

Cool

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In recent years the term “cool” has increasingly become a universal phenomenon, the ideal language of popular (and youth) culture, and a source of constant innovation. Arguably, it has had an important influence on many institutions, from media and education to the real estate market and the economy itself.

The word “cool” was apparently first used by the jazz saxophonist Lester Young (1909–59). This predominantly black jazz scene in the United States, and among expatriate musicians in Paris, helped popularize notions of cool in America in the 1940s, giving birth to Bohemian, or Beatnik, culture. Through the 1950s, “cool” was reified in American literature for example, in one of the most penetrating studies of the hipster, *The White Negro* (1957). In this essay, Norman Mailer asserted that the only way to resist conformity was by being a hipster, whose tastes for jazz, sex, drugs, and black slang and mores were distinctly cool. Interestingly, the 1960s and 1970s anti-establishment, hedonistic movements of the United States were symbolized by the adoption of hippy fashion, which also heralded the adoption of cool by the masses. Throughout the 1970s, in fact, the moral world of hippies and counterculturalists evolved into a form of revolution that was more personal, practical, and immediate, a revolution played out in the practice of everyday life, most notably Binkley’s *Getting Loose* (2007). Here, the trajectory of the counterculture was not something to be fought for, but something to be relaxed “in the moment,”

a philosophy of life, and the practicing of a looser and more “authentic” way of living. Thus, cool became a global phenomenon which morphed into the broader popular culture. Indeed, as this process penetrated into larger social practices, it commanded the attention of more conventional social and economic power, converting liberationist desire into more established modes, most insidiously consumption.

Cool, as a cultural category in its own right, apparently has no single meaning, and the idea of “coolness” falls into different categories (e.g., language, self-presentation, artistic expression, values, attitudes). Indeed, cool is not something that is inherent in artifacts themselves, but rather in people’s attitude toward them. The clothing designer Levi Strauss found out the hard way that cool is not an intrinsic property woven into the blue denim of its jeans: it was the way that their wearers perceived Levi’s that made them cool, and within a few years that perception would be imperceptibly stolen away by Calvin Klein and Tommy Hilfiger. What originally made Levi’s cool in the 1950s was that they were garments associated with the working classes, and for a middle-class kid to wear them symbolized an act of rebellion. Once an expression of rebellion, as offered by glamorous terrorists, gangsters, and wasted rock musicians, as Pountain and Robins (2000) state, cool came to depict, in fact, a “murky and contradictory” image: “on the one hand, it is egalitarian and hedonistic in temperament. On the other hand, it is fascinated by violence, drugs and criminality and mesmerized by the sight of naked power” (p. 178).

Cool is now very much linked to commodities and the aesthetics of designer labels

and niche brands. As faith in the revolutionary potential of “authentic” counterculture combined with the development of a new ideology of consumption, cool became the language of advertising and thus entered the mainstream as a marketing strategy. The determination of what is cool oscillates between peer judgments and conceptions and corporate promotion. In a March 1997 *New York Times* article, Malcolm Gladwell unveiled the triumphant circularity of “cool hunting” – that is, the search for authenticity among the urban poor by marketers, cultural reporters, or style runners – in which the act of discovering what is cool is itself what causes cool to take flight. Such a phenomenon represents a closed loop, whereby not only can the uncool not see cool but cool cannot even be adequately described by them. A special mix of six characteristics, compiled by Superbrands (UK) Ltd., included style, innovation, originality, desirability, uniqueness, and “authenticity” as components of cool that were recognized and adjudicated by people from the “street,” who supposedly can spot trends well ahead of marketers.

While authenticity has been understood as the truest hallmark of cool behavior,

Thornton’s analysis of the dance music scene (1995), for instance, focuses more on the exclusivity of cool, whereby authenticity is used to express superior taste and disdain for the mainstream. Urgently seeking cool for their products, businesses, services, and advertising, they are themselves prime exponents of the cool lifestyle. They are what French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1984) referred to as cultural intermediaries.

SEE ALSO: Authenticity; Consumption and Identity; Coolhunting; Cultural Intermediaries; Fashion; Popular Culture; Youth Culture(s)

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