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Self-categorization Theory and Perception of Coolness. An explorative study among British Teenagers

Teoria della categorizzazione del sé e percezione della *coolness* del brand. Uno studio esplorativo tra gli adolescenti inglesi

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ABSTRACT

Brand coolness and "being cool" are two issues which potentially face companies marketing to teens and young consumers. In the current economic instability even teenagers have received a cut in their personal allowances and parent's expenditures have become more restrained. Thus, being attractive for consumers by maintaining a "cool" image through a good positioning strategy is potentially one of the main aims of youth marketers in order to facilitate long term survival. The present study will offer a report from an exploratory research based on a series of semi structured interviews on teens' perspectives on brand coolness. Results suggest that teens describe their ideal "cool" or "uncool" brands on the basis of different elements: while coolness is more related to specific product features, what it is uncool is instead associated to self and group categorization elements. This result is consistent also in other topics like advertising and music. A review of the theoretical underpinnings of coolness is also provided, moving from its historical origins to the latest developments.
Keywords: self-categorization theory; *coolness*; teens; consumer behaviour.

RIASSUNTO

La "coolness" del brand e "l'essere cool" sono due temi che potenzialmente affrontano le aziende che si rivolgono con i loro prodotti agli adolescenti e ai giovani consumatori. Nell'attuale periodo di crisi economica anche gli adolescenti hanno visto ridursi le loro "paghette" personali e le spese dei genitori sono diventate più restrittive. Pertanto, uno degli obiettivi principali del marketing rivolto ai giovani è quello di facilitare la sopravvivenza a lungo termine di un prodotto o di una marca, attraverso una buona strategia di posizionamento che mantenga un'immagine "cool." La presente ricerca esplorativa si basa su una serie di interviste semi-strutturate condotte con adolescenti sulla "coolness" delle marche. I risultati indicano che gli adolescenti descrivono le loro marche "cool" o "uncool" ideali in base a diversi elementi: mentre la "coolness" è più correlata a specifiche caratteristiche del prodotto, ciò che è uncool è invece associato agli elementi di categorizzazione del sé e del gruppo. Questo risultato è coerente anche se la "coolness" si riferisce anche ad altri aspetti del consumo, come la pubblicità e la musica. Viene inoltre fornita una revisione dei fondamenti teorici della "coolness", dalle sue origini storiche agli sviluppi più recenti.
Parole chiave: teoria della categorizzazione del sé, *coolness*, adolescenti, comportamenti di consumo.

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Introduction

Especially among young people, the quest for coolness seems to be really developed, as being cool can be a practical shortcut to facilitate both self-esteem enhancement and social acceptance (Danesi, 1994; Belk et al., 2010). This age group is even significant for firms since it is estimated that in up to 80% of all brand choices, (including the ones operated in the familial context), teens control the final decision (Lindstrom and Seybold, 2004).

Nevertheless, despite the extensive use of attributes like "cool" and "coolness" to address brands and this concept has become popular within general culture, little research has been published on this topic in scholarly journals. For example, it is still vague which dimensions underlie coolness and which of them differentiate a cool brand from an uncool one. Moreover, little is known about the psychological elements behind these definitions.

The present study tries to extend previous research investigating which characteristics are relevant in teenagers' preference and how they contribute to the attribution of coolness. This paper aims also to facilitate the knowledge about what could be useful in the construction of a better brand image (Keller, 1993). Furthermore, this study links coolness to the construct self-categorization (Turner, et al., 1987; Brewer, 1991) and its development through consumption practices, taking into consideration the "transient" and often unstable nature of preferences during adolescence.

Theoretical Background and Research Propositions
Cooless

In the current marketing scenario companies are more and more hiring marketing researchers also known as "coolhunters" (Gladwell 1997) in order to understand and exploit the factors that make a brand "cool" in consumers' minds, acknowledging the fact that the nature of this quality is extremely evanescent. Nairn and Mayo (2009) point out that research so far seems not to having gathered deep insights of this concept, falling inevitably in biased findings. In other words coolness consists, for some extent, of a mysterious nature that surrounds objects, which tend to vanish when someone is looking for it.

Coolness has been studied in the past by scholars from different disciplines, such as semiotics (Danesi, 1994), cultural studies (Osumare, 2005), psychology (Dar Nimrod et al., 2012) and of course advertising and marketing (Frank, 1997; Nancarrow et. al, 2002; Warren and Campbell, 2014). These different viewpoints have indeed suggested a number of antecedents for the concept, which are nonetheless contradictory. For instance, while according to some researchers coolness derives from the ability of controlling emotional display (Connor, 1995; Pountain and Robins, 2000; Belk et al., 2010), for others it is a direct consequence of the exhibition of excitement and pleasure (Leland, 2004; Murthy and Hodis, 2010). Other elements, on which researchers seem to converge instead, include conformity, mimicry and belongingness (Danesi, 1994; O'Donnell and Wardlow, 2000; Pountain and Robins, 2000). On this last component, Pountain and Robins (2000) point out how the term "cool" assumes a particular meaning in the early decades the 20th Century in the United States, where it was employed within the afro communities as common jargon to denote the membership status to the "blacks" in opposition to what was considered the "white" culture.

On a more general level, O'Donnell and Wardlow (2000) argue that coolness is based on a set of shared meanings (such as language, attitudes, values) established within a group to signify affiliation of its members. These aspects encompass two conditions: the first is that people have to be part of a given group and to conform to its shared norms in order to be perceived as cool; the second regards the presence of one or more groups that differ from the one of belonging, which plays a comparative role.

This engenders two conditions: 1) to safeguard and strengthen the relationship among members of the *in-group*, intended as a social group in which a person psychologically identifies; 2) creating an opposite point of reference that is commonly regarded as external and far from the core norms of the group, known as *out-group* (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). Furthermore the discrepancy among the groups contributes in shaping the characteristics that distinguish what it is cool for the in-group as a reverse of what is cool for the out-group. In other words, there is the need, of an "uncool" counterpart in order to boost in-group's own coolness (Belk et al., 2010). Based on this

dichotomy and on the consequential categorization reasoning, individuals attribute cool characteristic to objects, experiences and persons that more resemble their own in-group.

Social Identities and self-categorization theory

Categorization processes are fundamental for human beings as they assist the organization and the structure of their knowledge about the surrounding world (Bodenhausen et. al, 2012). Individuals acquire the ability of arranging objects in categories since the early stages of childhood (Gelman, 2003), learning first to differentiate between genders, age, ethnicity and roles. During their infancy kids develop inferences on social distinctions; they can distinguish whether somebody belongs to a richer vs. a poorer background, if somebody is on a higher level of hierarchy in a job context or whether a job is typically "for men" or "for women". These basic skills can be maintained on the determination of categories of individuals and groups even during later stages of their lives (Patterson and Bigler, 2006).

According to the self-categorization theory (Turner et al., 1987) social categories are implemented to make sense of the structure among groups of individuals. Categories are based on a series of characteristics (such as status, dressing codes or possessions) that provide implicit clues about goals and values shared by the members of a given group, often resulting in a prototypical representation (Reid and Hogg, 2005). This reductive approach helps individuals constructing a simple and ordered structure of the world around them leading, sometimes, to a series of perceptive biases.

First, individuals tend to perceive members of a social group as interchangeable one with the others. This propensity is called *depersonalization* and involves the belief that all the members of a given group (including their own in-group) embody exactly the same values and they engage in the same behaviours. This encompasses a stronger attachment and sense of belonging among members of the same group, but leads at the same time to a stereotypical misperception of all the other groups that individuals might encounter. For instance, all black people are good at basketball, all Italians make a large use of gestures while talking or all women are not good at maths (Reynolds and Turner, 2006).

Second, a characteristic named *functional antagonism*, that is the affirmation of one identity through the high differentiation from other groups, plays a major role in identity definition as stated in the definition of coolness. Groups reinforce their identities as opponents of other groups and establish contentions (no matter if according to political, ideological or ethical reasons) in order to commensurate their skills opposed to those of their adversaries. As an example Republicans in the United States strengthen their identity even because they oppose Democrats or Manchester United supporters state their values also as opposed to the Manchester City's ones (Alabastro et al., 2013).

During puberty and the early adolescence self-categorization abilities increase exponentially, as the level of cognitive development allows individuals to make inferences based on underlying features and relationship are contextualized in a social universe (Selman, 1980; Banerjee, 2011). Groups provide a sense of security for individuals and an enhancement of the individual self-esteem (Ford and Tonander, 1998). At the same time they help teens putting order in a new universe passing from the egocentric vision of the world typical of the child to the more socially oriented and interconnected life of the adolescent, developing social identities. During adolescence the biased perception brought by self-categorization seems to be even stronger than during the later stages of development, due to the high importance that social influence has in shaping teens decisions (Mangleburg et al., 2004; Valente et al., 2005). Teens therefore tend to conform to the prototype of their group, adopting norms and customs embedded in the group culture, determining throughout the generations which practices members must maintain or reject.

Self-categorization, brands and coolness

Teens express their group identities through an array of elements such as preferences in music, body and verbal language and consumption of specific products and brands that match the collective identity of the group itself (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; Berger and Heath, 2008; White et al., 2012).

Brands bring with themselves implicit associations (Keller, 1993; 2003) and personalities (Aaker, 1997), and like human beings they develop relationships among each other (Fournier, 1998; Escalas and Bettman, 2003). Teenagers are well aware of these constellations of elements (John, 1999) and they make use of them to assess their own identities through the use of products and models (McCracken, 1986). At the same time, they avoid brands that don't fit their own idea of self or that are commonly rejected by their peer group, especially stressing their attention on clothing and apparel elements (Badaoui et al., 2012). They therefore develop brand schemas that influence information processing about the prototypical consumer and his behaviour (Puligadda et al., 2012). These schemas facilitate the organization of new information, storing and classifying them in a more accessible way in individuals' memory and activating associations between brands and the characteristics of their users and vice versa. Consumers' prototypes determine the adoption of one or more brands within a group of teens, preferring those that make themselves similar and fused with their in-group and diverse from the out-groups at the same time (Piacentini and Mailer, 2004; Isaksen and Roper, 2012).

As Danesi (1994) suggests, the engagement of individuals in these consumption preferences and habits contribute to assess their uniqueness from other teens, in accordance to the functional antagonism introduced by self-categorization theory. The adoption of certain practices determines also what it is cool or not and consequentially who is cool or uncool. The determination of coolness in products and brands among teens depends, therefore, on their group of belonging and on the identity they want to communicate or they do not want to be associated with.
Following this assumption and self-categorization theory it is also possible to predict that teens tend to depersonalize themselves and members of the other groups on the basis of the products and brands consumed, using the broader "cool" and "uncool" labels to indicate in-group and out-group belonging.

This paper investigates the role of self-categorization in teenagers' perception of coolness in brands. In detail this research aims at understanding which factors are considered cool by teens as well as what makes a brand uncool in their eyes. This approach perception might be considered not only functional to understand the dynamics involving brand and product positioning, but also to uncover how teens structure their initial consumption preference and how they evolve and influence social relationship during their development.
Based on the existent literature on self-categorization two main propositions have been formulated
P1: In their definition of *coolness,* teens will refer to generally accepted attributes of their social in-group.
P2: When they define what it is *uncool*, teens will use more elements related to undesirable identities and social out-group users.

Methodology

To address the research propositions we conducted a series of semi-structured interviews to broaden the investigation to other contexts (such as advertising, bands and holidays). We use this methodological tool to provide a sufficient balance between a rigorous structure and the capacity of probing new data that might have not be considered in the planning stage (Bryman, 2012). Twelve interviews were conducted with British teens aged between 11 and 14 years old. Participants were selected on the basis of a convenient sample, basing the data collection in different geographical areas of one of the biggest cities in the United Kingdom. Consent forms from parents and teens were obtained before the interview started and the data collection complied with the ethical recommendations as in the exploratory design.

The topics of the interviews comprehended a general definition of what it is perceived as cool and uncool, a description of one of the latest cool product they have purchased or asked somebody else to purchase, an advertisement and a band they considered cool and, lastly, one of the latest holiday experiences they had that they can define as cool.

The interviews were conducted and recorded by one interviewer and lasted from a minimum of 21 minutes to a maximum of 1 hour and 32 minutes. After transcription the content was subjected

to thematic analysis, dividing manually the data by questions and by themes. After all the coding procedures were undertaken, results were shown to two researchers who were not participating in the study for an external opinion of the appropriateness of the identified categories. No particular problems emerged during this cross validation phase.

Results

The following sections provide summary of the relevant aspects of self-categorization theory in relation to the definitions of coolness and uncoolness. Direct quotes from the interviews are used to exemplify the findings.

Coolness can fade quickly

A common theme found across the interviews is that coolness is generally very evanescent and does not stay very long attached to a brand or to an object, especially when the cool status is very salient (Mayo and Nairn, 2009).

L1 (Female, 13): Look at the Eastpak [bags] for example… Before EVERYONE had that bag…the small one…like a backpack
Researcher: What happened then?
L1 (Female, 13): Dunno… they disappeared. PUFF! [*makes a gesture like something bursting*].
Researcher: Do you think people don't like Eastpak anymore?
L1 (Female, 13): Mmmm… dunno…. They possibly like it… but it's not cool to bring it at school or out. It was last year….not now.
Researcher: So you said you were using a Blackberry before…
L2 (Male, 14): Yup. Was mee dad' one.
Researcher: Now instead you said you have a Samsung
L2 (Male, 14): Yup.
Researcher: How come? Did the other one break at some point?
L2 (Male, 14): No no… it's fine. It's somewhere in mee room. But it was old…. Nobody has it anymore. You said about cool…that's not!
Researcher: How long did you use the Blackberry for?
L2 (Male, 14): mmmm… don't know…. Two months… three… not sure.

It is interesting to observe how coolness influences teens' evaluation about product lifecycle duration. A brand that was perceived as cool and desired for long might become not worth of interest after a short period of time, maybe in favour of a new trend. This can happen not only to brands and objects, but also to music artists and bands.

G1 (Male, 13): In the very beginning X-Factor was cool…. I mean, lots of different music…. Then they became very standard. They realize everyone watches it and that's it. Boring!
Researcher: Are you a fan of any band at the moment?
G1 (Male, 13): Not of one in particular… I mean: Florence [*and the Machine*] is nice. But again… depends on the songs. I am annoyed when everyone sings the same songs around you… or they try to whistle them…. SO annoying!
Researcher: Why you are annoyed about this?
G1 (Male, 13): Cuz they maybe don't know the band or they know only that song. They just repeat cuz they listen this from somebody else.

It is possible to identify in this exert an element of group categorization on the basis of competences and norms related to the early abandonment of taste (Danesi, 1994; O'Donnell and Wardlow, 2000). A band or a song stops being cool as somebody who is not considered an expert mimics it just because it is trendy. Moreover, an element of narcissism (Pountain and Robbins, 2000) is linked to this conceptualization of coolness, with a real perception of "being offended" when individuals that

are considered extraneous to a topic (in term of competences or cultural background) adopt habits that are relevant for different individuals and their in-group.

Different levels of abstraction in coolness perception

In relation to the depersonalization dimension of the self-categorization theory, teens often make reference to groups for explaining why a product, a brand or a band is cool. However, this happens on different levels of abstraction, starting from personal and intimate motives to a more overarching category.

L3 (Male, 13): I think 50 Cents [*an American Rapper*] is very cool…
Researcher: Why you think he is cool?
L3 (Male, 13): It makes me feel good. And my buddies in my class listen to his songs. We like to sing along in the bus or in the streets.

Researcher: Which kind of products do you think are very cool at the moment?
V1 (Female, 12): I think those jeans that are very very tight on your legs are cool
Researcher: Is there a particular reason?
V1 (Female, 12): It's what people like me like.
Researcher: What do you mean by "like you?"
V1 (Female, 12): Like me…. Young like me
Researcher: Basically you mean young to say other teens?
V1 (Female, 12): Mmmm…. Depends. I would say 12 [*years old*] like me.

In the first case the determination of coolness is assessed through a narrower level of abstraction and fusion, a small group of peers using an element like a song or an artist to form a community. In the second case the level of depersonalization is higher and includes the entire concept of being in a "young" generation. When probed about the concept of young age, the definition is put on a narrower level indicating a particular cohort, as closer to the general experience for comparative fit (Haslam et al., 2011). In other words, elements of coolness can be categorized at different levels of the self, starting from a very intimate condition like "it makes me feel good", to pass to a narrow circle of peers ("my buddies") to an entire cohort ("people 12 years old like me") till an overarching category ("young people").

The uncool – group bias

On a similar note, when asked about what it is uncool, teens produce a series of evaluations that connect with an undesirable out-group bias.

F1 (Male, 14): The sporty stuff can be very uncool.
Researcher: Do you mean sport brands and products? Why you think so?
F1 (Male, 14): yup… sporty stuff like trousers, hoodies… they are very chavvy. You look really bad if you dress like that

E1: (Female, 12): I have seen an ad of Lynx in which there was a guy that was chased by loads of girls… It is cool for males not for us. Girls seem stupid there.

In the two interview extracts above, teens express their perception of uncoolness referring to a social and a gender group respectively. In the first case, the link between the sport brands and chavs. This is related to the definition of "chav", a term of British slang which indicates a "popular reconfiguration of the underclass idea" (Hayward and Yard, 2006, p.10).
Interestingly, the second example addresses an advertisement as uncool due to its particular positioning (a deodorant target to males) but also due to the particular stereotype of the women involved in the ad.

This is in line with the literature about cognitive development of gender roles (Martin et al., 2002), which states how gender stereotypes start very early in children development to find their peak during puberty and adolescence in order to support the development of personal identity and self-esteem (Bussey and Bandura, 1998). Age constitutes another relevant category to define what it is cool and what it is not, especially in a transitional stage like adolescence.

J1 (Male, 13): Justin Bieber is super uncool. His songs suck and he is childish.... and people listening to him are babies. I mean, sir…. Have you seen any his concerts? I think the oldest kid there is 10!
Researcher: So who do you think plays good music?
J1 (Male, 13): I would say all the others. Rap music is cool. It's more for us…I mean, older than 10 or 11 [*laughs*].

As the condition of the individual identity is unstable during the years of adolescence, it appears fundamental to differentiate them from the previous stage of childhood and assess their own personality (Lee, 2001). This may lead to judge uncool behaviours and habits that seem connect them back to their child life, such as doing certain games, wearing a range of clothes and shoes or having some musical tastes rather than others.

Discussion and Conclusions

Companies have sought for many years a way of staying cool on the market and win competition (Gladwell, 1997; Dar Nimrod et al. 2012). Notwithstanding the fact this quest has been faced using different approaches and a great amount of money has been spent by firms to understand the factors that influence brand coolness, there seems no agreement on how coolness can be conceptualized, measured and manipulated. This research tries to focus on the combination between business elements and psychological processes that happen between the individual and its relevant groups.

Specifically, the study presented was aimed to investigate how coolness can be shaped by belonging to a particular group with the choice of a set of core values that can be exploited to reinforce collective and individual identity. This finds full accomplishment in the expression of particular codes in dressing (Jamison, 2006) attitudes (Dar Nimrod et al., 2012) and musical taste (Belk et al. 2010) within the groups.

This paper advances the understanding of coolness applying Self-categorization theory to teens' consumer behaviour. Results show how coolness and uncoolness are constructed on different levels.

This study supports the relationship between group identity and coolness through different level of belongingness and depersonalization with the group. It seems, therefore, that teens use two levels of evaluation for coolness: a *surface level* that is more accessible to their mind (related to the perceptual features of products and brands; Zhang and Sood, 2002) and a *deep level* more interconnected with a social dimension.

Concerning uncoolness, instead, teens show a relationship with individual characteristics (such as gender or age) as well as social groups (like *chavs*). These results highlight the distinction that teens tend to interpose between themselves and their relevant group on one side and groups they consider extraneous on the other.

Limitations and future research

This study has a number of limitations and consequent directions for future research. First of all our sample is limited and not inclusive of other social backgrounds, such as lower income teens, who can have different brand repertoires and relevant concept of coolness, also dictated by their group belongingness. Secondly, this investigation covers a broad number of marketing sectors; a more specific analysis could enhance the quality of the findings and give new insights to practitioners.

Lastly, understanding in depth individual and collective inferences about coolness and the dynamics of their interactions (for example understanding how individual inference about what is cool are biased by the group and vice versa) can be the next step for the development of a broader theoretical approach for studying this phenomenon.

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