ACADEMIC PAPERS

An analysis of the concept of *cool* and its marketing implications

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Abstract

Cool *has become the favoured language of popular culture. This paper examines the roots of* cool *and its evolution with reference to its relevance to marketers. In particular, the work of Bourdieu and the concepts of cultural capital and cultural intermediaries are drawn on. The importance of talking to cultural intermediaries led Seagram to carry out a research programme that examines the process of adoption of alcoholic drinks and ways of reaching 'style leaders'. Given the problem of recruiting and researching 'style leaders', the research employed specialist recruiters and moderators and a combination of direct and indirect questioning.*

THE RISE OF *COOL*

In the last few years the term *cool* has increasingly become the favoured language of popular culture and, in particular, youth culture (Pountain and Robins, 2000a). It has also become quite noticeably the voice of advertising (Frank, 1997). It is arguably the popular *zeitgeist* of the new millennium, the mindset of considerable swathes of consumers across the globe and, seemingly, a very desirable commodity in itself.

Moreover, while personal or inner *cool* remains both fairly elusive and exclusive, an aesthetically, outer *cool* lifestyle is far more attainable, the desire of everyone from those now fifty-something baby-boomers who went to university during the 1960s (Brooks, 2000) to their teenage offspring. A *cool* lifestyle can be achieved, to a large extent, through selective consumption—which is why *cool* is so interesting to marketers.

Pountain and Robins (2000b) state that *cool* is 'fast becoming the majority attitude among young people' and 'far from being a passing fad it is having a major effect on business'. They also

argue that cool is now 'primarily about consumption' and that marketers need to 'crack the code of cool' to succeed in their interactions with contemporary consumers. Furthermore, as various writers have pointed out (Osgerby, 1998; Featherstone, 1991; Pountain and Robins, 2000b), most of today's key advertising, media and marketing creatives are themselves either children of the 1960s counter-culture or even younger and even more thoroughly imbued with *cool* values. While urgently seeking cool for their products, businesses, services and advertising, they are themselves prime exponents of the *cool* lifestyle. They are what French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu referred to as 'cultural intermediaries', working in the culture, media and marketing industries and diffusing cultural attitudes and the aesthetics of lifestyle into the mainstream (Bourdieu, 1984).

THE DIFFUSION OF *COOL*

Marketers are inevitably concerned with the process of diffusion of innovation and, in particular, with early adopters, especially in new technology, fashion or leisure products. Whether they are known as 'style leaders', 'taste makers', 'opinion formers', 'leading-edge consumers' or even 'symbol specialists' (Featherstone, 1991), the idea is the same—these are the people whose role in the innovation process is seen as crucial. They are not necessarily the true innovators: those artists, designers and other creatives whose work, often commercially unviable, inspires new modes and styles of consumption. These 'style leaders' live very much in the consumer world of designer labels, brands and advertising. Their 'cultural capital', to use Bourdieu's terms, or 'insider knowledge', is very much concerned with commodities (Bourdieu, 1984). Moreover, they are accessible to marketers; indeed, specialist marketing research companies exist to recruit such individuals (see *Research Buyers Guide*, 2000).

This paper will focus on one such exercise in carrying out qualitative research among 'style leaders', the objective of which was to understand the process by which some alcoholic drinks are seen as *cool* and how they acquire that status. It will also engage with how the 'trickle-down' effect from hip metropolitan bars to the mainstream operates and the impact of what Davis calls the 'float-up' effect from, in particular, ethnic minorities (1992). The need to understand the emergence of *cool* and how to define and interrogate the somewhat nebulous concepts of 'style leadership' and *cool* will be discussed.

COOL ROOTS

Within the last 30 years *cool* has evolved from a hippie mantra into the ubiquitous chant of every teenager: 'that's cool'. As a word it might seem to have become almost meaningless; as a concept it has considerable power, whether we regard it as what Raymond Williams called 'the structure of feeling' of contemporary popular culture or as one of the dominant ideologies of consumer capitalism (Williams, 1965).

Cool has its roots in black culture, especially that of urban North America. As a word, it has both drug and jazz connotations and dates from just before World War II (just as 'hip', too, has jive-talk roots), although as a concept it can also be linked to other bohemian artistic communities. As Shapiro has convincingly described in *Waiting for the Man* (1999), *cool* was essentially an attitude adopted by black musicians as a defence against the prejudice they encountered and a form of detachment from their difficult and often insecure working conditions. As such, it harked back to the slave plantations and the need to dissemble—to appear respectful and docile (jive talk was originally a way to conduct conversations that overseers could not comprehend).

Cool soon came to include the taking of drugs; the itinerant musicians from

the south had long been associated with drugs, whether those of the travelling medicine shows or marijuana from Mexico. In the northern cities like New York and Chicago, to be a jazz musician soon came to imply the use of marijuana. It was part of what has been called 'the freemasonry of musical separatism', with the drug-taking serving as a mark of distinction, a statement of separateness and a refusal to accept the norms of conventional society (Morton, 2000). *Cool* was about being 'in the know'. Moreover, drugs like heroin also increased the sense of detachment central to *cool*. They also gave *cool* its associations with gangster chic.

Cool also involved a dress code that, while adopting the dark clothes and dark glasses so beloved of twentieth-century fashion, also encompassed the 'flashy clothes' (such as the zoot suit) that urban black culture has often chosen in order to make a statement that cannot be ignored (most recently the 'ghetto fabulous' look) (Mercer, 1997). *Cool*, at this point, was essentially a male phenomenon. It also became increasingly seductive to white audiences.

During the years of Prohibition in the USA (1919–1933), the metropolitan jazz scene became even more of a draw to wealthy members of the middle classes taking 'a walk on the wild side'. Indeed, some members of the white jazz audience wanted to be *cool* so badly that they became what Norman Mailer (1957) referred to as 'White Negroes', talking jive, taking drugs and emulating black style. As Davis has noted, fashion usually involves 'a collective identity ambivalence'; although he relates this specifically to gender, social status and sexuality, ethnicity and a generalised desire to identify with black culture would also seem to play a part here (Davis, 1992).

The post-war Beats, too, absorbed much black culture through their appreciation of jazz, their proximity in Greenwich Village and the way in which drugs formed the central focus of their lives (see Polsky's ethnographic study *Hustlers, Beats and Others*, 1998). In this way *cool* began its trajectory from being a defensive mechanism of black jazz musicians, part of their performance, to becoming the attitude of choice of youth everywhere.

The real watershed for *cool* could be argued to be the 1960s counter-culture. The Beat philosophy evolved into hippie culture, an unprecedented number of young people went to university and society became increasingly consumer oriented. Certainly the 1960s, were, as historian Arthur Marwick has noted, the first era in which illicit drugs became part of the mainstream experience (Marwick, 1999). *Cool* values, which have been characterised as seeking 'to destroy order, convention and tradition for the sake of sensation, liberation and self-exploration' (Brooks, 2000), became those of the most articulate and influential of the baby-boomer generation.

The debate as to whether the *cool* ideology triumphed or whether it was effectively co-opted and exploited by consumer capitalism has been the focus of recent books by Brooks, *Bobos in Paradise* (2000); Powers, *Weird Like Us* (2000); Pountain and Robins, *Cool Rules* (2000b); and Frank, *The Conquest of Cool* (1997). While all agree that counter-cultural attitudes—anti-authoritarian, hedonistic, sexually permissive and focused on self-enlightenment/development—entered the dominant ideology, they disagree as to the process by which this happened and its implications.

It has long been argued that one of the 'cultural contradictions of capitalism' (Bell, 1979) is that the work ethic that was essential in the early days of capitalism has become obsolete because late consumer capitalism requires not thrift and a sense of duty but ever more consumption and pleasure-seeking to

sustain it. This essentially pessimistic view of society is echoed by Frank in *The Conquest of Cool*, which chronicles what he believes was the adoption and manipulation of *cool* by the advertising agencies of Madison Avenue (1997). 'Hip consumerism', he argues, 'marked a crucial step in the development of a new ideology of consumption'. *Cool* became the language of advertising and thus entered the mainstream as a strategy to increase hedonistic consumption. In a similar vein, Pountain and Robins claim that *cool* represents a 'sea-change in the group psychology of western societies', but that 'cool is the way to live with lowered expectations by going shopping' (2000a).

Brooks is more positive and argues that a dynamic generation of bourgeois-bohemians ('bobos') have emerged in the USA who are 'holding down day jobs in the unfettered global marketplace' while 'spending weekends immersed in a moral and cultural universe shaped by the sixties' (2000). Bobos have acted, to use Bourdieu's phrase, as the 'cultural intermediaries' of *cool*.

DEFINING CONTEMPORARY *COOL*
While accepting that 21st-century *cool* has connotations and implications well beyond youth culture, the scope of this paper is specifically the consideration of *cool* within the context of metropolitan clubs, bars and parties. Like the jazz scene of the inter-war years, this form of *cool* also operates chiefly as a way of excluding others—in contemporary terms, the despised mainstream. It could be compared to a 'performance' that reinforces the position of an elite group.

Cool is, however, now very much involved with commodities and the aesthetics of designer labels and niche brands. This is what Deighton has called the 'consumption of performance', whereby 'symbolic products' are used as 'props in performances enacted to

influence others' (1992). *Cool* also continues to display a fascination with black culture. And, as Pountain and Robins admit, 'Cool is still in love with cigarettes, booze and drugs' (2000b).

While Pountain and Robins describe *cool* as a combination of three personality traits—'narcissism, ironic detachment and hedonism'—that can be traced all the way back to the jazz musicians (2000a), Thornton's analysis of the dance-music scene, 'Club cultures: music, media and subcultural capital' (1995), focuses more on the exclusivity of *cool*. She argues that within contemporary club culture *cool* is a form of what she calls 'subcultural capital', echoing Bourdieu's concept of 'cultural capital'. She also asserts that 'the social logic of subcultural capital reveals itself most clearly by what it dislikes and by what it most emphatically isn't' and assumes the 'inferiority of others'. Thornton found that 'hip' criteria mostly focused on the exclusive: the 'alternative', the 'authentic', esoteric genres or venues, insider knowledge and a tendency to disparage aspects of culture considered 'feminine' or 'commercial' (pop music, for example). Above all, she found that trying too hard is anathema to *cool*.

One of Thornton's criteria in particular, that of 'authenticity', became a recurring theme of this project. In terms of popular culture it represents a deeply ideological discourse, invariably used to express superior taste and disdain for the mass-produced. As Strinati argues, authenticity 'derives from a particular set of cultural tastes and values', not from any historical truth (1995). Originating in both the Marxist and Leavisite critiques of mass culture, where 'authentic' folk culture represented a lost Golden Age and mass culture an artificial, hopelessly commercial culture, it has since been used to 'champion the superior status of certain genres' against the mainstream (Strinati, 1995). For example, it has been especially prevalent in music, where

masculine tastes for 'authentic' jazz, folk or rock have been valorised above feminine tastes for 'pop' music. 'Authenticity' is very much a value judgment that is used to express distinction, frequently gender-specific.

Authenticity is also, in its preference for rituals, associated with the 'invented traditions' so integral to our cultural history (see Hobsbawm, 1983): traditions that marketers have perhaps found it easier to relate to (and initiate) than the more nebulous concept of *cool*. As for defining *cool*, although we see it as essentially rather elusive, in the context of this paper and of the early 21st century, we would define it partly as an attitude—laid-back, narcissistic, hedonistic—but also as a form of cultural capital that increasingly consists of insider knowledge about commodities and consumption practices as yet unavailable to the mainstream.

MARKETING *COOL*

If trying too hard is taboo on the club scene, it is also something marketers seeking the youth market need to be wary of. If 'the price of cool is eternal vigilance and advertisers with a young audience play a difficult game, forced constantly to update their campaigns and demonstrate their knowledge about new people, new looks and new music' (Pountain and Robins, 2000b), it is also one that demands subtle approaches. This section of the paper reviews some recent marketing campaigns in search of *cool*, as reported in the media (*The Observer*, 1999; *Guardian*, 1999, 2000a, 2000b, 2001; *Marie Claire*, 1999).

Marketers in search of *cool* try to 'catch a vibe'—through 'cultural commentators'; 'cultural reporters' (who seek emerging trends everywhere from New York to Tokyo); 'style runners' (out on the streets, in clubs and on fashion shoots); and by talking to 'leading-edge consumers' (defined by Collier and Fuller (1999) as those consumers who are 12–18 months ahead of the mainstream). All of which

creates lucrative employment for those with 'hip' cultural capital and profit for those producers who catch the right vibe.

Naomi Klein's *No Logo* (2001) has described the '*Cool envy*' that has troubled companies ranging from IBM to Adidas to Pepsi and Coca Cola and how this led in the mid 1990s, particularly in the USA, to the rise of a new industry of '*cool hunters*'. Klein refers to these consultancies as 'the legal stalkers of Youth Culture' and remains sceptical of the phenomenon:

> 'cool hunters and their corporate clients are locked in a slightly S/M, symbiotic dance: the clients are desperate to believe in a just-beyond-their-reach well of untapped cool, and the hunters, in order to make their advice more valuable, exaggerate the crisis of credibility the brands face' (2001).

Nevertheless, the search for *cool* remains elaborate. For example, Diesel, an Italian jeans company, launched in London, a 'StyleLab': a laboratory of ideas whose designers have only one brief—'to be inspired'. For the summer collection the creative team 'found an affinity with the Bauhaus, mixing modernism with futurism' (*Observer*, 1999): truly a postmodern act of bricolage. Diesel is, moreover, now said by the media to have become well known for its 'wit and irony'.

Sometimes the marketer's objective is exclusivity. Levi's, worried that baby-boomers such as Jeremy Clarkson and Tony Blair were still wearing their jeans and killing any kudos amongst the young the brand might have, announced in 1999 that 'we want to show this is the brand that really understands contemporary culture' (*Guardian*, 1999). Seeking out 'sneezers', the kind of 'hip' individuals who spread 'the germ' of a fashion idea, they opened a flagship store in London with chill-out zones, DJs, graffiti art and in-store 'customising'. Then they launched a range—Levi's Red—with minimalist, pared-down design features, sent

samples to 'style leaders' and only stocked it in specialist outlets. By summer 2000 they had apparently succeeded—the hip twentysomethings of Hoxton were wearing their products (*Sunday Times*, 2000). Levi's *cool* credibility was restored.

Other manufacturers use advertising heavy with references to popular culture to enhance the image of what are essentially mainstream fashions. Gap, an American retailer, ran advertising featuring *cool* icons—Steve McQueen, Marilyn Monroe, Miles Davies, Andy Warhol—and anonymous *cool* individuals (*Marie Claire*, 1999). In this way, with true postmodern irony, Warhol, famous for prints of popular cultural icons, became such an icon himself. Appearing in a Gap advertisement acquired cachet; to wear Gap clothes was taken to mean 'I don't need labels'. The products themselves were mainstream; the manufacturers harnessed the concept of *cool* and created mystique that appealed to consumers wanting to look 'hip' without being 'cutting edge'.

Sometimes the marketing is relatively unsubtle: for instance, compilation CDs that recreate the ambience of a Hoxton bar (or even a club in Ibiza). At other times 'stealth marketing' is used: for example, Macy Gray's album *On How Life Is* was promoted apparently through word of mouth, though actually through very selective promotion, in keeping with its 'wholesome, rootsy, organic aesthetic'; in other words, its 'authenticity' (*Guardian*, 2000a). In order to make it appear exclusive, 12-inch rough mixes of the album were distributed to selected 'taste makers'. This was known as 'seeding' the marketplace. It worked first in the UK and the album went on to global success.

Sometimes the 'hip' are specifically targeted; sometimes the impetus is theirs. For instance, a 'retro' style may be chosen as a mark of distinction by a handful of individuals; it is next picked up by fashion stylists and designers and then by the style magazines. Soon the producer is quite unexpectedly experiencing an upsurge in demand without really understanding why. This happened in the United States to Hush Puppies, which went within two years from being an almost moribund brand to the footwear of Manhattan hipsters to every shopping mall across America (*Guardian*, 2000b).

What becomes apparent is that, however commodified the concept of *cool* is, it is people rather than commodities who create *cool*. Which is why it became so important to speak to those who are part of the *cool* world of London's nightlife and why Seagram UK carried out the qualitative research below.

THE RESEARCH PROGRAMME
Objectives
The objectives of the research included identifying the process by which a product (whether a drink, a venue or clothing) might be adopted by 'style leaders' or 'opinion formers' and might move thence into the mainstream. Seagram were particularly concerned about what influenced this process of adoption and how it might be possible for marketing to play a role in influencing the 'arbiters' of style.

Method
The research centred on young people aged between 20 and 30. The research also explored attitudes to various alcoholic drinks brands and forms of marketing communications. The fieldwork for the programme of research was conducted by experienced qualitative researchers from a reputable marketing research agency that specialises in this kind of 'cutting edge' work. They use young 'hip' recruiters (rather than the traditional middle-aged lady interviewers), recruit in fashionable areas of the city and search for a certain kind of job (fashion, media, music, design), single status and a

particular 'look'. In this instance they also required respondents to exhibit a considerable degree of socialising and the consumption of a range of alcoholic drinks.

In total eight group discussions were conducted in London, Edinburgh and Manchester. While most groups were carried out among 'pubbers and clubbers', one of the London groups focused on what the marketers called 'style leaders' and the concept of *cool*.

It was argued that style leadership is too fragile a concept to subject to just direct questioning techniques, and so observation and indirect questioning were also used as part of the recruitment process. Indeed, because the recruiters used by the marketing research agency were themselves young and stylish and thus well qualified to detect potential respondents, they were also well placed to persuade recruits that the whole exercise had 'credibility'. In this way the concern that true style leaders might simply be too *cool* to cooperate in a market research exercise was overcome. Indeed, the respondents recruited provided a valuable insight into what might be termed 'the diffusion of *cool*'.

Eight of those respondents designated 'style leaders' were invited to an evening session in Soho (London UK), paid a small incentive and involved in an informal group discussion with an experienced moderator who was also in his twenties. Another (mainstream) group was taken on an accompanied evening out so the interviewer could get a real feel for the whole evening-out experience with the core market. If these 'style leaders' and 'early adopters' were not at the very top of the innovation–diffusion ladder, their relative position tended to make them more useful in articulating what it is that makes a venue or a drink *cool*. It is something they work at and think about, rather than something that comes as a result of 'celebrity'. As Featherstone has argued of such cultural intermediaries:

'considerable time and effort have to be expended in cultivating a sense of taste which is flexible, distinctive and capable of keeping abreast of the plethora of new styles, experiences and symbolic goods'. (1991)

Interpretation of the Research Data
The nature of qualitative research is interpretivist (Hussey and Hussey, 1997; Barker *et al*., 2001). Accordingly, we do not present the data alone, but our interpretations, coloured by perspectives from the literature as well as our own experiences. Those involved in the interpretation were the three authors. The process involved independent and group interpretations. While different perspectives were brought to the interpretation (triangulation), we found sufficient commonality of interpretation to present just one 'narrative' of findings rather than three.

The group of eight 'style leaders' (four women, four men; two black, six white) consisted of a photographer, a graphic designer, a journalist (the *Face*), a fashion buyer, an Internet designer, a fashion editor, a writer for men's magazines and a freelance film-maker. All were aged 23–30 and lived in London. Mostly their capital was cultural rather than economic (their work being frequently irregular and the cost of life in metropolitan London being high); however, they were using their cultural capital—their insider knowledge of what is *cool*—to make a living. Indeed, herein lies one of the contradictions of the *cool* world. Although the greatest threat to insider knowledge is dissemination in mainstream media, many of those with 'subcultural capital' become involved in the consumer press, perhaps initially in 'style' magazines, but maybe subsequently in more mainstream media: 'the aficionados who become the writers, editors and photographers . . . have at one time or another been participants in subcultures and still

espouse versions and variations of underground ideology' (Thornton, 1995).

In many respects the style-leader respondents were closer to the art-school lifestyle than to that of conspicuous consumption. This tended to breed a certain ruthlessness towards those with more money but less *cool*, especially the 'city suits' they so despised and who tended to invade the new fashionable bars of Clerkenwell and Shoreditch on weekday evenings.

Just as pubs played little part in this group's leisure time, so clubs, too, were often rejected in favour of more unusual venues. They mostly claimed to be 'bored with the whole club scene', partly because clubs were often the haunt of younger age groups but also because they attracted businessmen, tourists and the 'desperately wannabes' of the mainstream. Perhaps, moreover, because in London clubs tend to be expensive and involve the ignominy of queuing. One of the group moonlighted as a 'door picker', selecting those with enough *cool* to be allowed into a club—and it would probably be true to say that 'picking' was more congenial to them than 'being picked'; as Thornton has commented, 'door people are key readers and makers of the meaning of style' (Thornton, 1995). Few clubs were regarded any longer as part of the 'underground'. As a result, a strong preference was expressed for members-only clubs and bars, invitations to join usually coming through their media or fashion connections. Two of the women particularly liked the 'sleazy' atmosphere of some of the 'Soho boho' members' bars.

The group's social lives seemed to revolve round parties (either acquaintances or business-related PR parties) and also a variety of bars in the City, Soho and Hoxton, until recently a rundown inner city area but now ultra-hip (*Sunday Times*, 2000). Hoxton, a maze of cobbled streets in the City of London, is 'arty, fashionable,

entrepreneurial . . . hotter than hot' and as close to style leadership as we are likely to get. Alexander McQueen started his fashion business in Hoxton Square; Tracey Emin lives and works there; models, photographers, artists, film-makers and 'fashion whizz kids' hang out there; 'one-off bars, restaurants, boutiques, galleries and nightclubs, with the emphasis on cool, have mushroomed' (*Sunday Times*, 2000).

The respondents' most favoured bar at the time was HOME in Clerkenwell—a deliberately down-at-heel, comfortable venue, with large sofas reminiscent perhaps of Greenwich Village (and, of course, *Friends*). However, it was clear that there was quite an urge to find new places as soon as current favourites became popular. An air of consciously 'moving on', searching for something new, runs through their comments.

For example, some admitted to enjoying taking up venues, such as hotel bars, that were previously deeply unfashionable: 'It is another step of one-upmanship—finding bars a lot of people wouldn't have been seen dead in before'. (This was before hotel bars like the Met and the Purple Bar at the Sanderson became hip.) Clearly they felt the need to be somewhere distinctive, somewhere that they could remain ahead of those they dismissively call 'the sheep'. As Pountain and Robins claim, 'Cool itself is intrinsically judgmental and exclusive' (2000b).

Not surprisingly, given their work in fashion, the media and design, the young men and women in the group discussion were very aware of their importance as innovators and 'taste makers'. None expressed surprise that a marketing company should seek their opinion. They are both profoundly cynical and yet firm believers in the power of marketing. They are aware that 'history' can be invented or manufactured, but still insist on the importance of 'authenticity'.

They are very advertising/marketing

literate and expect high standards of design and creative work. Jack Daniels, for example, is the kind of product they identify with—'an American icon', 'a cult drink', 'a dangerous image of ''playing with the devil'' ', with a 'strong heritage', 'authenticity', and 'heavy with the blues'. All agreed it was 'very cool'. The women, as much as the men, liked its masculine values. The fashion stylist said that Jack Daniels would be included in a photo shoot whereas, say, Southern Comfort would not. This could be related to Thornton's assertion that 'authentic culture is depicted in gender-free or masculine terms' (1995), 'gender-free' tending, as ever, to imply the masculine (Davis, 1992).

The group was equally impressed by Absolut vodka, a product without heritage but with enough 'hardcore' values—strong, minimalist, exclusive to make it, too, 'the ultimate ''cool'' drink'. In fact, one young man in a mainstream group admitted finding it 'intimidating' and said he risked ridicule if ordering it when not hip enough to do so. Admired by the style leaders for its strategy of low-key marketing, sponsorship of art events and distribution in select venues, Absolut was considered to be on its way to becoming 'a classic'. Absolut was also one of the early clients of New York's *cool* hunters (Klein, 2001).

It was also agreed that to a certain extent 'you can be cool and drink whatever you like'—a truly 'hip' drinker was allowed much more leeway than a 'wannabe'. However, there was no tolerance for sweet drinks like Malibu, which were regarded as 'girly', young and downmarket. It was also noticeable that this style-conscious group was far less interested than the mainstream groups who formed the rest of the project's focus in consuming large quantities of alcohol as the basis of a 'good night out'. As for drugs, for fairly obvious reasons they were outside the remit of this project; however, it would no doubt have been interesting to have included them as a topic of discussion.

Certainly absinthe, as an illegal drink, had serious attractions for some of this group. The complicated 'nice little ritual' connected with it, involving sugar, spoon and flame, made it particularly desirable. It was also reckoned to be 'opium-based', 'hallucinogenic', with the potential to 'make you go mad'. Although not in quite the same class, tequila, too, had its ritual (a useful device for excluding the uninitiated), while high-proof rum from the Caribbean that was not on sale here was also highly rated. Holt has written about this 'cultural capital of consumption' which focuses on consumption practices (1998). He argues that, because consumer goods themselves now hold their cultural value so fleetingly before becoming mass-market, there is a strong desire among the culturally knowledgeable to consume goods in ways not available to those with less cultural know-how, less *cool*. Hence the importance of rituals, invented traditions and 'authentic' imported drinks.

Interestingly, the group considered that it was, as much as anything, effective marketing that steered a drink towards iconic status: 'marketing can do anything'. Its members stressed the importance of 'aesthetics', admitted that 'fashions change so quickly' and placed emphasis on marketing events and promotions over advertising—suggesting involvement with London's carnivals as a good opportunity for a drinks company.

Were they style leaders? They were not in the celebrity league of Stella McCartney, Alexander McQueen, Damien Hirst, Jade Jagger, Rankin, Tracey Emin, John Cooper Clarke *et al*. They were, however, 'cultural intermediaries', whose occupations involve symbolic goods and services and whose preoccupation with 'the stylisation of life' (Bourdieu, 1984) makes them ideal diffusers of consumer culture. They act as cultural disseminators, interpreting and passing

on what they see and hear at work and what they read in the hip media. They both adopt and adapt the innovations of others. To a certain extent, we can expect that there was a degree of 'posturing' within the group dynamics; however, it is fair to assume that a similar degree of 'acting *cool*' would also frame their social 'performance'.

Deeply critical of those they do not consider hip, these young men and women devote considerable time and effort to acquiring subcultural capital. They search out new venues, give credibility to what are essentially commercial ventures and then move on, ever fearful of being caught up by the mainstream. Their creed is that one shall 'never be seen to ''try too hard'' ', which very much underlines Thornton's argument that 'nothing depletes capital more than the sight of someone trying too hard'.

Indeed, the video of the group suggests that daytime clothing tends to be a rather understated and androgynous street style, reflecting both the ambivalence of fashion that Davis refers to and also what he calls 'calculated under-dressing' (1992). Their clothes could not readily be recognised as designer label by the non-cognoscenti (this is not to say, however, that they are not designer labels—Maharishi, for example, was mentioned). It is very much an 'authentic' (one of their favourite words) and relaxed look, in stark contrast to the flashy 'city suits' and more obviously designer-label-clad teenagers.

The women appear not to wear cosmetics and make little concession to the 'ideology of femininity' (McRobbie, 1991). In keeping, perhaps, with the disdain that culture generally shows for the 'feminine' (the long-running critique of Mass Culture as Woman, as described by Huyssen, 1986), *cool* tends towards the masculine or the androgynous (this latter being, in fashion terms, 'located much more often on the male side of the gender division':

Davis, 1992). It is unlikely any of the group would have been singled out for attention—quite unlike many of the 'spectacular' subcultures of the past (Hebdige, 1979).

So how did these style leaders' concept of *cool* fit with our definitions? Certainly there was a degree of narcissism and hedonism, though ironic detachment is perhaps harder to pinpoint in a group discussion situation. To take Thornton's checklist of those with subcultural capital, these style leaders preferred the alternative to the mainstream; chose the 'authentic' over the fake; sought insider knowledge rather than the easily accessible; and liked specialist genres, in this instance, drinks and venues rather than music (Thornton, 1995). Certainly they demonstrated disdain for those considered uncool.

In terms of their attitude towards the commercial, however, the respondents were far less ambiguous than Thornton's criteria of 'hip' would suggest—their work placed them firmly in the consumer world. They were an integral part of what Featherstone calls 'the paperchase effect' resulting from 'the constant supply of new, fashionably desirable goods or the usurpation of existing markers by lower groups', which forces those with claims to be *cool* to 'invest in new informational goods in order to re-establish the original social distance' (1991). Their concept of *cool* was a distinctly commodified one, existing within the world of bars, clubs, fashion, music, media and advertising.

They did, however, conform to Thornton's criteria of preferring the masculine or gender free aspects of style over the feminine. In fact, as many writers have argued, gender-free, unisex and androgynous are ideological misnomers that privilege the male at the expense of the female (see, for example, Butler, 1990). Indeed, the whole issue of the concept of *cool* and gender, which was not a focal point of this project, emerged as one of the most interesting

prospects for further research. For example, the role of gay subcultures in influencing club culture, and hence youth culture more generally, should not be underestimated.

CONCLUSIONS

The research successfully explored the concept of *cool*, the role of cultural intermediaries and how marketing might influence this process. Concerns that there might be problems in researching the topic among 'style leaders' were not realised. It would seem that using the right type of recruiters, recruiting in the right places with relevant questions on consumption habits and employing moderators who relate to this type of respondents appears to be effective. In addition, qualitative direct and indirect questioning elicited rich insights with no evidence of respondents' adopting an aloof attitude. Of course, the apparent validity of the exercise is a subjective judgment based on the research team's critical analysis of the process (see Gabriel, 1990). In terms of future research it would be interesting to include observation *in situ* and classical socio-metric analysis of opinion leadership as a means both to validate the qualitative discussion route and potentially to provide further insights.

Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital clearly applies not just to highbrow culture but also in the popular cultural context of *cool*. In more practical terms, the research identified the kind of venues that style leaders and key influencers visit and so a focus for marketing activities. In addition, the ingredients of *cool* for an alcoholic drink were established and include authenticity, ritual, exclusivity and understated marketing.

It can reasonably be argued that an understanding of the concept of *cool* is important to marketers not only in youth markets but also in older lifestyle markets. For a drinks manufacturer, in particular, there is a vital difference between drinks 'of the moment' that are by their nature ephemeral (Vodka and Red Bull, Sea Breezes, for instance) and drinks that have the ability to move towards 'classic' status (for example, Absolut), and marketing strategies need to reflect these distinctions. However 'transitory, fleeting, contingent' it might appear that *cool* is, without an understanding of how the process of designating something as *cool* works and the importance of cultural intermediaries, marketers are unlikely to hit the right tone in their marketing and advertising campaigns.

For example, after the above research, the realisation of the importance of black culture to *cool* resulted in a very successful campaign for Morgan's Spiced Rum featuring black artists, writers, actors and musicians, groups identified as particularly *cool* and, crucially, as relevant to the Caribbean roots of the rum. The connection was a natural one, not forced, and therefore the advertising itself was considered 'authentic'; it was *cool*.

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