validation (Bleiberg 1988).

The emulation of the style of dress, behavior and the attitudes of the people and groups they admire (the "signifying osmosis" of Danesi [1993, 1994]), serves two functions. In addition to providing them with new ideals (that are more meaningful and appropriate than those they have recently abandoned), emulating peers they admire may also gain them entry into peer groups. During the adolescent individuation process, polarization from past social roles, and adoption of new ones is the only way to maintain psychological integrity (Blos 1967). The adoption of new social roles, and/or the denial of vulnerability and shame about the old ones may be facilitated by two different signifying osmosis reconciliation strategies: transitional positioning and omnipotence (Bleiberg 1988).

### Reconciliation Strategies

Adolescents have two methods at their disposal to help them reconcile the incongruence between their constantly evolving actual and ideal selves. These methods, transitional positioning and omnipotence, both depend on the use of external objects to fill the void created by the disengagement from childhood ideals, though they do so in different ways (Bleiberg 1988).

**Transitional Positioning.** Through the adoption of transitional positioning, adolescents invest people outside the family and objects (e.g. products) with the powers formerly associated with the old ideals (e.g. ability to comfort) (Bleiberg 1988). This behavior satisfies the object hunger and ego impoverishment they experience (Blos 1967; Joffe and Sandler 1967), allowing them to shore up their uncertain sense of self esteem (Coleman 1980). While

functioning as a substitute for the family, social groups provide adolescents with the belongingness, stimulation, loyalty, devotion, empathy and resonance they need to accomplish their shared individual goals of autonomy from the family. They share their hard times as well as their new found sense of freedom with the group, each bringing them closer together (Freud 1958). In groups of their friends, adolescents find reflections of their own lives, reflections of possible new ideals, and safe havens in which they can "try on" new ideal selves without shame or self consciousness (Wolf, Gedo and Terman 1972, Blos 1971; Danesi 1993, 1994). In addition to the bonding aspects of these relationships, friends and social groups also provide the sharp, intense affective states adolescents need to allow them to define themselves within the greater society (Blos 1967).

Normal adolescents use memories, fantasies, parental models, and extrafamilial objects (people and products) to construct new ideals, which are tempered by considering their own capabilities and limitations (actual self) (Bleiberg 1994). While peer group affiliation may help with the construction of transitional ideal selves, adolescents may also turn to celebrities and heroes to help them with the construction of transitional ideal and actual selves by adopting an omnipotent stance (Bleiberg 1988).

**Omnipotence.** Omnipotence is the denial of vulnerability and adoption of a false sense of bravado which adolescents experience by fantasizing that they are like their heroes (Bleiberg 1988). By idolizing and adoring famous people, adolescents are able to regulate their narcissistic well being, and create a second set of substitutes for the families from which they are striving to distance themselves (Blos 1967). This adoration of famous people serves to help adolescents overcome the feelings of shame and self-consciousness that accompany narcissistic vulnerability and by doing so they too help restore narcissistic balance (Bleiberg 1988; Blos 1967; Wolf, Gedo and Terman 1972).

While the adoption of a transitional position gives the adolescent the opportunity to allow similarly oriented peer groups to help with the formation of a transitional ideal self, omnipotence gives the adolescent a method of bolstering his or her fluctuating actual self as well. By "taking on" the characteristics of the idol, the normal adolescent may deny the feelings of shame, self-consciousness and the vulnerability caused by the fluctuations in actual and ideal selves, so that he or she can restore narcissistic well being, at least temporarily (Bleiberg 1988, 1994). The adoption of a common idol or hero by members of a group may also serve as a source of social identification, which strengthens the sense of in-group versus out-group values and beliefs, and reinforces the shared group ideal.

Paradoxically, it appears that these reconciliation strategies lead to a syndrome we describe as "I want to be a conforming member of a unique group." As Snyder and Fromkin (1980) explain, "when one is similar on group-defining attributes to members of one's reference groups, that person is at the same time different from the larger nonmember population of other reference groups" (p. 68). This concept of uniqueness through group affiliation is similar to the balancing of individuation and deindividuation described by Maslach (1974). Recent consumer research (Celsi, Rose and Leigh 1993; Holt 1998; Thompson and Haytko 1997) suggests that this search for uniqueness in groups manifests itself in diverse and symbolic consumption behaviors.

Considering the crucial role played by friends and social groups during adolescence, it is no wonder that teens become so passionately tied to their friends (Coleman 1980; Freud 1958), embracing their ideals and values, and emulating their musical tastes, style of dress and other consumption behaviors (Bleiberg 1988, 1994; Blos 1967; Danesi 1993, 1994).



### Communal Signification

Communal signification is the adoption of group-endorsed attitudes, behaviors and lifestyles, through signifying osmosis, as a means of indicating affiliation with a group (Danesi 1993, 1994). Throughout adolescence, identification with significant persons provides transitional actual and ideal self images which allow for the restabilization of self esteem (Pliner, Chaiken and Flett 1990; Simmons and Rosenberg 1971), while giving credence to individual identity by relating it to a larger community (Erikson 1968). The specific group to which an adolescent aspires will depend on matching the desired image of the adolescent with the *gestalt* of the various available groups.

**Group Membership.** While movies such as *Clueless*, *Heathers*, and *Grease* make light of the trauma and importance associated with teen group membership (or the lack thereof), research suggests that peer groups are extremely important from a developmental standpoint because they give adolescents a support system on which to rely when parents are no longer appropriate for this function (Coleman 1980). Adolescent groups are also important in a sociological sense in that they help the teen make the difficult transition from childhood to adulthood, where they will replace the childhood love objects (the parents) with intimate and loving relationships outside the family (Bleiberg 1994).

As they become increasingly alienated from their parents, adolescents begin to take information from peers (rather than their parents) as evidence of reality, and begin striving to conform to peer group (rather than familial) norms in order to be accepted (Deutsch and Gerard 1955; Burnkrant and Cousineau 1975). Aspiring group members may comply with group norms either to enhance their social standing (value expressive influence), or to avoid group disassociation or disapproval (utilitarian influence) (Kelman 1961; Park and Lessig 1977), both of which may be useful in reestablishing a sense of narcissistic well-being.

By providing information about reality, and setting the standards of what's cool and what's not cool during adolescence, peer groups replace parents as new sources of consumer socialization (Moschis and Moore 1979). Through modeling, reinforcement and social interaction, groups teach their members what clothing and hairstyles they should wear, what food and beverages they should consume, and what music they should listen to, if they want to be part of the group (Moschis and Moore 1979). Thus do members learn the appropriate degree of individuation permitted by their group (Maslach 1974; and consistent with Holt 1998).

**Group Gestalt.** Research on teenage cliques suggests a number of different criteria which may be used as the basis for clique formation such as popularity, wealth, sports participation, activities, academics (Crockett, Losoff and Peterson 1984), social class, IQ (Nash 1973), musical preferences (Danesi 1993) and hobbies (Leona 1978). Regardless of the means by which they choose to do it, teen group members tend to find symbolic ways of differentiating themselves from other groups' members, in spite of their close physical proximity. Though overidentification with group heroes serves a positive purpose by working as a defense against the loss of identity they experience at the beginning of adolescence, this identification process can also become very negative and destructive when teens exhibit intolerance and even cruelty to those who differ in terms of race, color, or possibly clothing (Erikson 1968). Visible product consumption plays an essential role in differentiating between members of the in-group and the out-group; therefore, understanding the norms for various peer groups should help marketers predict behavior, in the form of peer-sanctioned consumption (Thompson and Haytko 1997). In this way, peer groups and peer-sanctioned consumption are significant in their

ability to explain popular teen culture (Eder 1985; Danesi 1994; Zollo 1995).

Though several studies have found that individual popularity is the first and most salient criterion for clique membership for junior high students (Crockett, Losoff and Peterson 1984; Eder 1985), other studies suggest that groups become more focused in high school (Danesi 1993, Leona 1978, Mosbach and Leventhal 1988; Sussman et al. 1990). Because high school groups are more focused and specific, popularity changes from a universally accepted attribute to one that is more group specific. While junior high females made the first distinctions between those who were popular and those who were not, both groups contained a wide variety of girls and appeared to be based on visibility such as cheerleading and student government, more than anything else (Eder 1985). Later studies of high school groups suggest that other types of popularity evolved as a larger number of more homogenous groups emerged (Danesi 1993, 1994; Leona 1978; Mosbach and Leventhal 1988; Sussman et al. 1990). The same behavior, attitudes or appearance that make a teen popular with one group, may bar him or her from acceptance by another group (Thompson and Haytko 1997).

Shared values are a common basis for group formation and membership, though the particular manifestation of those values may vary from the music members value ("housers," "rockers," and "mods" [Danesi 1993]), to their hobbies (skaters [Sussman et al. 1990], surfers and jocks [Mosbach and Leventhal 1988; Sussman et al. 1990]), or extracurricular activities ("hot shots," "dirts" [Mosbach and Leventhal 1988; Sussman et al. 1990], "motorheads," "dirts" [Leona 1978]). Those who do not fit into one of their school's acknowledged groups may join a group at another school (as depicted in the movie *Valley Girl*), choose isolation, or as in movies such as *Sixteen Candles*, *Revenge of the Nerds*, *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, *Pretty in Pink*, and *She's All That*, they may form groups based on their failure to fit in anywhere else (e.g. "nerds," "geeks," "misfits").

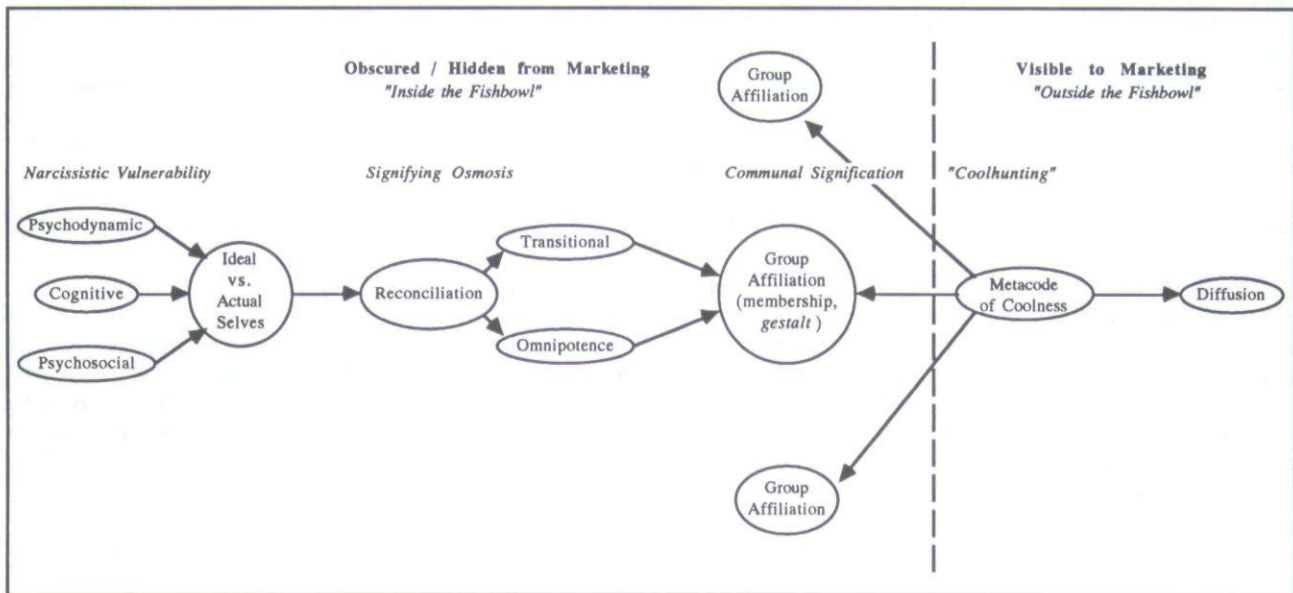
As groups become more specialized, so too do group norms, aesthetics, and language. What emerges is a unique group *gestalt*, an ethos which defines a semiotic code of coolness (Danesi 1994). The ethos is functional, because the particular combination of ideals, lifestyles and consumption within the group must be unique so as to differentiate it from other groups. As each group seeks to carve out a unique positioning for itself, it adopts a unique manifestation of what is cool and what is not. We believe this process to be dynamic and the group ethos persistent, though subject to the influences of progressive waves of group members and their leaders. In this way, the ethos evolves into a highly refined semiotic code of coolness which may be fathomable only to in-group members.

### Coolhunting

To an in-group member, the shared semiotic code of coolness is what makes their group unique and superior (in an ego-functional manner) to other peer groups. In-group members are concerned with the preservation of their group coolness sensibility, and may shift this code should out-group members adopt portions in ways which seem "uncool" to them (Danesi 1994). Thus while the fine distinctions of the semiotic code of coolness serve an important function in maintaining group cohesion (Danesi 1994), the in-group meanings appear largely irrelevant to a group of marketing consultants who have recently emerged as "coolhunters" (Gladwell 1997; e.g. Zollo 1995). These coolhunters are not members of these in-groups, and thus are essentially outside the fishbowl of coolness peering in.



**FIGURE 1**  
Theory on the Origins of Coolness



To the coolhunter what is important are the commonalities among peer-groups' semiotic codes of coolness. Accumulating these commonalities allows a marketing researcher to identify nascent trends which may be amenable to diffusion through the general population. The coolhunter seeks to discern a metacode of coolness, as the metacode elements allow for the greatest likelihood of acceptance in the general population. Thus we see the diffusion in the mid 1990s of loose-fitting jeans (generally accepted by teens across groups and thus part of a contemporary metacode of coolness) through the general population, but only an abortive diffusion of tattooing and body-piercing (which lack shared meaning across teen groups, thus not a part of the coolness metacode).

The coolhunters themselves demonstrate a range of capabilities and methodologies. Among the consistently methodical are Zollo (1995) who demonstrates an ability to categorize what is "in" and what is "out" and which trends are generalizable, marginally generalizable, or unstable (and thus unsuitable) for marketers. At the other extreme are pseudo-participants in the peer groups who anecdotally report "in" and "out" by geographic region and point in time (Gladwell 1997; *Vogue* 1997). While these compilations by marketing researchers are amusing to read, they offer little long-term value to marketers in understanding the emergence of coolness or in the ways in which to exploit emerging coolness.

Nevertheless, marketing practitioners invest in such "coolhunting" research despite its atheoretical nature and its uneven methodologies. For many, even scattered and flawed foreknowledge seems to provide better strategic insight than the alternative of reacting late to trends which have already begun to diffuse through the general population.

### A Theory on the Origins of Coolness

Rather than relying on coolhunters to correctly select "the next big thing" from among the various manifestations of coolness across groups, we suggest that marketers and academicians would be better served by trying to understand the process of identity construction that leads to the investing of certain products, behaviors and attitudes with the designation of coolness (see Figure 1). While

manifestations of coolness may vary from one group to another, each and every one of them originated from the need to overcome the narcissistic vulnerability that accompanies the onset of adolescence, which all adolescents experience.

As stated earlier, narcissistic vulnerability is the painful state of shame and vulnerability which results from chronic incongruence of the ideal and actual selves that accompanies the onset of adolescence (Bleiberg 1988; 1994). Based on the social psychology and developmental research discussed at length above, our model posits that narcissistic vulnerability is the primary motivation for, and the beginning of, the coolness designation process. All adolescents have at their disposal two reconciliation strategies, transitional positioning and omnipotence, to help them with their efforts to overcome the pain and turmoil caused by narcissistic vulnerability (Bleiberg 1988).

In order to reestablish their damaged narcissistic well being, adolescents rely most heavily on their friends and peers. Through transitional positioning, or symbolic transformation, teens are able to draw from friends and peers a transitional sense of comfort and security formerly associated with the parents (Bleiberg 1988). In order to fit in, teens dress and behave like the members of the group to which they aspire to belong. Omnipotence is the method of internalizing the characteristics and traits of heroes and idols, and then using these characteristics as transitional actual selves, in order to deny narcissistic vulnerability (Bleiberg 1988). In addition to helping shore up their fluctuating actual selves, adolescents also tend to join groups who share their devotion to the same heroes, celebrities and idols, thus providing them with the ideals associated with transitional positioning.

This process, known as signifying osmosis (Danesi 1993; 1994), helps them to shore up the faltering sense of self that accompanies narcissistic vulnerability (Bleiberg 1988). While all teens utilize transitional positioning as a reconciliatory strategy, the unique norms of the groups they join will result in different modes of dress, appearance, musical tastes and behaviors across groups. While they may "try out" a number of groups in this process, normal adolescents will ultimately select the group (group affiliation):



membership) which best matches their own characteristics, capabilities and limitations (group affiliation: *gestalt*) (Bleiberg 1994).

It is only at this point, as our model illustrates, that outsiders such as coolhunters and consumer researchers begin searching through the various manifestations of coolness across the groups for items that could potentially gain widespread appeal, if marketed properly. While certain elements of the individual groups' manifestations of coolness may be adaptable across groups, others may not. The coolhunter's role is to guess which products from the individual groups are likely to make it big, and to encourage their clients to mass produce these items. While some groups may "specialize" in setting the trends for shoes, others may specialize in setting the trends for jewelry, or hairstyles, or musical preferences. The combination of the various elements from different groups, and their adoption and diffusion across the larger teen population, results in a dynamic metacode of teen coolness.

### FUTURE RESEARCH

While the psychological processes involved with narcissistic vulnerability are reasonably well understood (Bleiberg 1988, 1994), applications of this concept in marketing have been limited to understanding its role in self-identity (e.g. Sirgy 1982) and not in the context of a precursor to group formation. Since the drive for group association is essential to coolness, prior research on narcissistic vulnerability and self-image formation needs to be revisited in the context of the theory posited here.

The process of signifying osmosis (Danesi 1994) is not well demonstrated empirically. Understanding transitional positioning and omnipotence as functional strategies for group affiliation would give us unique insights into the formation of group semiotics. Comparisons among group semiotic codes would then give us an understanding of the means by which the metacode of coolness evolves. From a marketing perspective, this gives us unique insights into why certain trends emerge from teens as cool, and thus amenable to diffusion in the general population. Similarly, we would improve our abilities to discern why some in-group codes never meld into the metacode of coolness, thus allowing us to avoid attempting to diffuse innovations which have little chance of success in the general population. The current state-of-the-art in practitioner research has provided hit or miss results. Any improvement in improving the "hits" and avoiding the "misses" would be very valuable to practitioners.

The obvious context for such research is in teen cohort groups, which would allow for the study of the evolution of in-group semiotics, as well as comparison among groups for the evolution of the coolness metacode. Longitudinal studies of these groups would provide valuable understanding of the internal group processes involving hierarchy and leadership, which is relevant to the reconciliation strategies of transitional positioning and omnipotence over time. We believe that an understanding of the formation of coolness is both academically interesting as well as of practical value to marketers in sharpening the abilities of coolhunters to accurately predict the trends which will be exploitable as "cool."

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