

# What Makes Things Cool? How Autonomy Influences Perceived Coolness

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Despite assertions that coolness sells products, little is known about what leads consumers to perceive brands as cool. This research uses an experimental approach to examine the empirical relationship between consumers' inferences of autonomy and perceived coolness. Six studies find that behaviors expressing autonomy increase perceived coolness, but only when the autonomy seems appropriate. Autonomy seems appropriate, and hence increases perceptions of coolness, when a behavior diverges from a norm considered unnecessary or illegitimate, when the autonomy is bounded (i.e., deviations are small or occasional rather than large or perpetual), and when the consumer views social norms as being overly repressive. A final experiment further supports the connection between autonomy and coolness and illustrates that coolness is distinct from liking by showing that whether a consumer has a goal to express autonomy moderates preference for cool brands.

The marketplace values cool brands. A cool image helped solidify Harley Davidson's status as an iconic brand (Holt 2004), rejuvenate sales of Pabst Blue Ribbon (Walker 2003), and vault Apple into the ranking of "the best global brand" of 2013 (Interbrand 2014). Coolness excites consumers, adds symbolic currency to products, and drives consumer trends (Frank 1997; Gladwell 1997; Heath and Potter 2004; Leland 2004). Kerner and Pressman (2007, xii) write, "our society is *consumed* with the trappings of cool. . . . All across the psychographic spectrum everyone wants it, even if they can't define what 'cool' actually is." This quote synthesizes two interesting aspects of coolness. First, coolness is often desired, both by consumers and by mar-

keters. Second, it is not clear exactly what, in addition to being desirable, makes things cool.

In six experiments we demonstrate that consumers perceive cultural objects, including brands and people, to be cool when they infer that the object is autonomous (i.e., pursues its own motivations irrespective of the norms and expectations of others) in an appropriate way. Consumers infer that a brand (or person) is autonomous when its behaviors diverge from the norm. Autonomy seems appropriate, and thus leads to perceptions of coolness, when a divergent behavior is perceived to be at least as effective or valuable as the normative behavior, it diverges from a norm that is not considered legitimate, and divergence is bounded rather than extreme. Moreover, consumers with countercultural values, who are more critical of societal institutions and more likely to consider norm divergence appropriate than those without countercultural values, tend to perceive a relatively higher level of autonomy cool. We further show that although cool brands are typically desired, coolness and desirability are not the same thing, as consumers prefer cool brands only when they want to stand out rather than fit in.

## WHAT IS COOL?

Although researchers do not agree on a specific definition of coolness (Dar-Nimrod et al. 2012; Kerner and Pressman 2007), a canvas of the literature reveals agreement on four defining properties. One, coolness is socially constructed. Cool is not an inherent feature of an object or person but

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is a perception or an attribution bestowed by an audience (Belk, Tian, and Paavola 2010; Connor 1995; Gurrieri 2009; Leland 2004). In this sense, coolness is similar to socially constructed traits, like popularity or status (Hollander 1958); objects and people are cool only to the extent that others consider them cool.

Two, coolness is subjective and dynamic. The things that consumers consider cool change both over time and across consumers (Danesi 1994; MacAdams 2001; O'Donnell and Wardlow 2000). Despite the subjective nature of coolness, consumers have little difficulty recognizing coolness when they see it (Belk et al. 2010; Leland 2004). Moreover, coolness ranges on a continuum, and consumers with similar backgrounds and interests tend to agree on what is more and less cool within a particular social context (Leland 2004). Thus, coolness is best operationalized using a consensual assessment technique (Amabile 1982) by asking a group of consumers the extent to which they perceive something or someone to be cool or uncool. Amabile (1982) originally developed the consensual assessment technique to measure creativity, which, like coolness, subjectively depends on the perceptions of an audience. Like judgments of creativity, perceptions of coolness are continuous and contextual. For example, clothing at WalMart seems more or less cool relative to other clothes in the store, not relative to designs at a fashion show. Likewise, consumers assess coolness differently when evaluating the shoes people wear in an office versus a nightclub.

Three, coolness is perceived to be a positive quality (Bird and Tapp 2008; Heath and Potter 2004; Pountain and Robins 2000). The few quantitative empirical studies on the topic confirm that cool people tend to possess personality traits considered desirable by the audience evaluating coolness (Dar-Nimrod et al. 2012; Rodkin et al. 2006). Qualitative studies similarly describe coolness as having a positive valence, noting that consumers even sometimes use the word "cool" as a synonym for "I like it" (Belk et al. 2010).

Four, although coolness is a positive trait, coolness requires more than the mere perception that something is positive or desirable (Leland 2004; MacAdams 2001). Pountain and Robins (2000, 32) write, "Cool is not merely another way of saying good. It comes with baggage." Consumers perceive some quality that sets cool things apart from other things that they merely like or evaluate positively. However, the literature is not clear as to what this additional quality is. Our goal is to identify this quality and empirically validate its influence on perceptions of coolness of cultural objects, including brands and people.

## WHAT DISTINGUISHES COOL FROM GOOD?

What, in addition to being liked, makes things cool? Despite the absence of strong causal data, the literature has made many claims about what leads to the perception that a person or brand is cool. Some argue that people (and brands) become cool by mimicking the behavior of other

cool people (Gladwell 1997) or by conforming to the norms, standards, and ideals of a particular subculture or clique (Danesi 1994; O'Donnell and Wardlow 2000; Thornton 1996). Others argue that a rebellious attitude (Pountain and Robins 2000), nonconformity (Frank 1997; Heath and Potter 2004), individualism (Hebdige and Potter 2008), defiance (MacAdams 2001), or an unwillingness to follow trends (Connor 1995) leads to perceptions of coolness. Still others point to factors like sexual permissiveness, hedonism, and detachment as potential antecedents (Bird and Tapp 2008; Connor 1995; Leland 2004).

Interestingly, a common theme is that all of these factors are related to the extent to which one shows, or does not show, autonomy. Autonomy refers to a willingness to pursue one's own course irrespective of the norms, beliefs, and expectations of others. Conformity, mimicry, and belonging suggest a lack of autonomy because they require following or conceding to the will of others. Conversely, unconventionality, rebellion, individuality, authenticity, and independence show autonomy because they require doing one's own thing and going against what others expect or prescribe. Because they similarly require parting from the normative path, sexual permissiveness, hedonism, and detachment also indirectly suggest autonomy. Some thus suggest that coolness comes from factors associated with low autonomy (Danesi 1994; Gladwell 1997; Thornton 1996), whereas others point to antecedents associated with high autonomy (Heath and Potter 2004; MacAdams 2001; Pountain and Robins 2000). Indeed, Belk and colleagues (2010, 202) point out that "there is a tension between standing-out cool and fitting-in cool"; however, they do not elaborate on this tension, nor do they discuss when perceptions of coolness will be more influenced by standing out and when they will be more influenced by fitting in. In sum, the literature suggests some relationship between autonomy and coolness, but it does not provide a clear understanding of the nature of this relationship.

Drawing from this work, we propose that the extra quality that differentiates something from merely being liked to being perceived as cool is inferred autonomy. However, given the tension between whether coolness comes from conforming or diverging, we hypothesize that there are conditions that moderate how autonomy influences perceptions of coolness. Specifically, autonomy will increase perceptions of coolness only when it seems contextually appropriate. Thus, we propose the following definition of coolness: coolness is a subjective and dynamic, socially constructed positive trait attributed to cultural objects (people, brands, products, trends, etc.) inferred to be appropriately autonomous. In the next section we develop this conceptualization, with specific attention to what makes autonomy seem appropriate.

## WHEN IS EXPRESSING AUTONOMY COOL?

Autonomy refers to the extent to which the person or brand follows its own character or motivations irrespective

of the norms, beliefs, and expectations of others. We propose that this willingness to do one's own thing, or be one's own person, regardless of the norm, is the extra quality that defines coolness. Because autonomy is a function of internal motivations, it cannot be directly observed but must be inferred from behavior (Jones and Davis 1965). Typically consumers infer autonomy from behaviors that diverge from a norm (Bellezza, Gino, and Keinan 2014). For example, Harley Davidson gained an autonomous image by associating with "outlaw" biker gangs famous for rebelling against rules and conventions associated with middle-class society (Holt 2004). Conversely, consumers infer a lack of autonomy from behaviors that conform to the norm or imitate others. For example, the "Mac vs. PC" ad campaign portrays the PC character as lacking autonomy by having PC wear conventional office attire and perform tasks that consumers associate with mainstream corporate jobs (e.g., spreadsheets and pie charts). Mac, in contrast, shows autonomy by diverging from conventional office norms by wearing causal clothes and tennis shoes.

The literature shows that norm divergence is often disliked. Norms develop in order to help coordinate interactions among people with different personal interests, and they serve as standards for appropriate behavior to which people are motivated and expected to conform (Cialdini and Trost 1998; Schultz et al. 2007). Norm violations are often punished (Fehr and Fischbacher 2003), and norm violators risk creating negative impressions (Aronson 2008; Schachter 1951), losing social standing (Hollander 1958), and potentially even becoming estranged (Hogan 2001). From this perspective, it seems curious that autonomy based on diverging from the norm might make something seem cooler. However, although divergent behaviors are often perceived to be inefficient, harmful, or otherwise inappropriate, there are some cases in which expressing autonomy leads to more favorable impressions (Ariely and Levav 2000; Bellezza et al. 2014).

We hypothesize that the effect of autonomy on perceptions of coolness depends on whether autonomy seems contextually appropriate. Autonomy should increase perceived coolness when it seems appropriate but not when it seems inappropriate. In order to understand when autonomy will seem appropriate and, hence, increase coolness, there are four important considerations: (1) whether a brand diverges from a descriptive or an injunctive norm, (2) the perceived legitimacy of the injunctive norm from which a brand diverges, (3) the extent to which a brand diverges from injunctive and descriptive norms, and (4) the extent to which the observer or audience values autonomy.

### Distinguishing between Descriptive and Injunctive Norms

Understanding whether a divergent behavior seems appropriate, and hence its likely effect on perceived coolness, depends on the nature of the norm from which the behavior diverges. Divergence can be from either a descriptive norm

(i.e., what most people typically do in a particular context) or an injunctive norm (i.e., a cultural ideal or a rule that people are expected to follow; Cialdini, Reno, and Kallgren 1990). People generally conform to both descriptive and injunctive norms but for different reasons. People typically conform to descriptive norms, especially when the optimal course of action is uncertain or unclear, because the norm provides an example of a behavior known to be generally effective or valuable in a given context (Cialdini and Trost 1998). In contrast, people typically conform to injunctive norms, which provide a cultural ideal or social obligation, in order to build or maintain relationships or social esteem (Cialdini and Trost 1998). Because there are different reasons for conforming to (or diverging from) descriptive norms than injunctive norms, the factors that influence whether a divergent behavior seems appropriate differ for descriptive and injunctive norms. In this section we discuss when divergence from a descriptive norm seems appropriate. In the next section, we discuss when divergence from an injunctive norm seems appropriate.

Descriptive norms offer an example of how to behave effectively. However, in many contexts, alternative behaviors exist that may be equally (or even more) effective or valuable. Creative ideas and products, for example, diverge from the norm in a way that seems both novel and functional (Amabile 1982; Burroughs and Mick 2004; Moreau and Dahl 2005). Creative advertisements similarly diverge from the norm in a way that helps fulfill the strategic goals of the advertising campaign (Koslow, Sasser, and Riordan 2003). Deviance regulation theory suggests that divergent behavior that seems better than the norm can help people reach their identity goals (Blanton and Christie 2003). We thus propose that autonomy will seem appropriate in a particular social context when a behavior diverging from a descriptive norm seems at least as effective or valuable as the normative behavior. For example, an unusual water bottle design would seem appropriate if it were to maintain functional utility (e.g., holds and dispenses water, stands upright) and avoid threatening consumers' identity goals (e.g., they would not be embarrassed to use it). Because the creativity literature demonstrates that negative or valueless divergence is not considered appropriate (Amabile 1982; Burroughs and Mick 2004), our studies control for value but do not directly test whether a lack of value detracts from coolness.

### Norm Legitimacy Moderates the Appropriateness of Divergence from an Injunctive Norm

Injunctive norms prescribe cultural ideals by specifying how people should behave in a given context. However, a range of norms exists both within and across cultures (Cialdini et al. 1990), and some of these norms may seem arbitrary, unnecessary, or potentially even harmful. Norms often seem strange and unnatural to people unfamiliar with a culture (Cialdini and Trost 1998; Sumner 1906). Opinions of a norm vary even within a culture. Some norms may not

seem legitimate because the norm is associated with a subculture with different interests and goals (see articles in the *Autumn 2013 Research Curation*—Thompson 2014). For example, consumers who frequent dance clubs and raves may reject the antidrug norms advocated by more mainstream society (Thornton 1996). Thus, norms vary in the extent to which people within a culture or subculture consider them legitimate (e.g., necessary, socially beneficial, just), and behaviors that part from an injunctive norm should seem appropriate if the norm is seen as arbitrary or lacking legitimacy. For example, Apple's call to diverge from a norm dictating the use of a particular type of computer and operating system in its famous "1984" advertisement likely seemed appropriate because many viewers considered the policy of using IBM/Microsoft computers unnecessarily restrictive.

We thus hypothesize that the relationship between autonomy and perceived coolness depends on the legitimacy of the norm from which an autonomous behavior diverges. Specifically, we predict that autonomy should increase perceptions of coolness when behavior diverges from a norm considered illegitimate (i.e., unnecessary, arbitrary, or incorrect) but not when behavior diverges from a norm considered legitimate.

### Bounded Autonomy Is More Appropriate than Extreme Autonomy

Regardless of whether they diverge from a descriptive or an injunctive norm, divergent behaviors vary from being similar to the norm (e.g., a product offered in a new color) to being radically different (e.g., a completely new product category). Cultural objects (people, brands, etc.) similarly vary in the regularity with which their behavior diverges from the norm, from never diverging to always diverging. In both cases, autonomy occurs on a continuum from not autonomous to extremely autonomous. Research suggests that consumers often prefer cultural objects that signal a moderate or bounded level of autonomy. Individuals attempt to balance competing goals for uniqueness and belonging by balancing divergent and normative behaviors (Brewer 1991) and avoiding brands that are either too popular (i.e., no divergence from the norm) or too unpopular (too much divergence; Berger and Heath 2007). Consumers show greater acceptance of products that diverge moderately from the descriptive category norm, as extremely divergent products are often difficult to understand (Campbell and Goodstein 2001; Jhang, Grant, and Campbell 2012; Meyers-Levy and Tybout 1989). Consumers are also likely to be more accepting of less extreme departures from injunctive norms. For example, fans may consider a celebrity's mild misdeeds appropriate (e.g., driving above the speed limit, recreational drug use) but are less likely to approve of more serious norm deviations (e.g., animal cruelty, drug addiction).

Society likewise may benefit from bounded expressions of autonomy. Absolute conformity is disadvantageous because it inhibits progress and innovation (Burroughs and

Mick 2004) and in extreme cases can result in blind obedience, even to potentially harmful norms (Marcuse 1955; Milgram 1963). Absolute autonomy, however, is problematic because it can lead to antisocial behavior and general lack of coordination between people (Heath and Potter 2004; Hobbes 1651/1991). Bounded expressions of autonomy, conversely, likely reduce the problems associated with either extreme conformity or extreme divergence. Thus, autonomous behavior should seem more appropriate if it is bounded rather than extreme. For example, Apple's 1984 ad would probably have seemed less appropriate if the ad encouraged consumers to rebel against all of society rather than an office policy.

Because bounded divergence should seem more appropriate than unconstrained divergence, we hypothesize that autonomy increases perceptions of coolness when the level of autonomy is moderate but not when it is too high. In other words, autonomy should have a curvilinear effect on perceived coolness, such that coolness first increases and then decreases as autonomy increases.

### Counterculturalism Moderates the Level of Autonomy Considered Appropriate

Consumers differ in the extent to which they consider autonomous behavior appropriate. Researchers have documented subcultures of consumers who generally consider societal institutions and authority figures unjust, repressive, and damaging (Heath and Potter 2004; Marcuse 1955; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007). Such consumers typically believe that societal institutions, including mass media, government, church, the economic elite, and even family and friends, impose a repressive force that suffocates creativity, individualism, and self-actualization and leads to widespread conformity. We refer to this worldview as counterculturalism. Because they are more likely to consider social norms unjust and overly repressive, consumers higher in counterculturalism should perceive higher levels of autonomy to be appropriate relative to consumers lower in counterculturalism (Heath and Potter 2004). For example, consumers high in counterculturalism will be more likely to consider the highly autonomous behavior of the motorcycle gangs associated with Harley Davidson appropriate, and therefore think of Harley Davidson as cool, than consumers lower in counterculturalism.

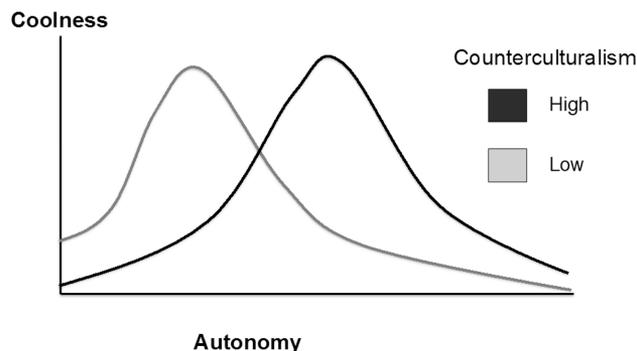
Because consumers who are critical of authority and social norms are more likely to consider divergence appropriate, we hypothesize that counterculturalism will moderate the level of autonomy that consumers perceive to be cool. Specifically, consumers higher in counterculturalism should perceive higher levels of autonomy as cool compared to consumers lower in counterculturalism (see fig. 1).

### Summary and Outline of Experiments

Our hypothesis that coolness stems from appropriate autonomy suggests that the relationship between autonomy and perceived coolness is more nuanced than previously dis-

FIGURE 1

HYPOTHESIZED RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PERCEIVED AUTONOMY, COUNTERCULTURALISM, AND PERCEPTIONS OF COOLNESS



cussed in the literature. Specifically, we propose that the relationship between autonomy and perceived coolness depends on the legitimacy of the norm from which the autonomous behavior diverges, the extremity of autonomy, and the worldview of the perceiver.

We test the relationship between autonomy and perceived coolness in six experiments. Study 1 shows that autonomous product designs are perceived to be cooler than equally liked normative designs. Study 2 illustrates that autonomy only increases perceived coolness when the autonomous behavior diverges from a norm seen as illegitimate, not when it diverges from a legitimate norm. Studies 3, 4a, and 4b show that autonomy has a curvilinear relationship with perceptions of coolness such that coolness first increases and then decreases as autonomy increases. Studies 4a and 4b also reveal that consumers who are high in counterculturalism perceive higher levels of autonomy to be cool compared to consumers who are low in counterculturalism. Study 5 confirms that perceived coolness and preference are not the same construct by showing that cool products are preferred only when consumers want to show that they are independent. Collectively, the studies affirm that autonomy increases perceived coolness, but only when the expression of autonomy seems appropriate.

### STUDY 1: COOL PRODUCTS DIVERGE FROM THE NORM

Study 1 provided an initial test of the relationship between autonomy and perceived coolness. The purpose of the study was to examine whether consumers would perceive a water bottle as being cooler when it diverged from, rather than conformed to, the norm. Because we propose that autonomy can increase coolness regardless of the source, we also manipulated whether the source was a well-known brand or an unfamiliar brand. We expected the autonomous product to seem cooler irrespective of brand familiarity.

### Method

We first conducted a pretest ( $N = 51$ ) to identify bottle designs for use in the study. The pretest, which asked participants to rate 11 water bottle designs (without logos), identified two designs perceived as differing in divergence but not in value. Participants had equally positive attitudes toward the two designs ( $M_{lo\ div} = 4.60$ ,  $M_{hi\ div} = 4.39$ ;  $t = .63$ , NS) but perceived them as having different levels of divergence from the norm ( $M_{lo\ div} = 3.24$ ,  $M_{hi\ div} = 5.65$ ;  $t = 5.98$ ,  $p < .001$ ; see table A1 for details).

Participants ( $N = 190$ ) recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk completed the focal study in exchange for a small payment (60% male;  $M_{age} = 30.92$ , range: 18–63; 38% college graduates; all in the United States). The study used a 2 (divergence: low, high)  $\times$  2 (brand: familiar, unfamiliar) between-subjects design. Participants read that a coffee retailer, either Starbucks (familiar) or Sabbarrio (unfamiliar), was changing the design of its water bottles and then viewed one of the two bottles from the pretest but with the Starbucks or Sabbarrio logo added to the bottle. We operationalized perceived coolness as a continuous variable by having participants complete two 7-point scales anchored by uncool/cool: "how cool or uncool do you consider the design" and "how cool or uncool would your friends consider the design" ( $r = .93$ ,  $\alpha = .96$ ). Drawing from Amabile's consensual assessment technique, the individual participants' responses will show an overall consensus of what is cool in the given context. Participants subsequently answered an open-ended question: "Why do you think the bottle design is cool or uncool?" Two coders, blind to the participants' conditions and coolness ratings, indicated whether the ratings suggested that the participant inferred a low (e.g., "the design is so typical," "looks like any other water bottle") or a high level of autonomy (e.g., "it's unique and very different," "it's a little weird"). In the few instances when the two coders did not agree (they agreed on 89%), a third coder resolved the disagreement. Because the divergence in this case was from a descriptive norm (i.e., a typical bottle design), we next measured appropriate autonomy by assessing whether the divergent design seemed at least as valuable as the normative design. Specifically, participants indicated whether "the design is different in a good way" and "the design is different in a bad way" as proxies for appropriate and inappropriate autonomy, respectively, on 7-point scales anchored by "strongly disagree" and "strongly agree." Participants finally reported their familiarity with Starbucks and Sabbarrio (see table 1), age, gender, and level of education.

### Results and Discussion

A 2 (divergence: low vs. high)  $\times$  2 (brand replicate: familiar, unfamiliar) ANOVA revealed a highly significant main effect of divergence. As predicted, the bottle that diverged from the norm was considered to be cooler than the bottle that conformed to the norm ( $M_{hi\ div} = 4.98$ ,  $M_{lo\ div} = 3.47$ ;  $F(1, 186) = 34.04$ ,  $p < .001$ ). No other effects were

TABLE 1  
STIMULI AND RESULTS FOR STUDY 1

| Brand                                     | Low divergence |             |             | High divergence <sup>a</sup> |                |                | $r^b_{\text{coolness}}$ |
|---|----------------|-------------|-------------|------------------------------|----------------|----------------|-------------------------|
|   | Unfamiliar     | Familiar    | Average     | Unfamiliar                   | Familiar       | Average        |                         |
| Pretest ratings of the unbranded bottles: |                |             |             |                              |                |                |                         |
| Divergence                                | . . .          | . . .       | 3.24 (2.10) | . . .                        | . . .          | 5.65*** (1.73) | . . .                   |
| Attitude                                  | . . .          | . . .       | 4.60 (1.84) | . . .                        | . . .          | 4.39 (1.97)    | . . .                   |
| Perceived coolness (mean)                 | 3.49 (1.59)    | 3.46 (1.71) | 3.47 (1.65) | 4.77*** (1.90)               | 5.21*** (1.89) | 4.98*** (1.93) | . . .                   |
| Brand familiarity (mean)                  | 1.74 (1.56)    | 5.73 (1.58) | 3.74        | 1.45 (1.21)                  | 6.16 (1.09)    | 3.81           | .07                     |
| Appropriate autonomy (mean)               | 3.14 (1.89)    | 2.73 (1.90) | 2.92 (1.89) | 4.57*** (2.06)               | 5.07*** (1.94) | 4.81*** (2.01) | .85***                  |
| Inappropriate autonomy (mean)             | 3.35 (1.94)    | 3.27 (1.94) | 3.31 (1.93) | 3.65 (2.19)                  | 2.96 (2.02)    | 3.32 (2.13)    | -.44***                 |
| Proportion of open-ended inferences:      |                |             |             |                              |                |                |                         |
| High autonomy                             | 5%             | 4%          | 4%          | 76%***                       | 70%***         | 73%***         | .36***                  |
| Low autonomy                              | 58%            | 60%         | 59%         | 2%***                        | 0%***          | 1%***          | -.42***                 |

NOTE.—Standard deviations in parentheses.

<sup>a</sup>Asterisks indicate significant contrasts for the corresponding brand across the high- and low-divergence conditions.

<sup>b</sup>Correlation between the response and perceptions of coolness.

\*\*\* $p < .01$ .

significant (all  $F < 1$ ), indicating that the effect of divergence on coolness occurred both when the brand was familiar (Starbucks) and when the brand was unfamiliar (Sabbarrío; see table 1).

Next we assessed whether inferred autonomy, coded from the open-ended responses by subtracting comments mentioning low autonomy from comments mentioning high autonomy, mediated participants' perceptions of coolness. We tested for mediation using a model with the divergence manipulation (low autonomy coded as  $-1$ , high autonomy coded as  $1$ ) as the independent variable, perceived coolness as the dependent variable, and inferred autonomy as the mediating variable (Preacher and Hayes 2008). As predicted, participants inferred more autonomy when the bottle design diverged rather than conformed to the norm ( $b = .63$ ,  $t = 16.42$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and they perceived the bottle as cooler when they inferred a higher level of autonomy ( $b = .85$ ,  $t = 3.60$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Importantly, inferred autonomy mediated the effect of the divergence manipulation on perceived coolness (indirect effect =  $.53$ ; 95% confidence interval [CI] =

.21–.87). Thus, the open-ended responses confirmed that the divergent bottle design seemed cooler because participants inferred that the bottle was more autonomous when its design diverged from rather than conformed to the norm.

Finally, we conducted a preliminary test of whether consumers perceived the divergent design to be cooler because they considered the expression of autonomy appropriate. To do so, we ran a second mediation analysis with the measures of appropriate and inappropriate autonomy as potential mediating variables. Participants rated the bottle that diverged from the norm as expressing a higher level of appropriate autonomy ( $b = .95$ ,  $t = 6.69$ ,  $p < .001$ ) but a similar level of inappropriate autonomy ( $b = .01$ ,  $t = .04$ , NS) as the bottle that conformed. Moreover, ratings of appropriate autonomy significantly increased perceptions of coolness ( $b = .70$ ,  $t = 16.36$ ,  $p < .001$ ), whereas ratings of inappropriate autonomy had the opposite effect ( $b = -.10$ ,  $t = -2.56$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Importantly, the effect of the divergence manipulation on perceived coolness was significantly mediated by appropriate autonomy (indirect effect =  $.66$ ; 95% CI =

.46–.89) but not by inappropriate autonomy (indirect effect = .00; 95% CI =  $-.04$  to  $.03$ ).

A product whose design differed from the norm seemed cooler than an equally liked product whose design conformed to the norm. Moreover, the effect of diverging from the norm on perceived coolness occurred because participants inferred that the brand was autonomous in an appropriate way. However, the data also tentatively suggest that consumers do not always perceive autonomous behavior as cool, as the perception that the product diverged from the norm in a bad way was negatively related to perceived coolness. Our subsequent studies follow up on this idea by more directly examining when autonomous behavior increases perceived coolness.

## STUDY 2: DIVERGING FROM LEGITIMATE AND ILLEGITIMATE NORMS

Study 2 examined when expressing autonomy by diverging from an injunctive norm is likely to increase perceptions of coolness. Injunctive norms indicate rules or ideals that people are expected to follow. People have different goals, values, and interests and, thus, different views about which social norms are necessary and beneficial and which are expendable. For example, although most consumers consider norms that forbid stealing music CDs legitimate, some perceive norms that forbid the piracy of digital music files illegitimate (Giesler 2008).

To test our hypothesis that expressing autonomy is only likely to increase perceptions of coolness when behavior diverges from a norm that is not considered legitimate, we asked participants to read an advertisement for a foreign clothing brand that advocates wearing blue. In order to manipulate autonomy and norm legitimacy while controlling for the brand's behavior, we described the culture in which the advertisement ostensibly aired. Depending on the description, the brand's behavior either conformed to or diverged from the norm, which varied in legitimacy. We predicted that diverging from an illegitimate norm would increase perceptions of coolness but that diverging from a legitimate norm would have the opposite effect.

### Method

We randomly assigned participants from Amazon's Mechanical Turk ( $N = 196$ , 43% female,  $M_{\text{age}} = 32.5$ , all in the United States) to one condition in a 2 (autonomy: high, low)  $\times$  2 (norm: legitimate, illegitimate) between-subjects experiment. Participants read that they would complete a survey about a foreign retailer's advertising strategy.

Participants read about a retailer, Roiku, that advertises and sells clothing in foreign markets, including the city-state of Ballai. Citizens of Ballai were described as celebrating a holiday called Masakha Day by wearing a certain color. Participants in the low-autonomy condition read that the norm was to wear blue, whereas participants in the high-

autonomy condition read that the norm was to wear white. We manipulated the legitimacy of the norm by describing the reason for wearing blue (or white). Participants in the legitimate norm condition read that citizens of Ballai wear blue (white) in order to honor fallen soldiers. Conversely, participants in the illegitimate norm condition read that the citizens wear blue (white) in order to pay tribute to a corrupt dictator (see complete manipulations in table A2). In order to check that they understood the fashion norm for Masakha Day and the reason behind it, participants next answered two open-ended questions: (1) What color do citizens typically wear on Masakha Day? (2) Why do most citizens wear this color? Next, participants had the option of re-reading the description of the fashion norms or of continuing with the study.

Subsequently, participants in the low (high) autonomy condition read, "Roiku recently created an advertising campaign in which the brand endorsed (parted from) the norm by encouraging consumers to wear blue on Masakha Day." Next, all participants viewed an advertisement with the headline "Roiku is blue" and the subtext "Masakha Day Collection" (see fig. 2). In sum, all participants viewed the same advertisement in which a brand endorsed wearing blue; however, the brand's behavior either conformed to or diverged from the norm, and the norm seemed either legitimate or illegitimate depending on the background description of the culture.

After viewing the advertisement, participants rated the perceived coolness of the brand on two 7-point scales anchored by uncool/cool: "To what extent do you personally consider the brand cool or uncool," and "To what extent do you think your close friends would consider the brand cool or uncool" ( $\alpha = .95$ ,  $r = .90$ ). Next, participants completed the manipulation checks (see table A1) for legitimacy ( $\alpha = .94$ ) and autonomy ( $\alpha = .94$ ). Because autonomy is a central construct in our research, we conducted several pretests in order to develop a scale to measure inferred autonomy. The pretests identified six items (e.g., "doesn't do things just to fit in") that consistently show a unidimensional factor structure and high reliability. Additionally, to examine whether expressing autonomy from an illegitimate norm increases coolness because the autonomy seems appropriate but that expressing autonomy from a legitimate norm decreases coolness because the autonomy seems inappropriate, we measured whether participants considered the brand autonomous in a positive way ("It does its own thing, but in a good way," and "It is different in a positive way";  $\alpha = .84$ ,  $r = .73$ ) and autonomous in a negative way ("It does its own thing, but in a bad way," and "It is different in a negative way";  $\alpha = .90$ ,  $r = .82$ ). Finally, participants reported their demographic information, including age and gender.

### Results

Both manipulations worked as intended. A 2 (autonomy: high, low)  $\times$  2 (norm: legitimate, illegitimate) ANOVA revealed the intended main effect of the autonomy manipulation on the perceived divergence of the brand ( $M_{\text{low aut}} =$

FIGURE 2

ADVERTISEMENT PARTICIPANTS VIEWED IN STUDY 2



2.99,  $M_{hi\ aut} = 5.46$ ;  $F(1, 192) = 142.47$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The legitimacy manipulation had neither a main ( $F(1, 192) = 1.18$ , NS) nor an interacting ( $F(1, 192) = 2.39$ , NS) effect. The legitimacy manipulation was also successful. Participants perceived the norm as being more legitimate when citizens wore the color to honor fallen soldiers rather than a dictator ( $M_{legit} = 6.00$ ,  $M_{illegit} = 3.04$ ;  $F(1, 192) = 250.45$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Consistent with the finding that observing an act of deviance can make a norm seem less legitimate (Cialdini et al. 1990; Keizer, Lindenberg, and Steg 2008), the norm also seemed slightly more legitimate when the brand conformed to it than when it expressed autonomy from it ( $M_{lo\ aut} = 4.64$ ,  $M_{hi\ aut} = 4.23$ ;  $F(1, 192) = 5.95$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Importantly, however, the norm legitimacy manipulation did not interact with the autonomy manipulation ( $F(1, 192) = 1.08$ , NS), and the norm seemed more legitimate in the legitimate condition both when the norm was to wear blue (i.e., low autonomy;  $M_{legit} = 6.13$ ,  $M_{illegit} = 3.35$ ;  $F(1, 192) = 112.57$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and when the norm was to wear white (i.e., high autonomy;  $M_{legit} = 5.86$ ,  $M_{illegit} = 2.69$ ;  $F(1, 192) = 138.30$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

Next, we assessed the effects of the manipulations on perceived coolness using a 2 (autonomy: high, low)  $\times$  2 (norm: legitimate, illegitimate) ANOVA. There was a marginal main effect of autonomy ( $F(1, 192) = 2.97$ ,  $p = .09$ ); the main effect of norm legitimacy was not significant ( $F(1, 192) = .04$ , NS). Importantly, the interaction between autonomy and norm legitimacy was highly significant ( $F(1, 192) = 42.30$ ,  $p < .001$ ). As predicted, expressing autonomy

increased the perceived coolness of the brand only when the norm from which the brand diverged seemed illegitimate ( $M_{lo\ aut} = 3.96$ ,  $M_{hi\ aut} = 5.10$ ;  $F(1, 192) = 12.02$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Expressing autonomy from a legitimate norm instead decreased the perceived coolness of the brand ( $M_{lo\ aut} = 5.56$ ,  $M_{hi\ aut} = 3.59$ ;  $F(1, 192) = 32.24$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

We next examined whether diverging from an illegitimate norm increases coolness because the autonomy is seen as appropriate but diverging from a legitimate norm decreases coolness because the autonomy is seen as inappropriate. If so, then the increase in perceived coolness when the brand diverged from an illegitimate norm should be mediated by the perception that the brand is autonomous in a positive way. Indeed, mediation tests (Preacher and Hayes 2008) revealed that the positive effect of expressing autonomy on perceived coolness in the illegitimate norm condition was mediated by the perception that the brand was autonomous in a positive way (indirect effect = .47; 95% CI = .24–.76). Diverging from an illegitimate norm increased the perception that the brand was autonomous in a positive way ( $M_{lo\ aut} = 3.03$ ,  $M_{hi\ aut} = 5.03$ ;  $b = 1.00$ ,  $t = 5.92$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Moreover, the perception that the brand was autonomous in a positive way increased perceived coolness ( $b = .47$ ,  $t = 5.34$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The direct effect of the autonomy manipulation was no longer significant after accounting for the indirect effects of positive and negative autonomy ( $b = .08$ ,  $t = .49$ , NS). If only appropriate displays of autonomy lead to coolness, then we might find that the decrease in perceived coolness when a brand diverges from a legitimate

norm would be mediated by the perception that the brand is autonomous in a negative way. Consistent with this explanation, the indirect effect of autonomy on perceived coolness in the legitimate norm condition was significant (indirect effect =  $-.59$ ; 95% CI =  $-.91$  to  $-.36$ ). Diverging from a legitimate norm increased the perception that the brand was autonomous in a negative way ( $M_{lo\ aut} = 2.04$ ,  $M_{hi\ aut} = 4.40$ ;  $b = 1.18$ ,  $t = 7.45$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Moreover, the perception that the brand was autonomous in a negative way decreased perceived coolness ( $b = -.50$ ,  $t = -5.07$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Again, the direct effect of the autonomy manipulation was no longer significant after accounting for the indirect effects of positive and negative autonomy ( $b = -.27$ ,  $t = 1.51$ , NS).

## Discussion

The effect of diverging from a norm on perceived coolness depends on norm legitimacy. Participants perceived a brand to be cooler when it diverged from an illegitimate norm but less cool when it diverged from a legitimate norm. Although both acts of divergence increased perceptions of autonomy, diverging from an illegitimate norm seemed appropriate, whereas diverging from a legitimate norm did not. Thus, the study supports our hypothesis that expressing autonomy increases perceived coolness, but only when the expression of autonomy seems appropriate.

### STUDY 3: BOUNDED AUTONOMY IS COOLER THAN EXTREME AUTONOMY

We propose that whether autonomy seems appropriate depends on the extent to which a cultural object diverges from the norm. Because divergent behavior is less likely to harm others and disrupt the social order—and hence, seem appropriate—when it is bounded rather than extreme, we predict that bounded autonomy will increase perceptions of coolness, relative to low autonomy, but extreme autonomy will not. Study 3 thus examined whether perceived coolness first increases but then decreases as autonomy increases. The study also investigated the relationship between coolness and product choice. Although research has assumed that coolness leads to sales (e.g., Gladwell 1997; Kerner and Pressman 2007), we could not find any quantitative investigations of the relationship between perceived coolness and actual behavior. In the current study, a diverse sample of participants read interviews with and could choose to download and keep a few songs by three rock bands. The interviews portrayed one band as having a low level of autonomy, a second band as having a higher but bounded level of autonomy, and a third band as having an extreme level of autonomy. In addition to expecting a curvilinear relationship between autonomy and coolness, we expected a similar curvilinear relationship between autonomy and actual choice, mediated by perceptions of coolness.

## Method

*Participants.* We offered US workers from Amazon's Mechanical Turk ( $N = 133$ ) a small payment and their choice of four song downloads for participating in a study on rock music. The sample was heterogeneous in terms of gender (60% female), age (range: 18–62,  $M = 30.3$ ,  $SD = 10.6$ ), annual household income (31%,  $< \$25,000$ ; 24%,  $\$25,000$ – $\$50,000$ ; 20%,  $\$50,000$ – $\$75,000$ ; 11%,  $\$75,000$ – $\$100,000$ ; 16%,  $> \$100,000$ ), and education (highest degree: 38%, high school; 15%, associate's degree; and 47%, bachelor's degree or higher).

*Procedure.* Participants read three interviews with musicians in up-and-coming rock bands, answered questions about each, and chose four songs to download. Through a personal connection, we identified three professional musicians who had recently started bands that were not yet well known (no more than 5% of the sample had previously heard of any of the bands) and were willing to be in the study and to sell us four song files each to use as choice options: Nick Campbell of Wages, Andy Herod of Electric Owls, and Matt Rumley of Her Marigold. Each interview included four questions: (1) "How would you describe your band?" (2) "What motivates you when writing your songs?" (3) "What is your favorite song to play live?" and (4) "What songs would you recommend to someone who has never heard your band?" The answers to questions 1, 3, and 4 were provided by each band and held constant across participants. With permission from the musicians, we created the answers to the second interview question to manipulate autonomy at three levels (low, bounded, extreme), within subjects, as follows:

*Low autonomy:* "We make an effort to write songs that appeal to a mass audience. By following the current trends and sticking to popular sounds, we create songs that we hope everyone will love. Our goal is to match our sound to mainstream tastes so as many people as possible enjoy our music."

*Bounded autonomy:* "We don't try to write a bunch of hits or records that go triple platinum. We just write songs that feel right to us and reflect what we are experiencing at the time. We see what is happening around us and try to incorporate these observations into songs that we hope some people can relate to."

*Extreme autonomy:* "We write what we feel like writing, which usually means completely ignoring typical conventions and doing something totally different. We do what we want and if people don't like it, that's their problem. Honestly, we couldn't care less what others think of us or our music."

While all participants read about the bands in the same order (Wages first, Electric Owls second, and Her Marigold third), we counterbalanced which band's second answer indicated low, bounded, or extreme autonomy such that autonomy was orthogonal to the band and order. Each band

expressed low autonomy for a third of the participants, bounded autonomy for a third of the participants, and extreme autonomy for a third of the participants. After reading the interviews, participants rated the extent to which they considered the bands cool, rated perceived autonomy of the band, and chose four songs to download and keep. We counterbalanced the order of the measures of band perceptions and song downloads. Order did not have main or interacting effects on perceptions of autonomy, coolness, or downloading behavior and is not discussed further. We measured coolness by asking, "Do you think this band is cool?" Participants indicated their response on a 7-point scale anchored by not cool/cool. We measured perceived autonomy of the band using the same six-item scale used in the previous study ( $\alpha = .91$ ; see table A1). Participants also selected four out of 12 songs (four by each band) to download. After reporting demographic information, participants were debriefed and directed to a web page to download their song selections and learn more about the bands.

## Results

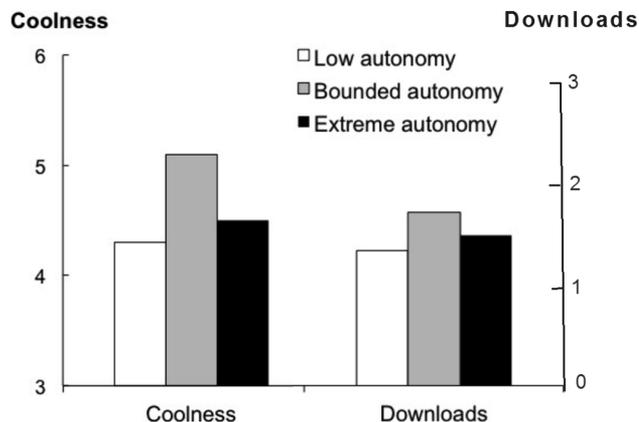
**Effects of Order and Band.** First, we calculated the main effect of band/order on perceptions of autonomy, perceptions of coolness, and the number of songs downloaded using a repeated-measures ANOVA with band as a within-subjects factor. Band did not have a significant main effect on perceived autonomy ( $M_{Wages} = 3.19$ ,  $M_{Owls} = 3.14$ ,  $M_{Marigold} = 3.30$ ;  $F(2, 264) = .56$ , NS) or perceived coolness ( $M_{Wages} = 4.62$ ,  $M_{Owls} = 4.46$ ,  $M_{Marigold} = 4.77$ ;  $F(2, 264) = 1.42$ , NS). There was, however, a main effect of band on downloads ( $M_{Wages} = 1.41$ ,  $M_{Owls} = 1.02$ ,  $M_{Marigold} = 1.56$ ;  $F(2, 264) = 7.93$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Subsequent analysis adjusts the number of downloads to control for the main effect of band in order to separate it from the effects of the autonomy manipulation.

**Manipulation Check.** We assessed the effectiveness of the autonomy manipulation by entering perceived autonomy as the dependent variable in a 3 (autonomy: low, bounded, extreme)  $\times$  3 (band-autonomy pairing: Wages/bounded, Electric Owls/bounded, Her Marigold/bounded) mixed ANOVA model with autonomy as a within-subjects factor and band-autonomy pairing as a between-subjects factor. Only the main effect of autonomy was significant ( $F(2, 260) = 123.77$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Paired sample  $t$ -tests revealed that participants considered the extreme-autonomy band ( $M = 4.02$ ) more autonomous than the bounded autonomy band ( $M = 3.27$ ;  $t = 7.99$ ,  $p < .001$ ), which they considered more autonomous than the low-autonomy band ( $M = 2.34$ ;  $t = 9.78$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Thus, the autonomy manipulation was successful.

**Coolness.** We tested the relationship between autonomy and coolness by running the same analysis with perceptions of coolness as the dependent variable. The analysis revealed a significant main effect of autonomy ( $F(2, 260) = 10.15$ ,  $p < .001$ ; see fig. 3). We tested the nature of the relationship

FIGURE 3

### PERCEIVED COOLNESS AND SONG DOWNLOADS IN STUDY 3



between autonomy and perceived coolness by assessing the effects of the linear and quadratic trends of autonomy. As hypothesized, there was a significant quadratic effect of autonomy on coolness ( $F(1, 130) = 28.96$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The band displaying bounded autonomy was considered cooler ( $M = 5.07$ ) than both the band displaying low autonomy ( $M = 4.30$ ;  $t = 4.56$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and the band displaying extreme autonomy ( $M = 4.48$ ;  $t = -3.76$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The linear effect of autonomy was not significant ( $F(1, 130) = .64$ , NS), indicating that the main effect of the autonomy manipulation was driven by the aforementioned curvilinear relationship between autonomy and coolness. Finally, the effect of autonomy on coolness did not depend on the band-autonomy pairing ( $F(4, 260) = .77$ , NS).

**Download Choice.** If people are more likely to choose products that they consider cool, we would expect a similar curvilinear relationship between autonomy and participants' download choices; this is what we found. There was a marginally significant main effect of autonomy ( $F(2, 260) = 2.84$ ,  $p = .06$ ) driven by a significant quadratic trend ( $F(1, 130) = 4.62$ ,  $p < .05$ ; see fig. 3). Participants chose more songs from the band showing bounded autonomy ( $M = 1.51$ ) than both the band showing low autonomy ( $M = 1.18$ ;  $t = 2.48$ ,  $p = .01$ ) and, directionally but not significantly, the band showing extreme autonomy ( $M = 1.31$ ;  $t = -1.37$ , NS). The effect of autonomy on choice did not depend on the band-autonomy pairing ( $F(4, 260) = .82$ , NS).

**Mediation.** We examined whether perceptions of coolness mediated choice behavior using a procedure recommended for within-subjects designs (Judd, Kenny, and McClelland 2001). First, we calculated a score representing the quadratic effect of autonomy on downloads ( $DL_{quad}$ ) for each participant, by subtracting the number of songs downloaded from the low-autonomy band, adding twice the number of songs downloaded from the bounded autonomy band, and

subtracting the number of songs downloaded from the extreme-autonomy band (i.e., coded  $-1, 2, -1$ ). Consistent with the quadratic trend reported above, on average  $DL_{quad}$  was significantly greater than zero ( $M = .53$ ;  $t = 2.17$ ,  $p < .05$ ). We then regressed  $DL_{quad}$  on mean-centered average ratings of coolness, and two contrast-coded variables representing the linear (coded  $-1, 0, 1$ ) and quadratic (coded  $-1, 2, -1$ ) effects of autonomy on coolness. The quadratic effect of autonomy on coolness explained significant variance in the quadratic effect of autonomy on downloads ( $b = .35$ ,  $t = 4.45$ ,  $p < .001$ ); however, the linear effect of autonomy on coolness did not ( $b = -.11$ ,  $t = -1.23$ , NS). Importantly, the intercept in the regression equation was not significant ( $b = .08$ ,  $t = .32$ , NS), suggesting that differences in perceived coolness fully mediated the curvilinear effect of autonomy on song choice.

## Discussion

The data revealed a curvilinear relationship between autonomy and perceived coolness: bands were considered cooler when they showed bounded autonomy rather than a low or extremely high level. Additionally, song choice showed a similar curvilinear pattern that was mediated by perceived coolness, indicating that coolness can influence consumer choice. The study provided additional evidence that autonomy increases perceptions of coolness when the deviation seems appropriate, in this case because autonomy was bounded rather than too extreme. However, the study did not address how this boundary differs across consumers. Understanding how perceptions of coolness differ is important in order to gain a deeper theoretical understanding of the antecedents of coolness.

## STUDIES 4A AND 4B: MORE AUTONOMY SEEMS COOL TO COUNTERCULTURALS

Consumers differ in the extent to which they consider autonomy appropriate. Because they are skeptical of society and are less likely to consider its norms legitimate, consumers high in counterculturalism are likely to consider higher levels of autonomy appropriate than consumers low in counterculturalism. Therefore, we hypothesize that more countercultural consumers perceive a higher level of autonomy to be cool than less countercultural consumers.

We conducted two studies to test this hypothesis. Both studies manipulated autonomy and measured counterculturalism. Study 4a asked participants to evaluate the coolness of four fashion brands, which varied by showing a low, moderate, high, or extreme level of autonomy, respectively. We manipulated autonomy at four (rather than three) levels in order to increase the ability to detect differences in the level of autonomy considered the coolest for high- and low-countercultural participants. Study 4b examined the generality of the findings by asking participants to evaluate the coolness of another person, whose autonomy varied from low to extreme (manipulated between subjects). Understanding what makes people cool is relevant for consumer re-

search because many consumers buy products and engage in activities that they believe will help make them cool (Belk et al. 2010; Heath and Potter 2004). Additionally, researchers have suggested that cool people exert a larger social influence and are more likely to be imitated by other consumers (Belk et al. 2010; Gladwell 1997). Therefore, understanding whether the same factors that influence the coolness of brands also influence the coolness of people could help inform consumers who want to be cool as well as marketers who want to target cool consumers.

In both study 4a and study 4b we expected to replicate the curvilinear effect of autonomy on perceived coolness, but we also expected that consumers higher in counterculturalism would perceive higher levels of autonomy to be cool compared to consumers lower in counterculturalism. Thus, we predicted a curvilinear pattern for all consumers but with coolness peaking at a relatively higher level of autonomy for consumers higher in counterculturalism.

## Study 4a

*Method.* Undergraduates ( $N = 58$ , 29% female) at the University of Colorado participated in the study for course credit. The study crossed four levels of autonomy (low, moderate, high, extreme) manipulated within subjects with a continuous measure of counterculturalism. Participants read descriptions of four fictitious brands: (1) Baraccio coats, (2) Ero sunglasses, (3) Setia shoes, and (4) Solle watches. We counterbalanced which brand expressed a low, moderate, high, or extreme level of autonomy, such that the autonomy manipulation was orthogonal to the brand and presentation order. We manipulated autonomy from low to extreme levels by indicating whether the brand “follows the market,” “usually conforms to popular styles,” “defies industry standards,” or is “rebellious and controversial” (see table A3 for full descriptions).

We measured the perceived coolness of each brand using two 7-point measures—“Is this brand cool?” and “Is this brand hip?”—anchored by not cool/cool and not hip/hip (all  $r > .7$ ). Participants then read, “Brands are often seen as possessing human characteristics and personalities. Next, we are going to ask you a few questions about the personality of these same four brands.” Participants indicated the extent to which the six items in the autonomy scale (all  $\alpha > .73$ ) described each brand. Finally, as part of an ostensibly separate survey, we measured counterculturalism using an original Likert-type six-item scale (e.g., “rules and conventions often overly restrict people’s freedom”; see table A1). We conducted several pretests to select and validate the items in the scale. The pretests confirmed that the scale consistently shows a unidimensional factor structure, high reliability ( $\alpha > .8$ ), and discriminant validity from other potentially related measures, including our six-item measure of autonomy ( $r < |.2|$ ), measures of individualism ( $r < |.3|$ ), and need for uniqueness ( $.2 < r < .5$ ).

*Results.* First, we examined the main effect of brand, which was confounded with product and order, on percep-

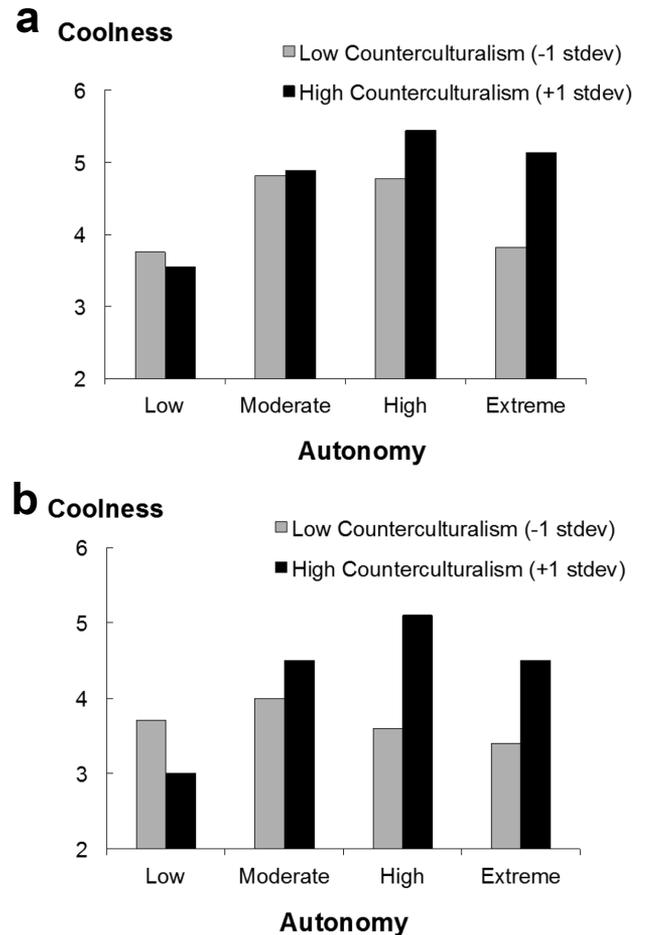
tions of autonomy and coolness. If the brand/product/order factor were significant, we would want to account for this effect in subsequent analyses in order to separate it from the effects of the autonomy manipulation. Brand did not have a significant effect on perceived autonomy ( $M_{\text{coat}} = 3.33$ ,  $M_{\text{sungl}} = 2.94$ ,  $M_{\text{shoes}} = 3.21$ ,  $M_{\text{watch}} = 3.05$ ;  $F(3, 168) = .76$ , NS) but did on perceived coolness ( $M_{\text{coat}} = 4.19$ ,  $M_{\text{sungl}} = 4.80$ ,  $M_{\text{shoes}} = 4.34$ ,  $M_{\text{watch}} = 4.88$ ;  $F(3, 171) = 3.22$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Therefore, we adjusted the ratings of perceived coolness in the subsequent analysis to control for this effect.

Next, we tested the success of the autonomy manipulation by entering perceived autonomy as the dependent variable in a 4 (autonomy: low, moderate, high, extreme)  $\times$  4 (order: low autonomy first, moderate autonomy first, high autonomy first, extreme autonomy first) repeated-measures ANOVA that also included counterculturalism and its interactions with the manipulated factors as continuous predictor variables. Only the main effect of autonomy was significant ( $F(3, 156) = 316.43$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Paired sample  $t$ -tests revealed that participants perceived each level of brand autonomy to be significantly different in the expected direction ( $M_{\text{low}} = 1.43$ ,  $M_{\text{mod}} = 2.60$ ;  $t = 12.26$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $M_{\text{high}} = 3.60$ ;  $t = 8.85$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $M_{\text{extreme}} = 4.67$ ;  $t = 10.38$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Thus, the manipulation worked as intended.

To test our primary hypothesis, we conducted the same analysis with perceptions of coolness as the dependent variable. Analysis revealed significant main effects of autonomy ( $F(3, 159) = 15.07$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and counterculturalism ( $F(1, 53) = 4.87$ ,  $p < .05$ ), qualified by a significant interaction ( $F(3, 159) = 3.41$ ,  $p < .05$ ; see fig. 4a). To interpret these effects, we split the autonomy factor into its linear, quadratic, and cubic components. Consistent with the previous study, there was a significant main effect of the quadratic trend of autonomy on coolness ( $F(1, 53) = 41.38$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Participants perceived brands showing moderate autonomy ( $M = 4.83$ ) to be cooler than brands showing low autonomy ( $M = 3.64$ ;  $t = 5.98$ ,  $p < .001$ ) but brands showing extreme autonomy ( $M = 4.50$ ) as less cool than brands showing high autonomy ( $M = 5.13$ ;  $t = -3.01$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The curvilinear pattern held throughout the sample, as indicated by an insignificant interaction between counterculturalism and the quadratic trend of autonomy ( $F(1, 53) = .63$ , NS). Unlike in the previous study, we also observed a main effect of the linear trend of autonomy on coolness ( $F(1, 53) = 7.97$ ,  $p < .01$ ); perceived coolness increased with autonomy, although, as previously noted, this increasing pattern did not hold at extremely high levels of autonomy. Furthermore, the increasing relationship between autonomy and perceived coolness was truer of participants high in counterculturalism, as indicated by the significant interaction between counterculturalism and the linear effect of autonomy ( $F(1, 53) = 5.35$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Consistent with our prediction, participants higher in counterculturalism considered higher levels of autonomy cooler than did participants lower in counterculturalism (see fig. 4a).

FIGURE 4

EFFECTS OF AUTONOMY AND COUNTERCULTURALISM ON PERCEPTIONS OF COOLNESS IN STUDIES 4A AND 4B



NOTE.—Autonomy refers to the level of autonomy of the brand (a, study 4a) or person (b, study 4b) evaluated in the study, whereas counterculturalism refers to individual differences in the participants evaluating the brand or person.

### Study 4b

**Method.** Undergraduates ( $N = 132$ , 35% female) at the University of Colorado participated in exchange for a candy bar. The study design was the same as study 4a with two exceptions: (1) we manipulated autonomy between subjects instead of within subjects, and (2) participants read a description of a hypothetical target person instead of descriptions of brands (see table A4).

**Results.** Analysis confirmed the successful manipulation of autonomy. Participants considered the target person less autonomous in the low- ( $M = 2.36$ ) than the moderate-

autonomy condition ( $M = 3.86$ ;  $t = 5.89$ ,  $p < .001$ ), more autonomous in the high-autonomy condition ( $M = 5.00$ ;  $t = 4.42$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and the most autonomous in the extreme-autonomy condition ( $M = 5.50$ ;  $t = 1.95$ ,  $p = .05$ ). Counterculturalism did not influence perceived autonomy ( $F(1, 123) = 1.12$ , NS), nor did it interact with the autonomy manipulation ( $F(3, 123) = .57$ , NS). The autonomy manipulation did not influence the counterculturalism measure ( $F(3, 127) = 1.33$ , NS).

To test the hypothesis that autonomy would have a curvilinear effect on perceived coolness and the hypothesis that higher levels of autonomy would seem cooler to consumers higher in counterculturalism, we analyzed coolness as the dependent variable in a regression equation with three orthogonal, contrast-coded variables representing the autonomy manipulation, the mean-centered measure of counterculturalism, and three variables representing the interaction between the autonomy manipulation and counterculturalism. As predicted, there was a significant main effect of the quadratic trend of autonomy on coolness ( $b = .31$ ,  $t = 2.36$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Overall, perceived coolness increased as autonomy increased from a low to a moderate level but began to decrease as the level of autonomy became more extreme. The interaction between the quadratic trend of autonomy and counterculturalism was not significant ( $b = .27$ ,  $t = 1.51$ , NS), indicating that the overall relationship between autonomy and coolness was curvilinear across the entire sample irrespective of level of counterculturalism. Importantly, however, the predicted interaction between the linear trend of autonomy and counterculturalism was significant ( $b = .21$ ,  $t = 2.66$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Relative to participants lower in counterculturalism, those higher in counterculturalism perceived higher levels of autonomy to be cool (see fig. 4b).

## Discussion

Replicating study 3, both brands (study 4a) and people (study 4b) were considered the coolest when perceived as having bounded autonomy, as evidenced by a quadratic relationship between autonomy and perceived coolness. Importantly, the studies also illustrated one reason why perceptions of coolness vary across consumers. Perceptions of coolness peaked at a higher level of autonomy for participants higher as compared to lower in counterculturalism, a result that provides additional support for the hypothesis that autonomy increases perceived coolness but only when the expression of autonomy seems appropriate. Consumers high in counterculturalism are critical of societal institutions and thus tend to perceive higher levels of autonomy to be cooler than do consumers lower in counterculturalism, who are more likely to consider autonomous behavior inappropriate and, therefore, uncool.

Our studies thus far indicate that perceptions of coolness increase when a brand or person seems autonomous in an appropriate manner. An alternative hypothesis, however, is that coolness does not require autonomy but is merely another way of saying that something is liked. Although the results of study 1 suggest that autonomy influences per-

ceived coolness independent of liking, identifying contexts in which consumer preferences diverge from perceptions of coolness would provide strong evidence that coolness and desirability are distinct.

## STUDY 5: WHEN DO CONSUMERS PREFER COOL BRANDS?

Preferences depend on goals (Van Osselaer et al. 2005), and coolness seems more likely to facilitate symbolic, identity goals rather than practical, utilitarian goals (Leland 2004). Therefore, it is likely that consumers use cool brands as a means for pursuing symbolic goals, such as signaling a desired identity trait (Berger and Heath 2007). But what identity do cool brands signal? Because coolness comes from expressing autonomy in an appropriate way, consumers could use cool brands to show that they are autonomous individuals. If so, then consumers should desire cool brands more when they want to signal an autonomous identity. Study 5 examined whether a goal to signal autonomy versus conformity would lead to greater preference for cool brands. Support for the hypothesis would (1) provide a better understanding of when consumers prefer cool brands, (2) supplement earlier studies by providing complementary evidence that coolness is rooted in autonomy in addition to desirability, and (3) verify the discriminant validity between perceived coolness and desirability.

We examined when consumers prefer cool brands by manipulating coolness and classiness. Depending on condition, participants thought of a real brand that they perceived to be cool, they did not perceive to be cool, they considered classy, or they did not consider classy. Participants then indicated their preference for using the brand in different social contexts, which we varied to manipulate participants' desire to express autonomy. Although Western consumers, like our participants, often want to express an autonomous identity (Brewer 1991; Markus and Schwartz 2010), there are social contexts that increase their desire to fit in. We predicted that although cool brands will be liked better than uncool brands in general, this will not hold in contexts in which consumers want to fit in. We hypothesized that contexts that encourage conformity over autonomy will reduce preferences for cool relative to uncool brands but will not influence preferences for classy versus not classy brands.

## Method

Seventy-four undergraduates (19% female) at the University of Colorado participated in an online study for course credit. All participants named one real shoe brand. We asked participants to name a brand that they considered high quality and, depending on randomly assigned condition, cool, not cool, classy, or not classy (we solicited only high-quality brands in order to control for the perceived value of the product). Participants next rated their attitude toward wearing the brand in different social contexts that varied in terms of desirability of standing out. The study used a 2 (trait valence: positive, negative)  $\times$  2 (trait type: cool, classy)  $\times$

2 (context autonomy: desired more, desired less)  $\times$  2 (context replicate: job, dinner) mixed design. We manipulated the trait factors between subjects and the context factors within subjects.

After naming a shoe brand that was high quality and (depending on random assignment) classy, not classy, cool, or not cool, participants listed their general attitude toward the brand on 7-point scales anchored by bad/good and unfavorable/favorable ( $r = .93$ ,  $\alpha = .96$ ). Next, participants indicated their attitude toward wearing the brand in four specific contexts on a 7-point scale anchored by bad/unfavorable and good/favorable. On the basis of a pretest, we identified two contexts in which participants have a higher desire to express autonomy, "a networking event hosted by a small advertising boutique" and "an informal dinner at a local café," and two contexts in which participants have a lower desire to express autonomy, "a job interview with a large, traditional corporation" and "a formal dinner at a fancy restaurant." Finally, we conducted a manipulation check of desire to express autonomy in each of the different contexts by asking, "In the following situations, would you rather show that you are independent or that you fit in?" Participants indicated their responses on a 7-point scale anchored by "prefer to show that I fit in" and "prefer to show that I am independent." We randomized the order in which we presented the different contexts for both measures.

## Results and Discussion

**Manipulation Check.** To check the effectiveness of the autonomy manipulation, we ran a 2 (trait valence: positive, negative)  $\times$  2 (trait type: cool, classy)  $\times$  2 (context autonomy: desired more, desired less)  $\times$  2 (context replicate: job, dinner) repeated-measures ANOVA on participants' desire to express autonomy. As expected, there was only a significant main effect of the context-autonomy factor ( $M = 4.48$  vs.  $3.18$ ;  $F(1, 70) = 21.29$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Paired-samples  $t$ -tests revealed that participants wanted to show independence more at an event with an ad boutique than at an interview with a corporation ( $M = 4.88$  vs.  $3.93$ ;  $t = 4.17$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and at a local café than at a fancy restaurant ( $M = 4.69$  vs.  $4.16$ ;  $t = 2.84$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Neither the replicate factor nor the between-subjects trait manipulations had any main or interacting effects. In sum, the manipulation worked as intended.

**General Brand Attitude.** To test whether, in general, participants preferred cool brands to uncool brands, we analyzed the effects of the manipulations on general brand attitude using a 2 (trait valence: positive, negative)  $\times$  2 (trait type: cool, classy) ANOVA, which revealed only a significant main effect of trait valence ( $M = 6.65$  vs.  $4.48$ ;  $F(1, 70) = 32.53$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Consistent with the downloading preferences in study 2, participants expressed a higher general attitude toward a brand they considered cool than a brand they did not consider cool ( $M = 6.69$  vs.  $4.39$ ;  $F(1, 70) = 26.44$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Not surprisingly, they also expressed a higher general attitude toward a brand they considered

classy than a brand they did not consider classy ( $M = 6.61$  vs.  $5.34$ ;  $F(1, 70) = 8.38$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

**Context-Specific Brand Attitude.** To test whether participants' preference for cool brands depends on the extent to which they want to express autonomy, we analyzed their attitude toward wearing the brand in the four different social contexts, using a 2 (trait valence: positive, negative)  $\times$  2 (trait type: cool, classy)  $\times$  2 (context autonomy: desired more, desired less)  $\times$  2 (context replicate: job, dinner) repeated-measures ANOVA. The analysis revealed main effects of trait valence (overall, participants had a higher attitude toward wearing brands that have a positive trait than brands that do not have a positive trait;  $F(1, 70) = 28.18$ ,  $p < .001$ ), the context-autonomy factor (overall, participants had a higher attitude toward wearing all of the shoe brands in contexts in which they were more motivated to express autonomy;  $F(1, 70) = 29.87$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and the context replicate (overall, participants had a higher attitude toward wearing the shoes to a dinner than to a job-related event;  $F(1, 70) = 26.46$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Importantly, the main effects of trait valence and autonomy were qualified by the predicted three-way interaction between trait valence, trait type, and context autonomy ( $F(1, 70) = 6.86$ ,  $p = .01$ ). No other interactions were significant. Because the replicate factor did not interact with any of the other factors, we simplified the subsequent analysis of the three-way interaction by collapsing across replicates.

To test the hypothesis that consumers are more likely to prefer cool brands when they want to signal autonomy, we investigated whether the contrast between participants in the cool and the uncool condition differed depending on the social context. A 2 (coolness: yes, no)  $\times$  2 (context autonomy: desired more, desired less) repeated-measures analysis retaining only data from participants in the cool trait condition revealed the predicted interaction ( $F(1, 34) = 4.52$ ,  $p < .05$ ). In situations in which they want to express autonomy, participants had a higher attitude toward a cool than an uncool brand ( $M = 5.53$  vs.  $3.33$ ;  $F(1, 70) = 18.61$ ,  $p < .001$ ). When participants were not motivated to express autonomy, they had a similar attitude toward a cool as an uncool brand ( $M = 3.22$  vs.  $2.36$ ;  $F(1, 70) = 1.70$ , NS).

Next, we investigated whether desire to express autonomy similarly moderated attitudes toward brands seen as possessing a different valued identity trait: class. We compared attitudes toward using the brand considered classy with attitudes toward using the brand not considered classy with a 2 (class: yes, no)  $\times$  2 (context autonomy: desired more, desired less) repeated-measures analysis retaining only data from participants in the classy trait condition. The interaction in this analysis was not significant ( $F(1, 36) = 2.69$ , NS), indicating that the preference for a classy versus a nonclassy brand did not depend on participants' desire to express autonomy. As expected, participants preferred the classy brand to the nonclassy brand, both in situations in which they would want to express autonomy ( $M = 5.24$  vs.  $3.82$ ;  $F(1, 70) = 8.24$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and in situations in which they would not ( $M = 4.84$  vs.  $2.24$ ;  $F(1, 70) = 16.40$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Thus,

a desire to express autonomy influenced preferences for cool brands but not for classy brands.

*Discussion.* Study 5 demonstrated that consumers prefer cool brands only when they want to express an autonomous identity. In contexts that encourage autonomy expression, consumers preferred a cool brand more than an uncool brand and as much as a classy brand. Conversely, in contexts that encourage conformity, consumers did not prefer a cool brand to an uncool brand and preferred a classy brand to both. Thus, cool is not merely another way of saying something is desirable or liked. Although brands seen as cool are often preferred to brands seen as uncool, consumers are less likely to show this preference when they want to fit in.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

Understanding what makes things cool has puzzled academics and marketers alike. We address this question by empirically examining the relationship between autonomy and perceived coolness, finding that brands and people that diverge from the norm in a way that seems appropriate are perceived to be cool. Study 1 illustrates that consumers perceive a product whose design diverges from the norm to be cooler than a product whose design conforms to the norm both for a familiar, real brand (Starbucks) and for an unknown, fictitious brand (Sabbarrío). Studies 2, 3, 4a, and 4b illustrate that autonomous behavior only increases perceptions of coolness when the autonomy seems appropriate. Whether expressing autonomy seems appropriate, and thus cool or uncool, depends on the norm from which an object diverges. Study 2 shows that diverging from an illegitimate norm increases perceived coolness, but diverging from a legitimate norm has the opposite effect. Whether autonomy seems appropriate also depends on the extent to which an object diverges. Our studies reveal a curvilinear effect of autonomy on perceptions of coolness such that rock bands (study 3), fashion brands (study 4a), and people (study 4b) expressing moderate, “bounded” autonomy are considered cooler than both those expressing low autonomy and those expressing very high levels of autonomy. Further, the level of autonomy considered the coolest depends on the consumers evaluating the object. Studies 4a and 4b illustrate that countercultural consumers, who are critical of mainstream social institutions and thus more likely to consider autonomous behavior appropriate, perceive higher levels of autonomy to be cool compared to less countercultural consumers. Finally, study 5 affirms that cool is not merely another way of saying something is “good.” Although cool brands are often preferred to uncool brands, this is moderated by a consumer’s goal to signal autonomy versus to fit in. Collectively, the studies empirically support a conceptualization of coolness as a subjective, socially constructed positive trait attributed to cultural objects (e.g., people, brands, products, trends) perceived to be appropriately autonomous.

### How Do Perceptions of Coolness Change?

One limitation of the research presented is that it does not directly investigate the dynamic nature of coolness.

However, the finding that perceptions of appropriate autonomy lead to coolness and that countercultural consumers consider a higher level of autonomy appropriate may help explain where coolness originates and how cool trends diffuse and change over time. Cool trends typically begin when people and subcultures seen as removed from mainstream society enact a behavior that deviates from a mainstream norm (Belk et al. 2010). A broad reading of the literature suggests that such behaviors may originate in any subculture perceived to be autonomous from mainstream norms, including African Americans (Connor 1995; Leland 2004), teens (Danesi 1994; O’Donnell and Wardlow 2000), bohemians (Brooks 2000), musicians (Bird and Tapp 2008); beats (Mailer 1957), hippies (Frank 1997), punks (Hebdige 1979), ravers (Thornton 1996), mythologized communities like the imagined Western frontier (Holt 2004), or other subcultures in which people ignore or resist the constraints imposed by mainstream society.

Because consumers high in counterculturalism consider high levels of autonomy appropriate, we believe that they often ignite cool trends by adopting behaviors that are too divergent or too obscure to seem appropriate to the less countercultural masses. As consumers who are high in counterculturalism but outside the subculture begin to adopt the behavior, its autonomy seems less extreme, making it more appropriate and, hence, cooler in the eyes of the less countercultural masses. Eventually, the masses then begin adopting the behavior in an attempt to become cool themselves (Gladwell 1997). However, the widespread adoption causes the behavior to seem less autonomous (Berger 2008) and, consequently, lose its coolness, first among more countercultural consumers and eventually among less countercultural consumers. The originally cool behavior thus becomes the new norm and then is replaced by the next cool trend. For example, the band Green Day initially seemed highly autonomous due to its relative obscurity and close association with a punk subculture in the Bay Area. However, as Green Day’s critically acclaimed album *Dookie* spread to listeners outside of the local punk scene, they became cooler to a wider audience, including eventually even consumers lower in counterculturalism. At this time, consumers higher in counterculturalism, including many of the band’s original fans, accused Green Day of “selling out.” By the time *Dookie* sold 20 million copies, Green Day had completed a transformation from unknown to cool to pop.

Other times cultural objects have some characteristic or attribute that most consumers have difficulty considering appropriate. For example, in contrast to Green Day’s polished and catchy songs, punk band Minor Threat’s radical ideology, lo-fi recording, and rough vocal style prevented it from ever catching on with mainstream audiences. In cases like these, behaviors often remain cool within a small subculture that considers the divergent behavior appropriate without spreading to a more general population that considers the behavior too outrageous. For example, even 30 years after breaking up, Minor Threat remains cool in the eyes of punk subcultures but relatively unknown to the general public.

## Implications

An important implication of the subjective and dynamic nature of coolness is that cultivating a cool image may not be an optimal strategy for brands that want to sustain a position as a market leader rather than a niche player. Because coolness prompts diffusion but widespread adoption makes brands seem less autonomous, it is difficult for mass-market brands to sustain a high level of perceived coolness over time. It is also difficult, if not impossible, to seem cool to everybody simultaneously, as consumers differ in terms of which norms they consider legitimate and the level of autonomy they consider appropriate. Maintaining perceptions of coolness among more countercultural consumers requires acts that seem too autonomous to less countercultural consumers. For example, one possible reason why Harley Davidson motorcycles continue to be perceived as cool by more countercultural consumers is because most mainstream consumers think Harleys are inappropriately loud and obnoxious. Conversely, brands that portray a level of autonomy considered cool by less countercultural consumers, like Starbucks or the Gap, often seem too mainstream to more countercultural consumers (Thompson and Arsel 2004).

Our research also has interesting implications for public policy attempting to reduce risky behaviors, such as underage drinking, smoking, and drug use. The most common strategy to curb these behaviors is to tell people not to do them. For example, teens are told that drinking will get them arrested or that smoking cigarettes will give them cancer or that drugs are bad. This "just say no" strategy may actually exacerbate risky behaviors by making them seem autonomous and, thus, cool. A more effective strategy may be to position risky behaviors as mainstream or to associate them with conformity, as done in the successful "Truth" anti-smoking campaign.

## Limitations and Opportunities for Future Research

We limited the scope of our research to the relationship between autonomy and perceptions of coolness at a specific point in time. However, as previously discussed, perceptions of coolness change over time. A better understanding of how perceptions of coolness change is an important topic for future research. Additionally, the literature discusses a number of factors other than autonomy that potentially influence perceptions of coolness, including concealing emotion, cultural knowledge, narcissism, hedonism, or excitement (Leland 2004; Nancarrow, Nancarrow, and Page 2002; Pountain and Robins 2000; Southgate 2003). Another important objective for future research could be to empirically test whether and how such factors influence perceived coolness.

An additional opportunity for future research could be to more explicitly identify the different ways in which brands can express appropriate autonomy. Our studies and the literature suggest at least three behaviors that prompt inferences that a brand is autonomous. Because brand personalities are often inferred from physical features of the

product (Aggarwal and McGill 2007), one way for a brand to express autonomy is by creating products with unconventional product design, packaging, or attribute combinations. A second way a brand could express autonomy is through marketing communications, like the ad for the Roiku brand in study 2. There are many similar examples of real brands that have expressed autonomy through advertising headlines and slogans: Apple ("Think Different"), Adidas ("Celebrate Originality"), Jack Daniels ("We never follow the crowd. But they're always welcome to stop by"), and Tabasco ("We don't bother keeping up with the Joneses"). Because meaning often transfers from people to associated brands (McCracken 1986), a third way that brands can become autonomous is through association with people. Thus, the perceived autonomy of a brand can be influenced by the behavior of the brand's visible employees (e.g., Richard Branson and Virgin), endorsers (e.g., Snoop Dogg and Monster Energy Drink), and customers (e.g., snowboarders and Burton). Future research could explore whether expressing autonomy through one of these ways (e.g., an unusual product design) may be more likely to seem appropriate and cool than another (e.g., hiring a rebellious spokesperson).

Additionally, it would be helpful for future research to investigate whether coolness and the pursuit of coolness is limited to certain product and service categories or if coolness is potentially a relevant trait for all brands. For example, consumers may care more about acquiring cool brands for products consumed publicly (e.g., a car) rather than privately (e.g., a dishwasher) or for hedonic products (e.g., music) rather than utilitarian products (toothpaste). A related possibility is that coolness plays a more important role for products that consumers use to signal their identity (e.g., clothing) than products that are not seen as identity signals (e.g., dish soap; Berger and Heath 2007). Because our studies typically used public, hedonic products in categories that consumers frequently use as identity signals (e.g., fashion, music, beverages), the extent to which our results generalize to other product and service categories remains unclear.

Another limitation is that our research investigates perceptions of coolness exclusively in Western consumers, who tend to be individualistic and hold a model of agency that suggests it is better to control the environment than to try to adjust to fit within it (Markus and Schwartz 2010; Oyserman, Coon, and Kimmelmeier 2002). In contrast, consumers from collectivistic cultures are more likely to believe that it is better to adjust one's self to fit within the environment than to try to control it (Markus and Schwartz 2010; Oyserman et al. 2002). It is unclear whether such cultural differences will merely alter consumers' perceptions of what is normal and which norms are legitimate or whether they will fundamentally alter the relationship between autonomy and perceived coolness or between perceived coolness and preference. These too are important questions that could be addressed in future research.

Another interesting question, which our research only tangentially addresses, is why has coolness become so ubiquitous? Cool has been part of the popular vocabulary in the

United States since at least the 1950s (Belk et al. 2010; Pountain and Robins 2000), and, although the objects considered cool vary, the term has spread beyond the United States and is now used similarly in a variety of cultures (Allison 2009; Belk et al. 2010; Gurrieri 2009). The persistence and proliferation of coolness suggests that it may serve some kind of social function. One possibility, consistent with the finding that appropriate autonomy leads to perceptions of coolness, is that coolness serves as a reward to incentivize socially beneficial change. By bringing status and esteem to people and brands that diverge from the norm in an appropriate way, the pursuit of coolness may encourage them to innovate, take risks, and challenge potentially outdated norms. In this sense, coolness may offer an alternative social hierarchy providing status to those whose behavior offers an appropriate alternative to the status quo rather than exclusively to those with wealth or a prestigious family background (Heath and Potter 2004). The notion that coolness encourages socially acceptable change may help explain why the growth of coolness in public discourse has coincided with an increasing demand for independence and creativity in the marketplace (Brooks 2000; Florida 2002). It may also explain why cool brands appear to be especially valued in product categories characterized by high levels of innovation (e.g., high tech) and stylistic change (e.g., fashion, music).

Grossman (2003, 2) describes coolness as “an invisible, impalpable substance that can make a particular brand of an otherwise interchangeable product . . . fantastically valuable.” Despite the recognized importance of cultivating cool brands, quantitative research on antecedents of coolness

has been limited. By showing that brands (and people) become cool by being different in an appropriate way, our research provides a better understanding of this important aspect of consumer behavior. We hope that our work inspires continued research on the important question of what makes things cool.

## DATA COLLECTION INFORMATION

We collected the data for each study as follows. Study 1 pretest: collected online by a survey panel service under the supervision of both authors in August and September 2012. The first author analyzed the data. Study 1: collected online through Amazon’s mTurk under the supervision of both authors in August 2013. The first author analyzed the data. Study 2: collected online through Amazon’s mTurk under the supervision of the first author in August 2013. The first author analyzed the data. Study 3: collected online through Amazon’s mTurk under the supervision of the first author in December 2010 and January 2011. The first author analyzed the data. Study 4a: collected at the Behavioral Research Lab at the University of Colorado, Boulder, in April 2010 by research assistants under the supervision of the second author. The first author analyzed the data. Study 4b: collected in a classroom at the University of Colorado, Boulder, by the first author in April and May 2009. The first author analyzed the data. Study 5 (both pretest and focal study): collected at the Behavioral Research Lab at the University of Colorado, Boulder, in April 2010 by research assistants under the supervision of the second author. The first author analyzed the data.

## APPENDIX

TABLE A1

SCALE ITEMS

|  | Item  |
|--|---|
| Attitude: study 1 pretest (1–7)                            | I like the design.  |
|  | I would want to drink water from a bottle like this.  |
| Divergence: study 1 pretest (1–7)                          | The design is different from the norm.  |
|  | The design is unique.   |
|  | The design shows independence.  |
| Autonomy: studies 2 (1–7), 3 (1–5), 4a (1–5), and 4b (1–7) | Lives how it/they/she (hereafter, “it”) wants to live whether or not it pleases others.                 |
|  | Doesn’t do things just to fit in.   |
|  | Pays little attention to established social norms or conventions.                                       |
|  | Rarely caves into social pressure.  |
|  | Doesn’t change who it is to suit others.  |
|  | Breaks rules when it feels like it.   |
| Counterculturalism: studies 4a (1–5) and 4b (1–5)          | Rules and conventions often overly restrict people’s freedom.   |
|  | Society traps people by restricting individual autonomy and independence.                               |
|  | Large institutions like corporations and the government exert too much control over our everyday lives. |
|  | Many of the problems in society are caused by overly restrictive norms and conventions.                 |
|  | Authority is usually a bad thing.   |
|  | Society has far too many rules and conventions.   |
| Legitimacy: study 2 (1–7)                                  | The norm seems reasonable.  |
|  | There is a good reason for people to follow this norm.  |
|  | The norm seems beneficial for the Ballai society.   |
|  | In general, the norm seems legitimate.  |

NOTE.—Scale range in parentheses.

**TABLE A2**

STUDY 2 STIMULI

|                                  | Description   |
|----------------------------------|---|
| Low autonomy, legitimate norm    | <p>Ballai is a small, foreign city-state. Most citizens of Ballai wear white clothes on Masakha Day, the city's primary holiday. Masakha Day commemorates the men and women who sacrificed lives in order to protect Ballai from foreign invaders. Citizens are expected to wear blue in order to honor fallen soldiers. The act of wearing blue helps the country remember and thank those who sacrificed themselves for the safety of others.</p> <p>Roiku recently created an advertising campaign in which the brand endorsed the norm by encouraging consumers to wear blue on Masakha Day.</p>    |
| Low autonomy, illegitimate norm  | <p>Ballai is a small, foreign city-state. Most citizens of Ballai wear white clothes on Masakha Day, the city's primary holiday. Masakha Day celebrates the glory and the power of the city's corrupt dictator. Citizens are expected to wear white in order to pay tribute to the dictator. The act of wearing white helps bolster the ego and pride of the city's corrupt leader.</p> <p>Roiku recently created an advertising campaign in which the brand endorsed the norm by encouraging consumers to wear blue on Masakha Day.</p>  |
| High autonomy, legitimate norm   | <p>Ballai is a small, foreign city-state. Most citizens of Ballai wear white clothes on Masakha Day, the city's primary holiday. Masakha Day commemorates the men and women who sacrificed lives in order to protect Ballai from foreign invaders. Citizens are expected to wear blue in order to honor fallen soldiers. The act of wearing blue helps the country remember and thank those who sacrificed themselves for the safety of others.</p> <p>Roiku recently created an advertising campaign in which the brand parted from the norm by encouraging consumers to wear blue on Masakha Day.</p> |
| High autonomy, illegitimate norm | <p>Ballai is a small, foreign city-state. Most citizens of Ballai wear white clothes on Masakha Day, the city's primary holiday. Masakha Day celebrates the glory and the power of the city's corrupt dictator. Citizens are expected to wear white in order to pay tribute to the dictator. The act of wearing white helps bolster the ego and pride of the city's corrupt leader.</p> <p>Roiku recently created an advertising campaign in which the brand parted from the norm by encouraging consumers to wear blue on Masakha Day.</p>   |

**TABLE A3**

STUDY 4A STIMULI

|                   | Description  |
|-------------------|--|
| Low autonomy      | <p>Baraccio/Ero/Setia/Solle [hereafter designated as <i>X</i>] follows the market to design coats/sunglasses/shoes/watches [hereafter designated as <i>products</i>] that fit mainstream tastes. There is nothing atypical or controversial about <i>X products</i>. <i>X</i> is concerned with gaining the approval of mainstream consumers and tries hard to follow the norm so it will be liked and accepted.</p> |
| Moderate autonomy | <p><i>X</i> usually conforms to popular styles. That said, the brand is not a slave to convention. <i>X</i> occasionally does its own thing and designs <i>products</i> that are slightly unusual. However, the brand is careful never to stray too far from the expectations and tastes of the average consumer.</p>  |
| High autonomy     | <p><i>X</i> often defies industry standards by creating <i>products</i> that are edgy and unique. <i>X</i> is irreverent and sometimes rebellious. Although it usually does its own thing, <i>X</i> is careful not to produce <i>products</i> that are so deviant that they seem strange or extremely odd.</p>   |
| Extreme autonomy  | <p><i>X</i> is a rebellious and controversial brand. Their <i>products</i> are radically different than other brands. <i>X</i> shows contempt for rules and a complete disregard for marketplace opinion. <i>X</i> and its employees do what they want whether or not it pleases others.</p>   |

TABLE A4  
STUDY 4B STIMULI

|                   | Description  |
|-------------------|--|
| Low autonomy      | Amber Johnson understood that society expects people to display “typical” manners, engage (and not engage) in certain behaviors, and pursue particular types of goals. Amber was well aware of society’s code, and she always conformed to it. She rarely would assert her independence or do her own thing. For example, Amber never wore unusual hairstyles or dressed differently than others. Although there were times she disagreed with the government, her boss, or her parents, she didn’t protest against these or other authorities. After she finished college, Amber moved to the city where she has become part of a larger community and regularly interacts with other people.                   |
| Moderate autonomy | Amber Johnson understood that society expects people to display “typical” manners, engage (and not engage) in certain behaviors, and pursue particular types of goals. Amber was well aware of society’s code, and she usually conformed to it. Although there were times she disagreed with the government, her boss, or her parents, she didn’t protest against these or other authorities. However, Amber occasionally would assert her independence and do her own thing. For example, she often wore unusual hairstyles and dressed differently than others. After she finished college, Amber moved to the city where she has become part of a larger community and regularly interacts with other people. |
| High autonomy     | Amber Johnson understood that society expects people to display “typical” manners, engage (and not engage) in certain behaviors, and pursue particular types of goals. Amber was well aware of society’s code, and she rarely conformed to it. She usually would assert her independence and do her own thing. For example, Amber often wore unusual hairstyles and dressed differently than others. There were times she disagreed with the government, her boss, or her parents and would engage in protests against these or other authorities. After she finished college, Amber moved to the city where she has become part of a larger community and regularly interacts with other people.                |
| Extreme autonomy  | Amber Johnson understood that society expects people to display “typical” manners, engage (and not engage) in certain behaviors, and pursue particular types of goals. Amber was well aware of society’s code, and she never conformed to it. She always would assert her independence and do her own thing. Amber often wore unusual hairstyles and dressed differently than others. There were times she disagreed with the government, her boss, or her parents and would engage in protests against these or other authorities. After she finished college, Amber moved into the wilderness where she now lives in isolation and avoids interaction with other people.                                       |

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