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"Wow! It's cool": the meaning of coolness in marketing

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore the common meaning of vernacular usage of "cool" in terms of the related concepts consumers use to describe the term, using the symbolic interactionist perspective.

Design/methodology/approach – Using literature review, we first analyse how cool has evolved from its original meaning to its contemporary form in global consumer culture (GCC). Next, from a content analysis approach, using associative group analysis (Szalay and Deese, 1978) we determine the cultural meaning of cool from a sample of young respondents ($n = 127$) drawn from United Arab Emirates. Then, using another set of respondents ($n = 98$), we assess the statistical reliability of our themes.

Findings – Results of our analysis indicate that there is a common set of themes describing the term cool: fashionable, amazing, sophisticated, unique, entertaining, eye-catching and composed. Fashionable theme significantly dominates the meaning of cool.

Research limitations/implications – The findings are only limited to GCC and cannot be generalised to others.

Practical implications – Even though the meaning of cool is attributed to emotional control and detachment in the literature (Pountain and Robins, 2000), manifestation of coolness in its meaning of fashionable, amazing and eye-catching dominate the concept in GCC.

Originality/value – Cool is a heavily used term by marketing practitioners. However, empirical literature uncovering the meaning of cool is still in its infancy in marketing. This research provides a view of what cool means to consumers in a GCC.

Keywords Global consumer culture, Market intelligence, Meaning of cool, Middle east, Symbolic interactionism, Word association

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Whereas cool is probably most widely recognised as a general purpose adjective in teenage vocabulary (Danesi, 1994), it is heavily used by marketing practitioners and especially advertising account planners (Southgate, 2003), for whom it describes a broader phenomenon. In advertisements, brands, web pages, t-shirts, song lyrics, book titles and business documents this wider meaning is current and the term is in widespread use. For instance, a simple online search of the US Amazon.com "books department" will yield more than 300 titles containing the word, primarily in its colloquial meaning, such as *Cool Careers for Dummies*, *As Cool As I Am: A Novel*, *The Way Cool License Plate Book* or *Once Upon a Cool Motorcycle Dude*. Belk (2006, p. 7) described this use of "cool" as "a person who is admired because she, or more often he, exhibits a nonchalant control of emotions, a rebellious trickster

demeanour, an ironic detachment from the regard of others, and a 'cool' style of talking, walking, gesturing, and grooming".

Though the use of "cool" as an ultimate term of approval is typically linked to teenagers (Danesi, 1994), people in the fashion industry (Nancarrow *et al.*, 2002), and the authors of such books as those cited above, it has even penetrated the world of journal refereeing. *Advances in Consumer Research* invited reviewers to evaluate the "novelty and value of the central research ideas" with the question: "Are there cool ideas here?". This indicates the immense power the concept of "cool" has attained across industries, and the extent to which it is assumed that most people will be able to decode its contemporary connotation.

Despite some advances in the academic understanding of the origin and meaning (O'Donnell and Wardlow, 2000) of this vernacular usage, the relevant literature in consumer research remains in its infancy. Among the few published studies, Belk (2006) related the concept to fashion, specifically shoes, and Bird and Tapp (2008) discussed its possible application in social marketing. Gurrieri (2009), in her discourse analysis, explored the role of marketers, cool-hunting agencies and consumers in constructing the identity of "coolness" for brands. Recently, Gerber and Geiman (2012), from a design perspective, attempted to measure the "coolness" of people and acknowledged the "slipperiness" and elusiveness of understanding cool. Read *et al.* (2012) proposed three levels of cool: having cool things, doing cool stuff and being cool and found that doing cool involves "slightly bad, but not really bad" things. Rahman and Cherrier (2010) found that humour, need for uniqueness, materialism, status concern and brand consciousness are positively related to "cool" identity.

The notion of what is "cool" changes constantly as "cool" behaviour and "cool" things are adopted by the masses (Saxton, 2005). In that sense, it is closely related to the phenomenon of fashions, which are "incrementally different" (Sproles, 1981) and follow a "cyclical trend" over time (Robinson, 1975). Indeed, Nancarrow *et al.* (2002) linked the two constructs by proposing that cool (used as a noun, denoting coolness) has an inner layer, which relates to an individual's hedonism, narcissism or "ironic detachment" (Pountain and Robins, 2000), and an outer layer comprising fashion, aesthetics and lifestyle. As an adjective, cool in its contemporary vernacular sense expresses the outer-layer meaning of good, fine or fashionable. It is a generic term of approval, which saves the user from (as Pountain and Robins put it) "ever being short of something to say".

It is important for marketing practitioners to comprehend the meaning of "cool" because many consumers strive to achieve a "cool" lifestyle to a large extent through selective consumption of goods and services (Pappas, 2002). Consumers' quest for a "cool" lifestyle may be grounded on symbolic interactionism theory pioneered by William James, George Mead and Charles Cooley in the early twentieth century (Mead, 1934). Symbolic interactionism focuses on the process by which humans, using symbols, understand their world by interpreting the actions of others (Solomon, 1983). Meaning making occurs through an interpretive process in dealing with things and situations (e.g. a person wearing blue jeans symbolises a sense of informality). Central to this perspective is the social self, the image we have of ourselves that we present to others and the meanings we assign to other people or objects. Mead's "taking the role of the other" (Rigney and Smith, 1991) (i.e. seeing ourselves as others see us) involves constant interplay between the "I" and the "me". We have a separate "me" for each of our roles. I am a formal and strict professor at school, a "cool" master of ceremony at our community club, an obedient father at home. My set of "me"s

combines to form my social self. From a consumer behaviour perspective, using the symbolic interactionism lens, the role of products as social stimuli has been advanced by a number of researchers (Solomon, 1983; Lee, 1990; Leigh and Gabel, 1992). These researchers contend that many products are consumed largely for their symbolism they contain. Based on the symbolism attached by society at large, when products are consumed for what they signify, they act as social tools in that they communicate symbolically between the consumer and others encountered. Similarly, a consumer may use a product because she thinks it is "cool" or others in a given social context regard it as "cool". Accordingly, a "cool" image – the symbolic meaning imparted in a product – becomes an important input to the product image.

In comprehending coolness, as Warrington (2010) summarised, it is important not to be swayed by what used to be cool rather than what will become cool. Campaign planners must therefore engage systematically in what Southgate (2003) described as "coolhunting". Given that coolness is a short-lived phenomenon, they are forced to update their campaigns and implement their understanding of newness in people, products, looks and music, to appeal to the target audience by imparting a "cool" image to products and brands by such means as, for example, celebrity endorsement (Belk, 2006; Nancarrow et al., 2002).

The endorsement strategy reflects the belief that the reason an object is termed cool is that it is used by someone who is perceived to be cool; coolness thus follows the trend. It is also intuitively reasonable to argue, however, that consumers tend to abandon products if they see that they are finding favour in the mass market; they aspire to personalise their style in an effort to be different, and do not want to be associated with the mainstream. Coolness can thus also mean being distinctive. Neumeister (2006) observed that it was once easier to predict consumer lifestyles by reference to age and gender: it was the young who were interested in fashion, not the elderly, and men and women had clearly distinct criteria and expectations. Many people no longer adhere to such gender or age stereotypes, but constantly strive to be cool.

The concept of cool is of particular relevance to a global consumer culture (GCC), defined as a "cultural entity not associated with a single country, but rather a larger group generally recognized as international and transcending individual national culture" (Alden et al., 1999, p. 80). The existence of a GCC has been documented in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the city of Dubai (Cherrier et al., 2011), where the research study reported in this paper was conducted. The current leadership's desire for modernity and openness to western ideals has resulted in the embracing of values traditionally associated with fashion and consumerism in the West. In Dubai, fashion boutiques disproportionately outweigh shops selling groceries or convenience goods. The immediate environment of major highways is replete with advertising billboards featuring western-style characters, chosen to convey an image of attractiveness, sex appeal and achievement, which are clearly intended to appeal to the sense of cool of both local consumers and the affluent business and vacation visitors attracted to this global city-state and business centre. The choice of Dubai as the context of the study reported here is reinforced by the fact that, given the consistent association of the concept of cool with younger people (Danesi, 1994; Evans, 1989), Dubai's Middle-Eastern location has been described by Dhillon (2008) as "demographically gifted", with over 60 per cent of its population under 30 years of age.

The remainder of this paper is organised as follows. First, the relevant literature is reviewed in more detail, showing how the concept of cool originated, developed and

transformed into its modern meaning. Next, the methodology of the empirical research study is described and discussed, including an explanation of the content analysis and reliability analysis. The findings are then presented in a fourth section, and the paper concludes with a discussion of the main findings and their implications.

Literature review

Birth of cool

The researchers cited in the introduction have placed a variety of dates on the origin of the concept of cool. Thompson (1983) traced its history to Ibo and Yoruba people of Nigeria in the late fifteenth century, who recognised and practised the notion of "grace under pressure". Olson *et al.* (2005) suggested a more recent genesis, but still as long ago as the nineteenth century, when "to cool off" meant to kill. By the 1930s, "cool as a cucumber" had made its appearance as an idiom connoting a calm and self-assured mien (Neumeister, 2006). A decade later, cool had entered the vocabulary of the music and entertainment industries, permeating the general culture from the popular jargon of black jazz musicians. There is general agreement that the origin of the contemporary meaning of "cool" lies in African-American culture (Belk, 2006; Moore, 2004). Green (1998) described the historical evolution of the term as: "Late nineteenth century: good or fine or pleasing. Twentieth century: calm, self-possessed, aware and sophisticated. 1940 + : fashionable, chic or with it".

In African-American culture, cool has been closely associated with music, drugs and "street credibility", and has been considered a male phenomenon. Specifically, it was associated with a dress code, black clothing and dark glasses, which Nancarrow *et al.* (2002) recognised as later becoming appealing to white audiences. Moore (2004) described the image of a typical cool person as "an African-American male jazz musician wearing sunglasses on an expressionless face": an elaboration of a basic persona in which suppressed emotion was combined with qualities of knowingness, detachment and control. Cool behaviour and cool dress codes expressed an attitude adopted as a defence mechanism against the prejudice such entertainers faced and as a form of detachment from their difficult and often insecure working conditions (Nancarrow *et al.*, 2002) or an assertion of social liberation of a minority, reflecting features of inner strength and silent knowing (Pountain and Robins, 2000).

From sub-culture to mainstream

Moore (2004) provided the most useful overview of this phase in the history of the cool phenomenon. He argues that the beat-generation writers of the 1950s, personified by Jack Kerouac, played a major role in the popularising of the adjective and the lifestyle, which they felt expressed everything to do with control allied to easy competence. The themes of those writers were mainly anti-racism, anti-capitalism and anti-hypocrisy, which transferred the core meaning of cool from its origins in the world of jazz to a place in quasi-mainstream culture. They thus paved the way for the contemporary vernacular meaning of cool, allowing a mainstream adolescent to portray coolness by embracing a form of authenticity, projecting a laid back attitude and exhibiting the urge to challenge convention. Icons of this cultural trend were the Beatles and Bob Dylan, who were viewed as cool because of a defiantly anti-conventional quality. What was once an African-American defence mechanism had become a rebellion against the older generation by the young in mainstream western society, who saw it as their means of detachment from the adult world in general. The concept had thus begun its diffusion into mass culture.

According to O'Donnell and Wardlow (2000), the cool phenomenon is a product of "narcissistic vulnerability", the difference between the ideal and the real self in early adolescence. As a "drive reduction strategy", teenagers derive from their friends and peers the sense of comfort and security formerly associated with parents. To fit in with those reference groups, and thereby mitigate their vulnerability, they "walk, talk, gesture and groom" in the same ways as the members of the group to which they aspire to belong, and internalise the attributes of heroes and idols.

Maher (2005) summed up this trend towards contemporary cool as an aspiration to change cultural affiliations and conventions. More specifically, Frank (1997) argued that, during the 1960s and 1970s, the impact of a liberal counterculture in the USA was symbolised by the adoption of "hippie" fashion, if not the lifestyle, which further led to the acceptance of cool by mainstream society. As Southgate (2003) put it, "cool has moved from an attitude for the marginalized to an attitude for both literal and lifestyle outsiders" (p. 458). If cool was once the façade of a small and rebellious community, it is now an attitude shared by most young people, and to a certain extent by their elders (Poynor, 2000).

Contemporary cool

Over time, cool has thus evolved different meanings and is by nature a subjective word. A decade ago, Nancarrow *et al.* (2002) defined contemporary cool as an attitude that is laid-back, narcissistic and hedonistic, and also as a form of cultural capital that consists of insider knowledge, inaccessible to others, about commodities and consumption practices. This view accords with the concept of a defence against narcissistic vulnerability (O'Donnell and Wardlow, 2000). Neumeister (2006) described young people's definition of a "cool" item as anything that inspires them to think "I want that!", and Southgate (2003) asserted that "the cool" are always looking for a way to be different and to express themselves in an "authentic" manner. Taking a different perspective, Maher (2005) described cool as the ability to overlook or minimise the claims of ethnicity. He asserted that the phenomenon exhibited such characteristics as quirkiness, innovation and tolerance, combined with the ability to "see the other side of the coin", which is possessed by people with a multicultural perspective and by ethnic minorities.

Hence, as Belk (2006) suggested, what was once a low-profile survival strategy for an ethnic minority has now become a youthful means of access to certain status and image systems. Successive generations of teenagers have adopted the cool lifestyle to the extent that Poynor (2000) was able to define cool as the ultimate term of approval by the masses at that time; there is no persuasive evidence that this is not still the case a decade later, for many consumers. Poynor asserted that it simply means "something good" or "great stuff to own", and requires no further explanation.

Thus, cool, as a concept, is arguably one of the most popular ideas of the new millennium, not only in western but also in non-western contexts. From the symbolic interactionism perspective, Solomon (2003) has suggested that, since the 1980s, coolness has been linked with consumerism as people have become more materialistic and have used brands to define their identity. In the UK for example, since 2001, the Centre for Brand Analysis has published a list of cool brands (CoolBrands, 2011), based on the collective opinion of consumers and experts. In their work, the judging criteria for determining the meaning of coolness of brands include six factors including style, innovation, originality, authenticity, desirability and uniqueness. In December 2011, their top 10 coolest brands were Aston Martin, Apple, Harley-Davidson, Rolex,

Bang & Olufsen, BlackBerry, Google, Ferrari, Nike and YouTube. This is consistent with the argument of Belk *et al.* (2010, p. 202) that "marketers often try to endow their brands with coolness or at least take advantage of the cool imparted". This demonstrates not only why companies are trying to hunt for the next cool thing (Warrington, 2010) but also the strategic importance for practitioners to base their marketing decisions on the contemporary concept of cool (unless the nature of the product or the market is irrelevant).

The existence of coolness in non-western contexts has also been recognised in the literature. For example, as Maher (2005) observed, cool includes a perceived ability to see the flipside of things; an ability that people with a multicultural perspective are uniquely believed to possess. Having analysed the "Ainu" ethnic minority in Japan, Maher concluded that "cool is the unexplained force that adopts cultural heterogeneity by coopting difference as design and fashion" (p. 90). Yet the concept of cool has not been empirically studied in a contemporary Middle Eastern culture.

The research study described in this paper was undertaken specifically to determine the precise meaning of the concept cool from a marketer's point of view, examining the vocabulary that consumers use to describe it.

Research method

As noted earlier, this research is grounded on a symbolic interactionist perspective that focuses on how individuals interact with each other via symbols. From this perspective, society is a product of the day-to-day interactions of individuals and it is composed of symbols that individuals use to establish meaning and develop their world views (Stryker, 2008). Hence, this research required an outlet where product symbolism is clearly evident. Accordingly, an important consideration in selecting the sample was to represent a GCC. In essence, the GCC is characterised by globalised needs, *an increased focus on seeking individual self-worth through material symbols*, and conformity to a market-mediated material world continuously communicating homogenised images of the "good" life (Clammer, 1997; emphasis added). Hence, this research study was undertaken at a small English-language university in Dubai, which is known for its multi-cultural background and is mostly attended by students from well-connected, open-minded families. Undergraduate students, 70 per cent of them in their senior year, were chosen as the participants because affluent young adults are especially prone to associate themselves with the means of looking cool and acting cool, and the quest for cool products and cool brands. In short, they strive to portray a cool image (Danesi, 1994).

In the first phase of a two-phase study which took place in the university over a period of two months, 127 undergraduate students from a variety of courses were invited to write down five examples of colloquial language that were "descriptive of" the concept of cool, based on their own interpretation of the term. They did so in English, which is the language of instruction and discussion in the university. The resultant descriptions, which happened all to be adjectives, were tested for statistical reliability by Cronbach's α coefficient.

The verbatim descriptive vocabulary was subjected to associative group analysis, a form of the general content analysis method devised by Szalay and colleagues (Szalay and Bryson, 1974; Szalay and Deese, 1978) in the field of social psychology and later adopted by researchers in marketing (Marsden, 2002; Phillips, 1996). This procedure identifies meanings from word association by placing the responses obtained into categories based on their semantic relationship to the stimulus. Word

association is a simple and efficient method for discovering the psychological and cultural meaning of a concept or subject. According to Szalay and Deese (1978), the word association task decreases the extent of informants' rationalisations, while also capturing associations that are difficult to express or explain, because it does not require informants to articulate concepts or attitudes directly; it is the task of the researchers to draw inferences from the vocabulary used. The method furthermore generates responses that are spontaneous and hence natural.

This research involved *in vivo* and *in vitro* coding (Strauss, 1987; Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009). *In vivo* codes are terms stated by the informants themselves. *In vitro* codes are terms the researcher creates to encapsulate a concept elicited by an informant. A team of three researchers (lead researcher and two research assistants), trained in associative group analysis, analysed the data according to the procedure advocated by Phillips (1996). Each respondent's word associations having been analysed using the *in vitro* approach, the lead researcher developed tentative themes summing up combinations of respondents' words that had a common theme. Words elicited from fewer than three respondents were eliminated from incorporation into any theme; others that could not be allocated to a theme were recorded in a "miscellaneous" category. The outcome was seven themes: fashionable, amazing, unique, sophisticated, eye-catching, entertaining, and composed.

The initial pool of 784 words was reduced to 583 by the exclusion of those offered by fewer than three participants. Such idiosyncratic word associations included, for example, "phenomenal", "energetic", "alluring", "hilarious" and "breathtaking". Using the *in vivo* approach, the research assistants then individually categorised the surviving words into one of the seven themes, and inter-coder reliability was tested by the percentage of agreement (Lombard *et al.*, 2002). The initial agreement between the lead researcher and first research assistant was 82 per cent; and between the lead researcher and second research assistant was 76 per cent. The relatively few disagreements were resolved in a lengthy group discussion.

An additional perspective on the data was provided by a procedure adapted from Szalay and Deese (1978), which measured what they describe as the "dominance" of a given theme: the relative contribution of the seven sets of word associations to the constellation of associative meanings analysed. In other words, dominance is the proportion of associations categorised under each theme

In the second phase of the two-phase research plan, a new study triangulated the themes suggested by the content analysis. Ma and Norwich (2007, p. 211) described the purpose of triangulation as "to increase the validity of a study by seeking the degree of agreement in the investigation outcome from the use of multiple methods and measurement procedures". This explanation is consistent with that of Denzin (1989), that research findings are validated by convergent agreement in results obtained from the diverse, systematic and dissimilar uses of methods.

The participants in this phase of the study were 98 undergraduate students who had not taken part in the first phase but were recruited at the same university. At 95 per cent confidence level, this sample size is significant resulting in a confidence interval of 0.09. Hence the confidence interval ranges from 0.616 (0.706−0.09) to 0.796 (0.706 + 0.09) (NSS, 2013). As Table I shows, just less than half the sample of 98 was male, and the age were normally distributed around a median of 21 within a range from 19 to 23 years covering 87 per cent of the total. More than two thirds came from various parts of the Middle East and Africa, but more than half had been resident in the UAE for longer than eight years. A high proportion, 86 per cent, had experienced

Variable	Categories	%
Gender	Male	44
	Female	56
Age	19	9
	20	22
	21	28
	22	32
	23	9
Years resident in UAE	Less than 1 year	4
	1-3 years	15
	4-8 years	22
	More than 8 years	59
Region of origin	Middle-East or Africa	67
	Asia	22
	The West	8
	Other	3
Annual household income in approximate US dollar equivalents	Less than 13,500	7
	13,500-27,000	8
	27,001-41,000	16
	41,001-54,500	14
	54,501-68,000	13
	More than 68,000	42
Visited or stayed in a western country	Yes	86
	No	14
Car ownership	Own car	82
	Family car	12
	Public transport user	6
Level of study	Sophomore	4
	Junior	26
	Senior	70

Notes: In all, 98 participants in quantitative phase of study. Decimal places rounded

western culture while living in Europe, North America, Australia or New Zealand. Just over 40 per cent had an annual household income greater than the equivalent of US$68,000 and four in five had their own car.

The participants were shown the 53 words generated by the word association task (as shown in Figure 1) in random order, and instructed to answer the question, "To what extent are the following words descriptive of 'cool'?" using a nine-point scale anchored at 1 = not at all descriptive and 9 = very descriptive. The resultant data were subjected to reliability analysis by means of Cronbach's α coefficient and a correlation analysis using the SPSS program.

The following six parameters were analysed: mean, standard deviation, Cronbach's α, α if a scale item was deleted, item-to-total total correlations, and corrected item-to-total correlations. The threshold α value was set at 0.7 (see Nunnaly, 1978) and the minimum required corrected item-to-total correlation at 0.3 (see Streiner and Norman, 2003). Any word that was found not to be adequately correlated with its related theme was deleted, in order to achieve the necessary α. The summary statistics are presented in Table II.
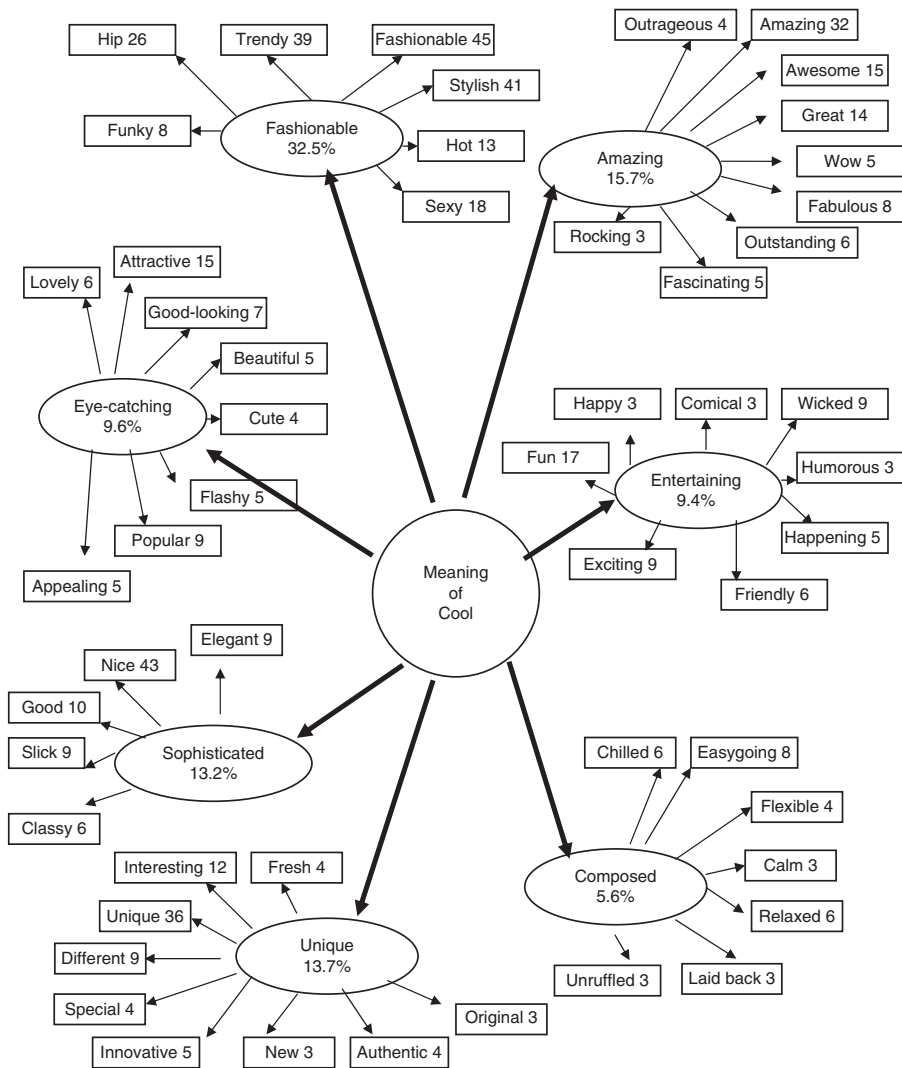
Figure 1.
The meaning of "cool"

Notes: Numbers in the boxes are the frequencies of those word associations.
Percentages in the ovals represent the "dominance" of that theme, as
explained in the text

The correlation analysis examined the correspondence between the frequency of occurrence of a given word elicited by content analysis and the mean rating calculated for the reliability analysis phase. For example, "stylish" occurred 41 times and its mean rating was 7.20; the corresponding values for "outrageous" were 4 and 5.88. To ascertain whether or not words with higher frequencies scored higher than those with lower frequencies, a correlation analysis was run between frequency and mean values. The result showed a significant and positive correlation ($r = 0.53$, $p < 0.001$), providing further convergent evidence in support of the chosen methodology.

Theme (dominance)	Elicited word associations	Frequency	Mean[a] (SD)	Item-to-total correlations	Cronbach's α
Fashionable (32.5%)	Fashionable	45	7.38 (1.67)	0.67	0.77
	Stylish	41	7.20 (1.65)	0.56	
	Trendy	39	7.39 (1.63)	0.52	
	Hip	26	6.85 (2.21)	0.33	
	Sexy	18	6.49 (2.28)	0.53	
	Funky	8	7.02 (1.94)	0.48	
	Hot	13	6.80 (2.01)	0.43	
Amazing (15.7%)	Amazing	32	7.24 (1.78)	0.61	0.77
	Awesome	15	7.38 (1.56)	0.32	
	Great	14	6.66 (1.89)	0.68	
	Fabulous	8	6.45 (2.02)	0.63	
	Outstanding	6	6.53 (2.14)	0.62	
	Wow	5	7.25 (1.85)	0.37	
	Fascinating	5	6.66 (1.93)	0.45	
	Outrageous	4	5.88 (2.47)	0.36	
	Rocking	3	5.38 (2.53)	0.22	
Unique (13.7%)	Unique	36	6.74 (2.01)	0.64	0.83
	Interesting	12	5.65 (2.19)	0.43	
	Different	9	6.06 (2.18)	0.54	
	Innovative	5	5.74 (2.36)	0.46	
	Authentic	4	5.80 (2.08)	0.69	
	Fresh[b]	4	6.05 (2.24)	—	
	Special	4	5.92 (2.16)	0.54	
	Original	3	6.43 (2.18)	0.59	
	New	3	5.87 (2.15)	0.68	
Sophisticated (13.2%)	Nice	43	6.13 (1.97)	0.58	0.70
	Good	10	5.69 (2.28)	0.65	
	Elegant	9	5.78 (2.26)	0.36	
	Slick[b]	9	6.13 (1.97)	—	
	Classy[b]	6	5.47 (2.49)	—	
Eye-catching (9.6%)	Attractive	15	6.64 (2.06)	0.68	0.82
	Popular	9	6.94 (2.08)	0.43	
	Good-looking	7	6.34 (1.93)	0.63	
	Lovely	6	5.30 (2.29)	0.63	
	Beautiful	5	5.40 (2.45)	0.63	
	Appealing	5	6.58 (1.83)	0.33	
	Flashy	5	6.36 (2.21)	0.44	
	Cute	4	6.03 (2.06)	0.69	
Entertaining (9.4%)	Fun	17	7.52 (1.68)	0.30	0.75
	Exciting	9	6.79 (1.97)	0.54	
	Wicked	9	6.06 (2.18)	0.24	
	Friendly	6	6.17 (2.36)	0.56	
	Happening	5	6.50 (2.18)	0.31	
	Comical	3	6.07 (2.18)	0.48	
	Humorous	3	6.51 (2.35)	0.57	
	Happy	3	5.84 (2.10)	0.59	
Composed (5.6%)	Easygoing	8	6.84 (2.01)	0.54	0.79
	Relaxed	6	6.14 (2.38)	0.69	
	Chilled	6	6.91 (1.88)	0.42	
	Flexible	4	6.03 (2.34)	0.59	

(*continued*)

Table II.
Summary statistics

Theme (dominance)	Elicited word associations	Frequency	Mean[a] (SD)	Item-to-total correlations	Cronbach's α
	Calm	3	4.76 (2.54)	0.54	
	Unruffled	3	5.18 (2.24)	0.40	
	Laid back	3	5.88 (2.20)	0.42	

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Table II.

Notes: [a]Based on a nine-point scale; [b]items deleted from scale due to low reliability. Columns 1-3 based on Phase 1 (content analysis of word associations); Columns 4-6 based on Phase 2 (reliability analysis)

The themes developed in this study are effectively constructs, and construct validity can be tested by factor analysis. However, according to Hair *et al.* (1995, p. 373), for dependable factor analysis, "the minimum is to have at least five times as many observations as there are variables to be analyzed". The relatively small sample sizes in our study thus militated against factor analysis of the constructs.

Findings

Associative group analysis of the data obtained from the participants in the first stage of the study identified seven "themes": fashionable, amazing, unique, sophisticated, eye-catching, entertaining and composed. Each theme was defined by a set of word associations mentioned by various numbers of participants. Adjectives were allocated to themes on the basis that they were found during analysis to have closely related meanings, and each theme was given a name that encapsulated those meanings. Analysis of the "dominance" of the seven themes found that those allocated to fashionable and amazing accounted for, respectively, 32.5 and 15.7 per cent of all processed word associations: that is, almost exactly half the total collectively. The third most significant contribution was the word associations allocated to unique, accounting for 13.7 per cent, which brought the cumulative total of those highest-ranked themes to almost two-thirds of the total. The remainder of the total constellation comprised sophisticated, at a dominance value of 13.2 per cent, eye-catching at 9.6 per cent, entertaining at 9.4 per cent and composed at 5.6 per cent.

The results of these two analyses were consolidated into the cognitive map of cool shown in Figure 1, which provides an overview of the various meanings attributed to the description and the ways in which participants related to the concept. The percentage figures in the ovals in the cognitive map identify the relative dominance of each theme within the total meaning of the construct, and the frequencies attached to the adjectives in the constellations surrounding each oval indicate the magnitudes of their respective contributions to the construction of that particular theme. The following sub-sections describe the relative dominance of each theme, in descending order, and the results of reliability analysis.

Fashionable

The most dominant theme, accounting for roughly 32 per cent of all allocated word associations, this construct comprised seven adjectives, the relative contributions of which are indicated by the whole numbers in brackets: fashionable (45), stylish (41), trendy (39), hip (26), sexy (18), hot (13) and funky (8). The Cronbach's α coefficient for this seven-item theme was found to be 0.77, confirming that the content analysis categorisation was reliable. All seven items within this theme perhaps define coolness

as a matter of being well dressed, having a distinctive sense of style, being up-to-date with latest trends, and generally portraying a cool image in terms of appearance. Participants thus saw the expression of fashionable cool in the way people dress, talk, walk or express themselves.

Amazing

The second most dominant, accounting for almost 16 per cent of all allocated word associations, this theme was made up of nine adjectives and one exclamation: amazing (32), awesome (15), great (14), fabulous (8), outstanding (6), fascinating (5), wow (5), rocking (3) and outrageous (4). Cronbach's α was 0.77, which is above the threshold applied and therefore confirmed that the associations in this category reflect the idea of someone or something being "amazing", an adjective that in fact occurred commonly in the vocabulary of the young consumers. "Cool" can be used, in this sense, to describe almost everything from an enjoyable social event through an admired individual to a favourite song.

Unique

The third most dominant theme, accounting for almost 14 per cent of all allocated word associations, this theme comprised: unique (36), interesting (12), different (9), innovative (5), special (4), authentic (4), new (3), original (3) and fresh (4). The Cronbach's α value in this case was 0.537, indicating that some of the nine adjectives did not relate well to the theme. "Fresh" was found to have an exceptionally low corrected item-to-total correlation of only 0.04. Although "fresh" can denote newness and novelty, it is also used to indicate the state of being clean or unblemished, which is unrelated to the vernacular use of cool under investigation. With this adjective deleted, the α coefficient rose to 0.83, well above the threshold value, demonstrating that the remaining eight items related to this theme. The inference is thus that something or someone genuinely unique may be seen as cool (provided, obviously, that the nature of the uniqueness is viewed as positive rather than negative).

Sophisticated

This theme was in fourth place, contributing just over 13 per cent of the total picture. It was constructed from the adjectives nice (43), good (10), elegant (9), slick (9) and classy (6). Reliability analysis yielded a Cronbach's α value of only 0.57, well below the accepted threshold of acceptability. With "slick" and "classy" removed, the α coefficient rose to an acceptable 0.70, suggesting that the this expression of cool is summed up by "nice", "good" and "elegant". "Slick" may in fact be unrelated to this theme, by virtue of meaning superficially eye-catching but with positive connotations of sophistication. In the case of "classy", the reason may be that this label is applied to people who are modish, fashionable and refined, but not necessarily wise, intellectual or thoughtful. This theme thus expresses the notion of coolness in a subtle rather than overstated manner, defining something that is pleasing and presented in an appealing way.

Eye-catching

The last three themes collectively accounted for only a quarter of the total inventory of word associations. At nearly 10 per cent, "eye-catching" was an amalgam of: attractive (15), popular (9), good looking (7), lovely (6), appealing (5), beautiful (5), flashy (5) and cute (4). Cronbach's α in this case was 0.82, confirming that the categorisation of this theme was highly reliable and that each constituent word association was a component

of the concept of a cool person or product. All those words relate to the notion of something or someone to which one would be attracted.

Entertaining

Also accounting for over 9 per cent of all word associations evoked, this theme was built from eight adjectives: fun (17), exciting (9), wicked (9), happy (3), humorous (3), friendly (6), happening (5) and comical (3). The Cronbach's α for this set of eight adjectives was 0.75. Although that value is within the acceptable range, the coefficients in the column in Table II showing item-to-total correlations indicated that it would be somewhat higher (0.76) if "wicked" were eliminated from the category. Although this adjective has a paradoxically positive sense in the current vernacular usage of the under-30s, its literal meaning may not connote something entertaining. Wicked behaviour or images may entertain some people, but others will see them as mean or cruel. Taking account of this ambiguity, the decision was made to retain this word association, which might represent a rebellious aspect of entertainment.

Composed

Least dominant of the seven themes, with a contribution of <6 per cent, this theme comprised: easygoing (8), chilled (6), relaxed (6), flexible (4), calm (3), unruffled (3), and laid back (3). The Cronbach's α coefficient of 0.79 confirmed that the seven adjectives are inter-related and do evoke a general, consistent meaning. This aspect of cool clearly related in the participants' minds to the behaviour of a cool type of person, rather than to a cool product. The relatively few respondents who offered it were presumably thinking of "cool under pressure" and "keep a cool head", rather than cool jazz musicians or cool gear. In that respect, this theme is distinct from the previous six.

The Cronbach coefficients for the data comprising the seven themes initially suggested that five of the seven themes (fashionable, amazing, entertaining, eye-catching and composed) were statistically reliable and internally coherent. After exclusion of doubtful adjectives from the remaining two, sophisticated and unique, the α values for those themes also exceeded the 0.70 threshold. Collectively, the themes generated from the data offered a conceptually sound explanation of the vernacular meaning of the concept cool.

Given that the cognitive map in Figure 1 is thus valid, the composite verbal picture can be examined from the point of view of the "dominance" of each contributing theme, as calculated by the Szalay and Deese (1978) procedure. The result showed that fashionable (32 per cent) was the single dominant contributor to the construct of "cool". Three other themes, amazing (16 per cent), unique (14 per cent) and sophisticated (13 per cent) collectively accounted for a little less than half of the total, but were individually far less dominant than the leading theme. The remaining three themes constructed from the adjectives contributed by the study participants all accounted for <10 per cent of the overall explanation. Turning to the individual word association adjectives comprising those themes, found in the constellations of boxes around the ovals in Figure 1, we find that fashionable (45 mentions in total) was again the most dominant word used. It also scored one of the highest mean ratings on the nine-point scale, at 7.38. This key adjective was followed in sequence by nice (43), stylish (41), trendy (39) and unique (36 per cent).

In summary, to describe someone or something as cool implies an appraisal that, above all else, it or he/she is fashionable. After that, the most significant connotations are niceness, style, trendiness, uniqueness and amazing-ness.

Discussion, conclusions and implications

The findings of this study contribute to knowledge in marketing in general and consumer behaviour in particular, with notable implications for practitioners. For example, these findings should be of particular interest to the planners of marketing and communications campaigns, and the advertising agency "account planners" who serve them. Although the strategic significance of the behavioural traits characterising cool consumers and reference groups have been recognised among marketing practitioners for some time, little academic work has been done in this area. The study reported here has revealed, by way of the semantic process of associative group analysis and a cognitive map of its outcome, the embedded meaning of cool from its most dominant summary theme, fashionable, to the least dominant, composed. The finding is that this contemporary epithet encapsulates a whole range of meanings. The colloquial comment "He's a cool guy!", implies more than that he is a good guy. He may, for instance, be wearing a fashionable outfit, be personally good-looking, exhibit an unruffled demeanour, and use unique vocabulary. His attitude may be described by onlookers as "wicked", his personality as "awesome" and his style as "funky". In using these descriptions, others are describing and judging the whole person, not the single characteristic that a single adjective might seem to imply. Though the range of vocabulary may be considerable, the single word cool is a cue that evokes the corresponding range of meanings. The attribution of male gender in the previous descriptions is deliberate. As Belk (2006) and Pountain and Robins (2000) have suggested, cool has typically been treated as a male phenomenon. Gender differences in coolness would thus be a fruitful avenue for future research.

The themes generated by associative group analysis express the concept of cool in one of its modern senses. In conjunction with fashionable, the sophisticated theme relates strongly to being elegant. Even though a person may aspire to sophistication by way of wardrobe choices, typically inspired by branding and advertising, the reason for separating sophisticated from fashionable is that elegance is neither an easy quality to achieve nor the kind of image that anyone could convey. Similarly, unique implies that the study participants not only thought about being cool in terms of fitting in with perceived style leaders, but also wanted to be seen to be distinct from the mainstream. This is consistent with the findings of a study of fashion consciousness among young male consumers (Bakewell *et al.*, 2006), which identified a strong "anti-fashion" dimension in their choices of fashions to adopt. It is also consistent with what Pountain and Robins (2000) described as constant negotiation between individuality and fitting in. A respondent's quote in a study by Nuttall (2008, p. 626) on music consumption by adolescents illustrates this point: "Celia doesn't really like that much music but when I'm on the bus I usually listen to music and she sometimes listens to Tori Amos or something with me". Responding to the notion of "individuality (uniqueness) and fitting in (fashionable)" has strong implications for marketing practitioners. On the one hand, making the products fashionable requires trend-following at the closest level as fashion adopted in a society is incrementally different (Sproles, 1981); fashion follows a cyclical trend (e.g. skirts become increasingly shorter and then increasingly longer) over a period of time (Robinson, 1975). On the other hand, making the products unique requires substantial differentiation in an autonomous way (Warren and Campbell, 2010) because if too many firms do the same, then uniqueness may lose its value.

Somewhat distinct from the dominant fashionable theme, entertaining suggests the quality of being socially engaged and outgoing, in order not only to amuse others but also to divert their minds from the usual hustle and bustle of life. This theme nicely

fits the "pleasure of sociality" pointed out by Goulding and her colleagues (2009) when they investigated consumer's tendency to seek shared pleasure in clubbing. The least dominant of all the identified themes, composed, connotes a positive approach to life and the situations one has to deal with, and a concealment of true emotions. It perhaps also has connotations of casualness, but can clearly convey a cool image in the right circumstances.

According to Southgate (2003, p. 456), self-styled "coolhunters" consider the hallmark of cool behaviour to be authenticity. Cool people need to be outwardly expressive and socially engaged to prove their authenticity, which they can do by promoting the ultimate desire for complete ownership and autonomy over their identities. They are driven by an endless quest for novelty, which implies that the strategically important consumers who drive trends tend to be drawn towards and fascinated by novelty. This view of what constitutes cool reflects two more themes, eye-catching and amazing, plus (again) unique.

Maher (2005) concluded from the results of discourse analysis relating to minorities in Japan that the core concept of cool was specifically applicable to multi-cultural social groups and ethnic minorities. In Dubai, the location of our fieldwork, 80 per cent of the resident population is of foreign origin. The local culture is no longer distinct and absolute, but consists of a mélange of cultures interconnected across diverse groupings (Alden *et al.*, 1999). The globalisation of Dubai, reflected in multi-cultural events and the ubiquity of global brands, offers the perfect context in which to explore the meaning of cool.

From a theoretical point of view, it is of interest that our findings do not include anything corresponding to such earlier deconstructions of cool behaviour as hiding emotions and ironic detachment (Pountain and Robins, 2000). The explanation may lie in the assertion by Nancarrow *et al.* (2002, p. 311) that, whereas "inner cool" is a "fairly elusive and exclusive" condition to achieve, an "outer cool" lifestyle is a realistic aspiration. Given that the study was conducted in a GCC where cool has been adapted and adopted, it is not surprising that the lifestyle aspect of "outer cool" dominates the meaning. These findings nicely support the theoretical underpinning used in this research – the symbolic interactionsim perspective (Mead, 1934; Solomon, 1983) – where consumers in a global culture appear to use outer qualities of coolness to conspicuously project their image using aspects of uniqueness and fashionable, amazing, entertaining and eye-catching themes. In contrast, conventional theory developed from studies largely conducted with western audiences have emphasised that the coolness of a person tends to be more fundamentally present within a person genuinely possessing the "inner" qualities of authenticity, detachment and rebelliousness rather than conspicuously trying to project an image regarded as cool by overtly relying upon the use of appropriate products and brands (Moore, 2004). This is similar to the notion of "nouveau riche" vs "old money" illustrated by Solomon (1983), where the members of the "lower upper class" attempt to demonstrate their status through the overt display of luxury cars, clothes and home whereas "upper upper class" members avoid overt display of their wealth. An interesting question, then: Is this prioritising of the "outer" aspects of cool, compared to the "inner" aspects, the result of a Middle Eastern cultural concern with surface image or a more globalising influence that has recently developed? As Cherrier and her colleagues (2011) have shown, the UAE has the significant presence of the GCC as the qualities of consumer culture identities evolve across nations. Hence, our findings have strong implications for marketing practitioners. Consumers do not need to have the "inner" coolness to have "cool". Cool products and

brands may be consumed by those who want to be cool whether they are in the westers or non-western society.

Furthermore, from practitioner's point of view, the prominence of "outer" aspects of cool is also applicable to a western audience. For example, five (style, innovation, originality, authenticity, and uniqueness) of the six factors used by CoolBrands (2011) in the UK were nicely captured in our data (the exception being desirability). Interestingly, in our categorisation, the "style" factor fell within the fashionable theme and the remaining four CoolBrands factors fell within the unique theme. The other five themes developed in the present study might provide insights to CoolBrands strategists and practitioners like them. Accordingly, a cross-cultural comparative study between western and non-western contexts may be revelatory

Specifically, the findings of this research feeds into the informational needs of managerial level strategic decisions as well as the implementation level account planning, design and creative direction procedures. At the managerial level, for example, the findings of this research imply that the marketing efforts embedded in products and services may be sought by consumers not only because of their fashion content but also because of benefits delivered by other related themes such as entertainment, uniqueness and sophistication. Hence, managers can use the method employed in this research to determine the nature of coolness of their products. Depending on the desired outcome, at the implementation level, creative directors may impart cool images to products and services using a range of tactics. For example, in his study of "cool shoes", Belk (2006) notes the brands that succeeded in imparting a cool image to shoes did so because they made their shoes "fashionable" by associating to celebrities. They also imparted other images of coolness to shoes such as "entertaining" image by associating to skateboarding; "sophisticated" image by associating to real athletes; "eye-catching" or "composed" images by association to cool postures and facial expressions in their print ads.

The study has certain limitations. First, in word association tasks, respondents are typically asked to freely associate "anything that comes to mind". In contrast, we directed participants to write down words that were "descriptive of cool". Without that constraint, the results would certainly have been different: a potentially fruitful avenue for future research. Second, since empirical study of the cool phenomenon remains scarce in the marketing literature, a less structured form of qualitative research, such as in-depth interviewing or focus group discussions, might have been more appropriate for an exploratory study. The former is in fact in planning, as a means of triangulating our findings. Respondents might be asked, for instance, to name products or brands they perceive as being cool, to describe cool experiences, and to state whether or not they believe that the meaning of cool depends on the particular context. Third, the themes developed in this research need to be validated by confirmatory factor analysis. The small sample size militated against this procedure, which should be an ingredient of future studies. Fourth, this research used a nine-point continuous scale to measure coolness. Conflating a dichotomous scale with a continuous scale is an inherent weakness. Next, use of a nine-point scale rather than a five or seven-point scale is unusual and may produce a "patterned response". As noted earlier, due to limitation in sample size, although significant enough to test basic statistics such as reliability, it was not possible to employ sophisticated techniques such as confirmatory factor analysis – an important consideration for future research. Finally, many of the findings of this research are based on professional judgement employed by the researchers involved. Even though reliability was successfully established, interpretation within this research

was challenging, particularly due to conducting research around semantics and meaning in a second language scenario. For example, one may disagree with the resultant theme "fashionable" which includes fashionable, trendy, stylish and sexy within the same parent category, as they are different types of concept constructed with different social and psychological backgrounds.

Despite these limitations, this study has empirically shown that consumers' understanding of cool comprised seven distinct dimensions, or themes, identified by word association and associative group analysis. Most significant among those, expressed by single descriptive adjectives, were "fashionable", "amazing", "sophisticated" and "unique". Lesser components of the whole constructed meaning were "entertaining", "eye-catching" and "composed". These findings add to the conceptual understanding of coolness advanced by a number of researchers (Belk *et al.*, 2010; Nancarrow *et al.*, 2002; O'Donnell and Wardlow, 2000). This research emphasises both the complex, culturally contingent and temporal nature and the importance of the concept of "cool" within consumer behaviour theory and its role within the context of the GCC.

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