

**Cool Brands:
A Discursive Identity Approach**

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Abstract

This paper argues that ‘cool’ is maintained in part by language and seeks to understand how identities of coolness for brands are constructed in consumer culture discourses. These discourses are constructed within a cultural production system, which comprises three sets of actors: marketers, cool hunting agencies and consumers. The preliminary findings of the research suggest a cool brand identity is constructed through the aforementioned actors drawing on discourses of value, social networks, progressiveness and unconventionality. Although all drew on the same thematic discourses, marketers and cool hunters constructed identities of coolness for brands in similar ways whilst consumers varied in their articulated language and meanings. However, across all actors a meta-narrative of elusiveness pervaded the articulations of cool brand identities.

Keywords: cool, discourse, identity, brands

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Introduction

Cool has become one of the dominant ideologies of contemporary consumer capitalism and an imperative aspiration within popular and youth culture (Nancarrow, Nancarrow, and Page, 2002). For organisations, cool represents a vehicle to increase market share and profits, becoming “our country's most precious natural resource: an invisible, impalpable substance that can make a particular brand of an otherwise interchangeable product - a sneaker, a pair of jeans, an action movie – fantastically valuable” (Grossman, 2003, p.48). For consumers, cool represents aspiration and status, being “the summation of all that we aspire to. Cool is not an image, a way of looking, talking or doing. It is a way of being” (Pountain and Robbins, 2000, p.25). Hence, far from being a passing fad, cool is having a major effect on contemporary commerce and businesses are being urged to ‘crack the code of cool’ in order to succeed in interactions with consumers (Pountain and Robbins, 2000). The growing recognition of the importance of cool by practitioners is most clearly highlighted by the emergence of an industry solely dedicated to understanding it, namely the cool hunting industry.

Cool hunting began to emerge as a ‘cutting edge’ practice in the early to mid 1990s. Cool hunters or trend spotters, can be found in specialist agencies as well as market research, consulting or advertising firms and primarily act as a go-between in the worlds of culture and business by acting as a discoverer and interpreter of emerging trends and a connector with consumers who have social influence or cool knowledge in a certain social or cultural networks. Cool hunters argue that a product, service or brand can only be cool if individuals who are regarded as being cool themselves adopt and display it (Gladwell, 1997). As such, cool hunters develop wide feedback networks, which facilitate their interactions with and understanding of cool consumers. Although the techniques used within these networks vary, all firms depart from the same contention, namely diffusion theory or a ‘trickle down’ notion of coolness whereby once the coolest consumers adopt a trend, other consumers will imitate until the least cool consumers finally adopt it and render it unfashionable (Rasmusson, 1998; Gladwell, 1997).

However, despite this growing interest in cool by practitioners, academic studies examining cool in consumer culture are extremely limited. The most penetrating to date, by Nancarrow et al. (2002), explores the use of style leaders to associate products and services with cool, due to their perceived ability to credibly diffuse products and services into the mainstream. This analysis, however, is limited only to the role played by style leaders and does not consider other actors involved in the process. This paper aims to overcome these gaps by offering a discursive investigation into the construction of cool that considers the role of marketers, the cool hunting agencies they employ and the consumers who are both involved in the process and are the intended target audience. In doing so, it offers three key contributions, first developing theory on how social actors discursively construct cool in consumer culture; second, empirical application of discourse analysis, which remains an under-used methodology in the marketing academy; and third, an investigation into how identities of coolness are constructed for brands.

Understanding 'Cool'

Cool has been traced back to an ancient Western African philosophical and spiritual concept called *itutu*, which contains meanings of control, composure, detachment, beauty and inner peace (Thompson, 1973;1979). Cool is said to have been transported to America with slavery, where it became a carefully crafted, emotionally controlled persona used as defence mechanism to cope with exploitation and discrimination (Majors and Mancini Billson, 1992; Connor, 1995; Pountain and Robins, 2000; Nancarrow, Nancarrow and Page, 2002). It then spread generally through society via the jazz scene, with bohemians mimicing their African-American jazz musician idols, whereby cool became a culturally appropriated personality that represented antiestablishment attitudes and pursuits (Mailer, 1957; Baraka, 1963; Connor, 1995; Pountain and Robins, 2000; MacAdams, 2001; Nancarrow, Nancarrow and Page 2002). It also took on symbolic representation, specifically through fashion, music, hairstyles and drugs (Pountain and Robbins, 2000; MacAdams, 2001). This symbolism is argued to be the vehicle through which organisations later commodified and exploited cool, changing its meaning to aspirations of individuality, distinction and positional status (Frank 1997; Pountain and Robins, 2000; Heath and Potter 2004). As the history of the term demonstrates, over time a multiplicity of meanings have been attached to cool. In the literature, a lack of consensus exists as to how to conceptualise cool. Furthermore, the morphing nature of its inherently social meanings illustrates the multi-faceted and contested nature of cool. This speaks to the futility of attempting to rigidly define the concept, as no essential, innate or immutable characteristic of a person or object can be termed cool.

Theoretical Approach

This study aims to remedy the impasse of cool's conceptualization by arguing that cool is socially constructed, and as such defies objective categorisation and is best understood through social and cultural processes and the language which frames these phenomena. Moreover, this paper concurs with past research, which contends cool can only be recognised in and through people and their attitudes towards cultural artefacts (Stearns, 1994; Gladwell, 1997; Pountain and Robins, 2000; Southgate, 2003;). Hence, a more useful way of conceptualising cool that accounts for its fragmentation, fluidity and changeability is identity. Specifically, this paper proposes a discursive approach to identity, in which identity is regarded as being discursively generated and fragmented, contested, fluid and changeable rather than a stable, essential characteristic inherent or internal to a person or object (Hardy and Phillips, 1999). Identity is thus an ongoing process constructed in the social interaction – particularly language and communication - between multiple actors in specific settings. To assist in focusing the study of cool identities in the context of consumer culture, a cultural production system perspective has been adopted (Figure 1). This involves the ways in which specific actors, namely cultural producers, cultural intermediaries and cultural consumers interact and collaborate in the production of symbolic meaning in consumer culture. The articulations of these actors intersect or converge into individualized negotiations of meanings and constructions of identities (Kozinets, 2001; Venkatesh and Meamber, 2006).

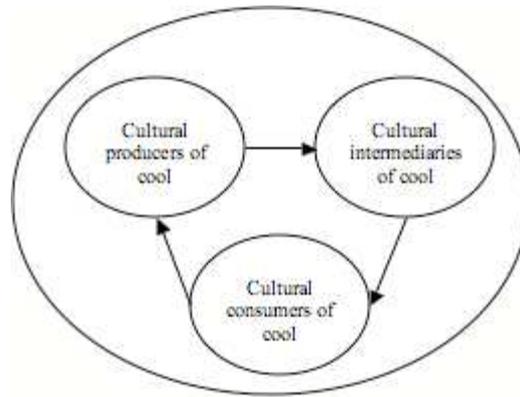


Figure 1. Proposed framework: the construction of cool

Cultural producers are responsible for producing the cultural product/service to be associated with meanings of coolness. Cultural intermediaries mediate production and consumption through their involvement in the meaning transfer of a cultural good, in which they act to associate the brand of the cultural producer with the symbolic properties of cool and consequently transfer these meanings to consumers. The cultural consumers transform the cultural objects associated with cool into meaningful consumption experiences and do not simply decode the meanings provided by cultural intermediaries but also actively play a part in the meaning that is produced (Tharp and Scott, 1990; Scott, 1990, 1993, 1994; Schroeder, 2002). This meaning may be a combination of the intended meaning of the cultural intermediary and the personal meaning attributed by the consumer based on their background and interests (Venkatesh and Meamber, 2006). However, this framework is not meant to be suggestive of a rigid, linear process. It acknowledges that the lines between these three actors have great potential for overlap and blurring.

Methodology

As identity is contextually dependent, the choice of research site was important. The cool hunting industry was chosen as it focuses on the interplay of the aforementioned actors in the construction of cool identity in consumer culture, namely organisational clients who want their brand to be cool (cultural producers), cool hunters who discover/interpret emerging trends and connect firms with consumers who have social influence or cool knowledge in certain social networks (cultural intermediaries) and the consumers both used in this process and who are the target of the activities who individually maintain or aspire to a cool identity (cultural consumers). A comparative case study of two cool hunting firms was chosen: one Sydney based, the other Melbourne based. A client project for each was selected in which the focus was to conceptualise a brand as cool. Each project lasted approximately three to six months and access to the clients and consumers was granted.

The Melbourne case study was a cool hunting agency commissioned to reconceptualise a declining alcohol brand, Southern Comfort, as cool and more appealing to youths. An events based project was proposed that would begin with exclusive, invitation only parties held in custom designed shipping containers with cutting edge entertainment and music acts. The Sydney case study was a cool hunting agency retained to revitalise a declining street culture clothing brand, Golf Punk, as cool. In researching the attitudes of the target market, the agency found that the ethical conduct of business was regarded as important. In response, the agency created a fictitious organisation called 'Hypnomarketing' which ran two controversial hypnosis show events which ironically proposed that through newly discovered techniques

marketers were able to brainwash consumers to become brand advocates, playing on the idea that advertising is simply a form of brainwashing.

Given the theoretical direction of the paper, discourse analysis was chosen as an appropriate methodology. Discourse analysis assumes a social constructivist perspective and focuses on understanding how meaning is constructed - not reflected or revealed - through language. Discourse analysis has been regarded as being part of a wider movement to establish a new agenda for understanding social phenomena (Hackley, 2003). Essentially, discourse analysis explores how texts become meaningful through their production, dissemination and consumption and how texts contribute to the constitution of social reality by creating meaning (Phillips and Brown, 1993). Discourse analysis has been used in marketing predominantly in the areas of consumption practices and consumption texts to show how product meanings are created, negotiated and altered (Hirschman, Scott, and Wells, 1998); reader response theory (Scott, 1994); and interpreting the symbolism of products as presented in cultural texts such as advertisements, films, television programs, and novels (Holbrook & Grayson 1986; Hirschman 1988, 1990; Holbrook, Bell, and Grayson 1989).

To generate the texts needed for the discourse analysis, a combination of data collection methods were utilised. The primary method was semi-structured interviews with the client, cool hunting firm and consumers who attended the events, in addition to other key actors involved in the projects such as performers and public relations agents. Second, both events were attended in person with observational notes made, photographs taken and in the case of the hypnosis show a recording was made. Third, information about the projects was collected from the cool hunting agencies, such as reports, photographs, videos, marketing materials, media transcripts and in the case of the Golf Punk project the website created for the fictitious Hypnomarketing organisation. Fourth, a web search was conducted to collate media articles and web forums that discussed each of the projects. The first stage of the discourse analysis focused on the identification of broad patterns constructed across the cases. Then the texts were analysed in greater detail to investigate how meanings of cool were shaped, with specific attention paid to language used and the discourses invoked.

Preliminary Findings

When constructing an identity of coolness for a brand, marketers, cool hunters and consumers drew on various discourses, namely; value, social networks, progressiveness and unconventionality. Unsurprisingly given the confluence of their goals, marketers and cool hunters constructed cool brands in similar ways. On the other hand consumers, whilst drawing on the same thematic discourses, constructed a cool brand identity through the use of varying language and meanings. Despite these differences, across all sets of actors a meta-narrative of elusiveness pervaded the articulations of cool brand identities.

Firstly, all actors drew on a discourse of value in constructing a cool identity for a brand. However, value was articulated in different ways. Marketers and cool hunters constructed a cool brand's value as residing in its financial and marketing value. They also articulated the various boundary setting practices that quantified the value of coolness in these contexts. For consumers, the value of a cool brand was constructed as residing in its social currency.

Secondly, a discourse of social networks was drawn on by all actors in constructing an identity of coolness for a brand. Cool hunters and, via their knowledge and advice, marketers constructed a brand as only being cool when it was associated with networks of people or

organisations that were recognised as being cool. Through a metaphor of a cult, cool hunters constructed themselves as possessing the skills to hunt elusive cool consumers and coerce them to act as evangelists for a brand, constructing it as cool and diffusing it to a susceptible marketplace. Likewise, consumers constructed a brand as being cool when it was associated with cool people, namely those who operate at higher levels of the cool status hierarchy. Through a metaphor of a court, cool consumers were constructed as arbiters that judge a brand's coolness and thus rank in the cool status hierarchy.

Thirdly, all actors, though predominantly cool hunters and marketers, drew on a discourse of progressiveness in constructing a cool identity for a brand. All actors constructed brands as cool through references to being progressive by both drawing on the language of science and innovation and through a discursive pre-occupation with time. Cool hunters and marketers also constructed brands as being cool by drawing on a discourse of progressiveness through associations with cutting edge cultures. Finally, marketers and cool hunters drew on a discourse on unconventionality in constructing a brand as cool through leveraging associations of being non-mainstream, controversial and sub-cultural. Narratives of the brand's history also aided the cool construction, whereby the brand's original owners were articulated as iconic rebels. Licensed transgressions through associations with hedonism, the exotic, the fantastical and the freak show and the use of transformed space and locations, also encompassed unconventional means of constructing a brand as cool.

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