

Cool

MARIA ANGELA POLESANA

IULM International University of Languages and Media, Italy

Cool is a semantically complex English term, characterized by many variations. Literally it means “somewhat cold” and so suggests a comfortable and pleasant temperature but, if related to people and actions, it suggests detachment and self-control.

“Cool” is not actually a recent phenomenon, even though it is very popular nowadays and in the last century has become more colorful by taking on other attributes which have made it so popular in the common language. Effectively, the term “cool” has a long history, as its roots can be traced back to African civilization and in particular to the “itutu” concept. In the religious philosophy of Yoruba (an ethnic-linguistic group from western Africa) it defines a series of positive behavioral features like self-control, composure, detachment, beauty, and inner peace (Thompson, 1974, 1984). The itutu “cool” philosophy arrived in America with slavery and then developed into a defense mechanism used by African Americans to cope with exploitation and discrimination. It became a sort of detachment employed in order to bear orders and insults without giving in to anger, which was liable to punishment (Majors and Mancini Billson, 1992; Connor, 1995; Poutain and Robins, 2000).

From the end of the 1940s, the meaning of “controlled and relaxed in style” was used to define jazz music and then both jazz musicians and all those who listened to “cool” music. In the 1950s the term acquired an increasingly active dimension and in the 1960s became synonymous with “protest against social inequalities” in hippie jargon. In these years of economic boom cool became more and more related to the media and consumer industries. The youth subcultures used coolness as a tool of distinction from the cultural mainstream to reject their rules. Therefore, cool

has a conflicted dimension that combines symbolic protest against the dominant values with a clear distinction and expression of one’s own individuality. Trendsetting industries picked up these subcultural manifestations of coolness and turned them into marketable goods, establishing an even deeper relationship between cool and consumerism.

Today “cool” is part of the common language, not only in the Anglo-Saxon world, and is used both in daily life and in advertising and popular culture. Elements such as authenticity, self-expression, trendsetting, and self-confidence are all attributed to the term cool. In fact “cool” often identifies itself with cultural superstars, who are not only charismatic but also authentic, independent, rebellious, and represent social revolutions: James Dean, Madonna, Jimi Hendrix, Patti Smith.

Apple’s iPad for instance represents an interesting and specific example of coolness, because it combines its mass diffusion with the perception of being an exclusive and niched item. Apple’s payoff itself, “think different,” expresses a maverick attitude. However, we should acknowledge that “cool” is not material, it is not something in the object itself but rather something subjective and strongly linked to the zeitgeist. According to Southgate (2003) cool is a quality found in people and, therefore, objects become more or less cool depending on the use that people make of them and on how they understand coolness and shape it within a specific social context.

From the 1980s onward, cool has increasingly permeated the slang of youth culture and, in the twenty-first century, it has been massively adopted by young people (Poutain and Robins, 2000) who identify it with being stylish, innovative, original, authentic, desirable, and unique (Tapp and Bird, 2008). And young people are the inspiration source for trendsetters (Gladwell, 1997) (think for instance of the fashion world and of how effective it is in transforming street style into fashion icons), who are capable of immediately transforming their inventions into cool products. In particular, cool hunting is a research approach based on a thorough reading of the consumerism world and a deep dive into specific

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subpopulations that are then studied by means of the ethnographic method. In simple words, cool hunting uses “on the street” observation as a method for trend findings. Several researchers and analysts believe that cool hunting in a way steals from the young and from subcultures their own identifying symbols (Klein, 2001), shifting trends and habits from where they are generated to the market place, that is, from niche to mainstream.

The lifecycle of coolness is usually short and that is why trendsetters must always pay close attention to consumers’ sensitivity and always be ready to pick up new signals from a sort of vicious circle of coolness where the discovery of what is cool causes a rapid shift towards “other things” (Gladwell, 1997).

Two apparently opposing forces coexist in the term “cool”: aloof individualism and at the same time a sense of belonging to a group. According to Majors and Mancini Billson (1992) coolness allows for the expression of a group identity through personal style. Cool is zeitgeist. Cool is individualistic sensitivity. Cool is a worldview which changes depending on the historical and social context and expresses a moderate and transgressive charge without ever being excessive, without ever moving beyond the threshold of acceptability. It is a way to avoid the mainstream but to have control of situations. Therefore, cool has an associated set of practices used by consumers, acting as an instrument of both social inclusion and exclusion and demonstrates the control capacity of contexts (Pedroni, 2010).

Even places can be more or less cool, as Richard Florida (2002) notes about the so-called creative class. It is a group of professionals (scientists, engineers, university professors, artists, architects, doctors, lawyers) whose professions, if carried out in a professional and innovative way, can enter into the creative economy and play a fundamental part in advanced capitalist countries. Florida affirms the notion that geographical

places provide fundamental organizational unity for the development of the creative class and is a driving force of local economies. A habitat where creativity thrives has three characteristics: technology, talent, and tolerance towards difference (the three Ts). These creative places are authentic and unique. In a word, they are cool.

SEE ALSO: Cool Hunting; Consumption, Fashion and; Culture; Culture and Movements; Economy, Culture and; Popular Culture

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