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Producers' Perspectives on What Makes (and Keeps) Brands Cool

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PRODUCERS' PERSPECTIVES ON WHAT MAKES (AND KEEPS) BRANDS COOL

BY

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ABSTRACT

Cool has long been an elusive, and yet, attractive target for brands. Many brands in the streetwear/sportswear industry seek to be seen as cool, yet few achieve this goal. Even for those that do, the perception of cool proves to be fleeting. This qualitative work, based on long interviews with managers from leading streetwear/sportswear firms, sought to understand what they believe to make and keep brands cool. Five key drivers of cool were identified – Authenticity, Associations, Accessibility, Originality, and Storytelling, and a model for how these drivers of cool interact to make and keep brands cool was developed.

Keywords: cool, brands, authenticity, streetwear, sportswear

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when I was not. You helped me see the way forward on the days when all I could see was the dead end. I owe you a lifetime's worth of love, gratitude, and support in return. And it is a debt I am lucky to have and more than happy to repay.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS	vi
LIST OF TABLES	vii
LIST OF FIGURES	viii
CHAPTER 1	9
INTRODUCTION.....	9
CHAPTER 2	14
REVIEW OF LITERATURE.....	14
CHAPTER 3	33
METHODOLOGY.....	33
CHAPTER 4	46
FINDINGS.....	46
CHAPTER 5	82
DISCUSSION	82
BIBLIOGRAPHY	97

LIST OF TABLES

TABLE	PAGE
Table 2.1 Definitions of Cool in People	22
Table 2.2 Definitions of Cool in Things and/or People	24
Table 2.3 Elements of Cool in People	26
Table 2.4 Elements of Cool in Products	28
Table 3.1 Informant Characteristics	38
Table 5.1 Revisiting the Elements of Cool in Products.....	90

LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE	PAGE
Figure 2.1 Origin and Evolution of Cool	15
Figure 2.2 Movement of Meaning Model and Dissertation Focus.....	31
Figure 5.1 The Five Overlapping Themes of Cool Brands	82
Figure 5.2 Interactions among the Drivers of Cool in Brands	88

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Cool is a major driver of commerce both in the United States and abroad (Pountain and Robins 2000). Its impact and reach is so vast and pervasive that it has been labeled a “global pandemic” (Lasn 1999, xiv). Products perceived to be cooler have been shown to drive preference (Warren and Campbell 2014), and brands are perceived as cool are able to price their products at higher premiums than their competition (Olson, Czaplewski, and Slater 2005). Functional magnetic resonance imaging studies have shown exposure to products rated to be cool trigger differential brain wave activity in the medial pre-frontal cortex section of the brain, an area associated with desirability (Quartz and Asp 2105). Cool is highly desired by consumers, and therefore, in turn, marketers pursue cool to increase sales and remain relevant to modern popular culture (Cassidy and van Schijndel 2011). Cool is so highly sought after by brands that it is “hunted” (Gladwell 1997; Gloor and Cooper 2003; Southgate 2003), while some marketers attempt to cultivate or *farm* cool (Gloor and Cooper 2003). Cool is so important to marketing practitioners that one institute, The Centre for Brand Analysis, is dedicated to tracking which are the coolest brands. Because of the commercial significance of cool, and the challenges associated with defining, hunting, capturing, and maintaining cool, marketers “engage in a never ending quest” for it (Tapp and Bird 2008, 21). In fact, entire careers in marketing have revolved around measuring and developing coolness in brands (Gioia, 2009).

Cool, however, is notoriously difficult to explain. As noted by Kerner and Pressman (2007) “society is consumed by the trappings of cool...even if they can’t define what cool is” (xii). While once viewed as an oppositional, counter-cultural attitude with a dark side and edgy element to it (Pountain and Robins 2000; Dar-Nimrod, et al. 2012), cool is now widely acknowledged to be linked directly to consumer capitalism (Frank 1997; Heath and Potter 2004; Tapp and Bird 2008). This commercialization of cool is believed to stem from the co-opting of cool by advertising agencies during the 1960s (Frank 1997). As a result of this commercialization, it has been argued that people can essentially buy cool in stores like any other commodity (Tapp and Bird 2008). It has been claimed that both consumers and brands can be cool (Pountain and Robins 2000; Warren 2010; McGuigan 2009), and that consumers use cool products in order to imbue themselves with cool (Ferguson 2011).

Others suggest, however, that although goods may be imbued with the symbolism of cool, cool itself is not something that can be purchased (Connor, 1995). This aligns with the belief that a major component of cool is a sense of *knowingness* by the consumer (Moore 2004) related to “commodities and consumption practices” (Nancarrow and Nancarrow 2007, 135). That is, trendsetters or “alpha consumers” have an innate sense of cool that others try to follow by purchasing goods used by alpha consumers, but simply having those goods does not ensure an individual will be considered cool. The idea that people, not brands, are where cool resides (Belk 2006) is also supported by Southgate (2003), who noted that it is cool consumers who make brands cool, and by Gurrieri (2009) who found that brands become cool by association with people (or organizations) that are perceived as cool. In sum, the question of how brands, products, or individuals

become cool is unresolved, but is a topic of intense interest to academics and practitioners alike because of the cultural significance and impact of cool.

Recent research by academics has also explored the ways consumers perceive cool. Runyan, Noh, and Mosier (2013) developed a scale to measure perceptions of cool in apparel, and Sundar, Tamul, and Wu (2014) developed measures for assessing perceptions of cool in technological products. Other research that has focused on the consumers' perspective of cool has examined whether consumers' inferences about a product's autonomy (i.e., non-conformity, but in a contextually-appropriate way) influence their perceptions of cool (Warren 2010; Warren & Campbell, 2014), and whether individuals who are perceived as cool by others share personality traits (Dar-Nimrod et al., 2012).

What has not been the focus of meaningful study by academicians is how marketing practitioners create and maintain cool products. Marketing practitioners have been theorized to be critical agents in the cultural production of meaning in society (McCracken 1986). McCracken's seminal article describes the advertising/fashion system as taking meaning from the "culturally constituted world" (74), and transfers that meaning such that it "become(s) resident in consumer goods." Consumers then purchase these goods in order to imbue themselves with the meaning that marketers, in their role in the advertising/fashion system, imbued in their product. Marketers have been said to play an "active, interventionist role," in the development of culture (Lury 2009), not simply communicating product information to consumers, but instead shaping and forming consumer desires. Critics of American consumerism have furthered this theory, claiming that culture is now developed by "brands, products, fashions..." (Lasn 1999, xiii).

Further to this point, Bourdieu (1984, 359) introduced the concept of cultural intermediaries, who were described as those in “occupations involving presentation and representation (sales, marketing, advertising, public relations, fashion, decoration and so forth) and in all the institutions providing symbolic goods and services . . . and in cultural production.” More recently Latour (2005) described an “intermediary,” as someone who is simply a vessel through which culture is transported, contrasting such individuals with mediators who “transform, translate, distort, and modify . . . meaning” (Latour 2005, 39). Marketers, argues Moor (2012, 576), are the latter not the former, and therefore provide “a more active contribution to shaping” culture. Echoing this thought, Atik and Firat (2013) found that marketers are critical actors in the “process by which consumer desires are culturally imagined and formed” (Atik and Firat 2013, 856), and do not simply respond to the wishes of consumers.

Despite the critical role played by marketers in the creation of culture, and the commercial importance of cool, perceptions of what makes brands cool amongst marketing practitioners in private industry is under examined. In its role in the cultural production system, marketing “not only changes and influences reality but it actually creates reality” (Kornberger 2010, 76). Understanding what marketing practitioners in the advertising/fashion system believe makes and keeps brands cool will enhance understanding of the important cultural concept of cool.

In research associated with this dissertation, I utilized long interviews (McCracken 1988) with executives directly involved with merchandising, marketing, entertainment and design, to understand what they believe makes brands cool and what strategies they use to ensure their brand is perceived as cool. I focused specifically on

sportswear brands because these brands have decades of connection to cool, having become the height of cool in the 1980s (Pountain and Robins 2000). In Chapter 2, I review the literature concerning (1) the genesis and evolution of cool, including the influence of marketing on the meaning of cool, and (2) the definitions and dimensions of cool. In Chapter 3, I describe the research design and data collection methods. Chapter 4 details my findings based on analysis of the data, including a discussion of five major drivers of cool in brands, and how these drivers interact. Finally, I describe limitations and managerial implications of the current research and identify areas for future research.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In this chapter, I trace the history of cool from its roots in West Africa to its usage in North America, noting the influences of jazz, hip-hop culture and marketing. I illustrate how the meaning of cool came to be bifurcated, with two seemingly contradictory meanings, and explain how the co-existence of these meanings helps to resolve an apparent paradox, which is that once a brand enjoys mainstream popularity, it would seem to become uncool by definition. Given the importance of cool to modern culture, the ability of marketers to recognize and respond to fluctuating definitions and perceptions of cool in brands and customers is of paramount importance. I complete the chapter by placing my dissertation in context of the prior research on cool, identifying where my work is located, and how it builds on the knowledge on this critical topic that has come before it.

History and Evolution of Cool

Origins in Africa, Imported to USA through Slaves

The meaning of cool as having a nonchalant attitude, especially in excitable situations, is thought to have originated in West Africa in the 15th century (Thompson 1973), although some claim it has roots up to 3000 years ago (Majors and Billson 1992). The idea of “grace under pressure” (Thompson 1983, 16), was evident in the ability of tribe members to maintain a *cool face* while performing intricate dances (Thompson

1983). Coolness, or *itutu*, as it was labeled in the Yoruba civilization, was considered to be a noble trait, even a “cardinal tenet” (Thompson 1974, 44), as it indicated the ability to reach the “creative goodness God endowed us with” (Thompson 1983, 16). To act with coolness was considered to be proper, the “correct way to represent yourself” (Thompson 1983, 13).

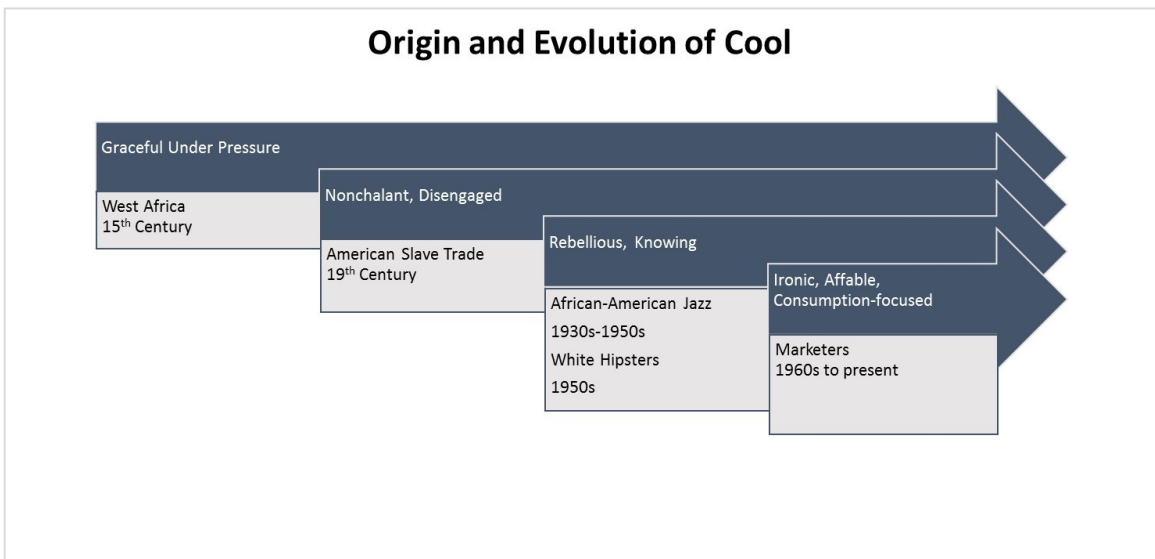


Figure 2.1 Origin and Evolution of Cool

As noted in Figure 2.1 above, from Africa, the concept of cool is believed to have migrated to the United States during the slave trade (Pountain and Robins 2000). Nonchalance was useful for slaves in a system in which showing emotions could be very dangerous, therefore, the repression of emotions was commonplace (Connor 1995). (As in other instances when the meaning of cool has evolved, new meanings have been added but have not replaced earlier meanings of cool. Therefore, grace under pressure remains a meaning of cool in the present day.) The verbal insult game known as *the dozens*, in which two individuals level a stream of increasingly harsh insults (see Majors and Billson

1992, 91-102), is thought by some to originate from the days of slavery, and, at least in part, served as a way to train oneself to remain cool in difficult situations (Levine 1978). The need being addressed by cool during the days of slavery was to ensure survival (Connor 1995). Yet as the days of slavery ended, cool began to morph, and address the need of African American men to develop a sense of manhood in a system still prone to oppression (Connor 2005). And cool emerged as a sort of “code of honor” (Connor 2005, 9) to fill that need.

Jazz Influences Cool

As depicted by the third level arrow in Figure 2.1, cool’s association with jazz led to another major added meaning to the word cool. While in Africa, and through the days of slavery, the meaning of cool was centered, almost exclusively, on the idea of nonchalance or disengagement. Through its association with jazz, the meaning began to morph and the notion of rebellion became integrated into the sense of coolness (Pountain and Robins 2000; Lopes 2005). This was due, at least in part, to jazz music and jazz clubs being a place where Whites and Blacks came together, this in and of itself being a form of “deviancy,” due to it being “multiethnic, multiracial, and nonconventional: a general rebellion against Anglo-American conventional culture” (Lopes 2005, 1479).

Cool continued to be associated primarily with African-American culture. However, cool developed close ties to jazz culture beginning in the 1930s through 1950s (Shapiro 1999; Belk 2006; Pountain and Robins 2000; Gioia 2009). Some researchers point to cool originating in jazz culture. Lester Young, a jazz artist from that time period, is claimed by one researcher to be the individual who “gave birth to cool” (Dinerstein

1999, 241) through his adoption of a *cool mask* or a *cooled face*. Young embodied the “philosophical objective of African American cool...to combine expressive style with public composure” (Dinerstein 1999, 267). Not only have jazz musicians been labeled as cool, but also the music itself. The Miles Davis album, “Birth of the Cool,” is also an indicator of the importance of cool to the jazz community (Austin and Stormer 2008). Davis’s cooler version of jazz involved eliminating or de-emphasizing some of the complexity of be-bop, which was the predominant jazz form at the time (Austin and Stormer 2008). By playing this cool version of jazz, Davis and his *cohorts* were considered to be the “personification of cool” (Connor 1995, 15).

It was during, and as a result, of the Jazz era of the first half of the twentieth century that the notion of *knowingness* became central to the meaning of cool. The implication being that those who were cool held “a kind of insider knowledge, access to information that the (cool person)...is privileged to have” (Moore 2004, 71, Wilmer 1998). Jazz artists were detached and seen to be contemplative, especially those of post be-bop era (Lopes 2005).

Jazz played a critical role not only in the addition of the connotation of knowingness, and rebellion that is associated with the word cool, but as well to the broadening of the relevance of cool beyond African Americans. Author Norman Mailer’s essay related to cool and the *hipster* lifestyle, titled “The White Negro” (Mailer 1957), directly notes the influence of the African American culture, jazz, and cool on a majority or White audience. Using the terms hip and cool seemingly interchangeably, Mailer notes the impact of jazz on the hipster audience, stating the “source of Hip is the Negro” (Mailer 1957, 278), and further “the presence of Hip as a working philosophy in the sub-

worlds of American life is probably due to jazz.” Ultimately, the end result was jazz music was no longer played just in smoke-filled clubs but expanded and was being featured on college campuses and beyond (Pountain and Robins 2000). Jazz had migrated to a broader, whiter audience and cool came along with it.

Beyond the world of jazz, other factors played a role in the ever-broadening appeal of cool and the expansion of cool to meaning rebellion and having elements of knowingness. Just as the hipsters of the 1950s noted by Mailer played a role in this transition, so did the hippies in the 1960s, and the punks in the 1970s (Mailer 1957; Pountain and Robins 2000). Notable celebrities who played a role in broadening the appeal of cool to a White audience include Elvis Presley, James Dean and Marlon Brando (Pountain and Robins 2000; Belk, Tian, and Paavola 2010). James Dean’s roles as a rebel in a series of films made him a “cool original,” while his death was said to make him a “cool martyr,” and through Brando, it was claimed, “white folks too, were learning how to be cool,” (Pountain and Robins 2000, 70). In addition, the general upheaval or seemingly mainstreaming of rebellion from the late 1950s through the 1960s served to further strengthen cool’s appeal and at the same time reinforce the notion of rebellion, or oppositional, resistance-based aspect of its meaning (Pountain and Robins 2000; Moore 2004).

It is important to note that despite the fact that cool had moved into prominence in non-African American culture, it would be wrong to say cool was no longer relevant to African Americans. Indeed, it remains a critical concept for African-American youth in particular. In fact, cool has been posited as being perhaps the most important factor in the life of an African-American male (Connor 1995), echoing a similar sentiment to that of

another set of researchers who stated “being cool is not a way of life...it is life” (Stanlaw and Peshkin 1988, 209). The *cool pose* is a demeanor utilized by African-American males to create as a defense mechanism against the offenses of daily life (Majors and Billson 1992). By acting cool, black males seek strength and self-respect (Majors and Billson 1992). A cool pose is considered to be of particular utility in hip hop culture, where intense feelings can quickly lead to violence (Pountain and Robins 2000).

Some have gone so far as to argue that cool is only relevant to Blacks (Connor 2005), claiming for non-Blacks, cool is nothing more than a performance in which they try to be cool through purposeful scandal and rebellion. This might be considered a form of “cultural hijacking”, which occurs “when the new versions acquire a claim of authenticity undermining the intellectual knowledge and creative expression of an earlier source” (Abarca 2004, 4). Such hijacking has become increasingly controversial in recent years, perhaps the most notable example being the 2017 Oscar-nominated film *La La Land* (2016). That film was taken to task for being perceived to hijack the cool of jazz from Blacks, due to the fact that the protagonist, a jazz musician, was White, despite the history of jazz being replete with primarily Black musicians.

Cool goes Commercial

Marketers, through the creation of advertisements and other tactics influence how cultural meaning will change (McCracken 1986; Latour 2005). In the most recent stage of cool’s evolution depicted in Figure 2.1, advertisers in the late 1950s and 1960s, upon understanding the power and appeal of the countercultural notion of cool especially to youth, apparent in the rise of the beat and hippie movements of time, worked to co-opt

this detached and rebellious notion of cool to sell products (Frank, 1997). A classic example of this co-optation is the advertising campaign for the Volkswagen Beetle. The tone of the copy was ironic, irreverent and self-aware, while visually, the black and white images, spare sans serif font, and ample white space around the car conveyed detachment (Johnson, 2012).

The work of these marketers in the 1960s served to change cool from an attitude that held consumption in contempt to one that glorified it (Belk, Tian, and Paavola 2010). Subsequently, the meaning of cool as being oppositional or counter-cultural in nature ebbed, and cool became tied to consumer capitalism (Heath and Potter 2004; Belk, Tian, and Paavola 2010).

Consequently, scholars have concluded that the central meaning of cool has pivoted away from *uniqueness* to *being one with the crowd* (Gioia 2009; Lasn 1999). One study found less than ten percent of teens now include a rebellious attitude as part of their concept of cool (Zollo 1999). The result is that cool is “commercially mediated” (Belk, Tian, and Paavola 2010, 193), “measured primarily at the cash register” (Danesi 1994, 3). The notion of “social deviance and rebellion” (Pountain and Robins 2000, 28) is largely gone, replaced to a great degree by “popularity and affability” (Moore 2004, 70).

While the strain of cool related to more to being in a “permanent state of private rebellion” (Pountain and Robbins 2000, 19), and having an approach to life that is resistance-based may still exist, it is the “commercially mediated” (Belk, Tian, and Paavola 2010, 193) notion of cool that is the focus of this dissertation.

Cool Defined

Noted above, the meaning of cool has evolved over time and is notoriously difficult to pin down. For example, the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary (2016), cool is listed as an adjective (with 13 separate definitions and sub-definitions), an intransitive or transitive verb (with an additional five definitions), a noun (with four definitions), and as an adverb. The first non-temperature related definition on this website is stated to be “marked by steady dispassionate calmness and self-control,” yet other definitions include elements related to having an impersonal nature, being free of tension, and lacking “due respect or discretion.”

It is not just within the general public that a lack of consensus exists regarding the meaning of cool. Even amongst leading academic researchers of the concept there is no singular, agreed to, definition (Warren and Campbell 2014; Dar Nimrod et al. 2012, Kerner and Pressman 2007). Belk et al. (2010, 183), for example define cool as “a particular impression-related verbalized and embodied performance...(which) requires validation by an audience.”

Alternatively, Warren and Campbell (2014, 544), describe it as “a subjective and dynamic, socially constructed positive trait attributed to cultural objects (people, brands, products, trends, etc.) inferred to be appropriately autonomous.” Yet another definition employed is “an attitude or belief about a product, ...which is either hedonic or utilitarian in nature, and which, if purchased or worn by an individual, sets that individual apart from an average person” (Runyan, Noh, and Mosier 2013, 333). Some have simply stated truly capturing and defining cool to be essentially impossible and thus labeling it to be “an inescapable aura of unknowability and obscurity, which is...extended to its bearer”

(Kohlenberger 2015, 35). Indeed, as the tables below, fully one-third of the authors identified who have written on the topic of cool chose not to attempt to define the concept, although each author has some implied ideas about what constitutes cool.

Despite the lack of a singular definition for the word, not surprisingly, there is overlap in terms the definition created by those who focused on cool as a trait in people (see Table 2.1). The notion that cool is a display or performance is prevalent (Belk, Tian, and Paavola 2010; Dar-Nimrod et al. 2012; Wooten and Mourey 2013; Maher 2005; Majors and Billson 1992; O'Donnell and Wardlow 2000). Deviance or rebellion is a noted component in a number of the definitions (Dar-Nimrod et al. 2012; Wooten and Mourey 2013). Effortlessness or nonchalance is a theme present in a few of the definitions (Wooten and Mourey 2013; Nancarrow, Nancarrow, and Page 2002; Majors and Billson 1992). The notion of acceptance by or affiliation with others is also common to some of the definitions (Dar-Nimrod et al. 2012; Wooten and Mourey 2013; Maher 2005; O'Donnell and Wardlow 2000), and yet at the same time disaffiliation and uniqueness is also a theme present in a few of the definitions (Wooten and Mourey 2013; Maher 2005). Cool as related to consumption is central to a number of the definitions (Wooten and Mourey 2013; Nancarrow, Nancarrow, and Page 2002; Cassidy and Schijndel 2011; Horton et al. 2012).

Table 2.1 Definitions of Cool in People

Authors	Definition (with page numbers)
Belk, Tian, and Paavola 2010	"impression-related verbalized and embodied performance...(which) requires validation by an audience" 184
Dar-Nimrod et al. 2012	"understanding of coolness...is driven (primarily) both by perceptions of peer-relevant desirability and (secondarily) by the

	darker history of the word" 183
Wooten and Mourey 2013	"standing out cool is a form of positive deviance that reflects a seemingly effortless display of style and composure" 173 "fitting in cool...is characterized by efforts to gain acceptance through emulative consumption behaviors" 174
Tapp and Bird 2008	"an alternative form of (valuable) cultural capital" 22
Nancarrow, Nancarrow, and Page 2002	"although we see it as essentially rather elusive,..., we would define it as partly as an attitude- laidback, narcissistic, hedonistic, but also as a form of cultural capital that increasingly consists of insider knowledge of commodities and consumption practices as yet available to the mainstream" 315
Majors and Billson 1992	"cool pose is a ritualized form of masculinity that entails behaviors, scripts, physical posturing, impression management, and carefully crafted performances that deliver a single, critical message: pride, strength, and control" 4
Kohlenberger 2015	"cool could be classified as an inescapable aura of unknowability and obscurity, which is...extended to its bearer" 35
Maher 2005	"Cool is not the same as fashion or popularity...includes a perceived ability to see the flipside...is quirky, innovative, and tolerant....is an attitude and a hope...its performative style is based upon and derives simultaneously from the symbols of both disaffiliation and association." 83-84
Cassidy and Schijndel 2011	"fashionable through clothing, music tastes, and community groups" is a given definition but it also states "the meaning still remains fluid and superficial" 165
O'Donnell and Wardlow 2000	"Coolness is a set of shared meanings (e.g. language, self-presentation, artistic expression, values, attitudes) within a peer group which signify group affiliation"
Gerber and Geiman 2012	"We see the distributed nature of cool in the way it changes across time, in location, and that folks concepts suggest cool <i>can</i> be defined locally...Cool has efficient, practical meaning only as a distributed property" 107-108
Horton et al. 2012	"the having of cool things, the doing of cool stuff, and the being of cool" 73
Moore 2004	"It is the qualities of knowingness, detachment, and control along with implication of rebelliousness that make up the

	original core referent of cool of the modern <i>cool</i> concept." 71
Dinerstein 1999	"an ideal state of balance, a calm but engaged state of mind between...hot' ...and 'cold' ...(or a) relaxed intensity" 241
Pountain and Robins 2000	"an oppositional attitude adopted by individuals or small groups to express defiance to authority...a permanent state of rebellion." 19
Pedroni 2010	Undefined but implied ideas includes fashionable, distinctiveness, trendiness
Gurrieri 2009	Undefined but implied ideas include social currency, stylishness, commercialism, notes the multiplicity of meanings
Connor 1995	Undefined but implied ideas include emotional control, self-esteem, code of honor
Southgate 2003	Undefined, but implied ideas include a sense of knowingness, trendsetting, an overall approach to life, engaged in appropriate resistance
Raptis, Kjeldsko, and Skov 2013	Undefined but implied areas include authenticity, rebelliousness, exclusivity, and control

Only a few of the authors who addressed cool as it relates to things (brands, products, trends, etc.) attempted to develop a definition (See Table 2.2). Of those who did the were two commonalities present across the definition. One dealt with the notion of distinctiveness (Warren and Campbell 2014; Sundar, Tamul, and Wu 2014; Runyan, Noh, and Mosier 2013), while the other related to the ability for the item to connote or create a sense of community (Sundar, Tamul and Wu 2014; Gloor, Kraus, and Nann 2009).

Table 2.2 Definitions of Cool in Things and/or People

Authors	Definition (with page number)
<i>In Things</i>	
Sundar, Tamul, & Wu 2014	"an innovation would be considered cool if it is novel, attractive, and capable of building a subculture around it" 179

Runyan, Noh, and Mosier 2013	"an attitude or belief about a product..., which is either hedonic or utilitarian in nature, and which if purchased or worn by an individual, set that individual apart from an average person" 333
Gloor, Krauss, and Nann 2009	"a property combined of four factors...cool things are fresh and new...makes us part of a community...are fun...give meaning to our life" 1-2
Nancarrow, Nancarrow, and Page 2002	Undefined but implied ideas symbolism, authenticity, exclusivity
Raptis et al. 2016	Undefined but implied ideas include aesthetics, hedonic quality, desirability, usability and rebelliousness
Bruun et al. 2016	Undefined but implied ideas include desirability, rebelliousness, and usability
Quartz and Asp 2015	Undefined but implied ideas include rebellion, and status
Fitton et al. 2012	"the having of cool things, the doing of cool stuff, and the being of cool" 2097
<i>In Things and People</i>	
Warren and Campbell 2014	"A subjective and dynamic, socially constructed positive trait attributed to cultural objects (people, brands, products, trends, etc.) inferred to be appropriately autonomous"
Ferguson 2011	Undefined but implied ideas include self-identity
Rahman 2013	Undefined but implied ideas include fashionable, amazement, uniqueness, and sophistication

Elements of Cool

While not every author provided a formal definition of cool, all of them discussed themes or elements that encompass cool. As with the definition, I first discuss authors who addressed cool as a trait in people (see Table 2.3), and then go on to detail those who addressed cool relative to things (see Table 2.4). In both of sections I have created sub-categories of the elements.

The first element was strongly centered around the original meaning of cool, that being the notion of maintaining composure. As is evident in the Table 2.3, the majority of authors consider maintaining composure as a part of cool. Other common elements of cool are sophistication and confidence.

A second common element in definitions of cool relates to standing apart from the crowd. This was captured by the idea of *standing-out cool* (Belk, Tian, and Paavola 2010; Wooten and Mourey 2013). Another element includes having special knowledge about life or a sense of knowingness. Many definitions of cool include the trait of stylishness, such that a cool person has a style, in the clothes they wore, how they wore them, and how they carry themselves when doing so.

Table 2.3 Elements of Cool in People

Element	Authors
<i>Composure</i>	
Nonchalance	Belk, Tian, and Paavola 2010; Dar-Nimrod et al. 2012; Rahman 2013; Wooten and Mourey; Southgate 2003; Moore 2004
Sophistication	Rahman 2013
Confidence	Dar-Nimrod et al. 2012; Wooten and Mourey 2013
<i>Uniqueness</i>	
Uniqueness	Belk, Tian, and Paavola 2010; Wooten and Mourey 2013; Rahman 2013; Dar-Nimrod et al. 2012
Creativity	Wooten and Mourey 2013
<i>Stylishness</i>	
Stylishness	Belk, Tian, and Paavola 2010; Wooten and Mourey 2013; Rahman 2013
Attractiveness	Dar-Nimrod et al. 2012; Rahman 2013; Cassidy and Van Schijndel 2011

<i>Knowingness</i>	
Knowingness	Belk, Tian, and Paavola 2010; Wooten and Mourey 2013; Southgate 2003; Moore 2004
Trendiness	Dar-Nimrod et al. 2012
Innovation	Wooten and Mourey 2013; Southgate 2003
<i>Successfulness</i>	
Talent	Belk, Tian, and Paavola 2010
Drive for Success	Dar-Nimrod et al. 2012; Horton et al. 2012
Competence	Dar-Nimrod et al. 2012; Horton et al. 2012
Amazingness	Rahman 2013; Dar-Nimrod et al. 2012
<i>Positivity</i>	
Friendliness	Dar-Nimrod et al. 2012; Horton et al. 2012; Southgate
Prosocial Values	Dar-Nimrod et al. 2012; Southgate 2003
<i>Fun</i>	
Fun/Entertaining	Rahman 2013; Dar-Nimrod et al. 2012
<i>Associations</i>	
Having cool things	Cassidy and Van Schijndel 2011; Fitton et al. 2012; Horton et al. 2012
Doing cool things	Fitton et al. 2012; Horton et al. 2012
<i>Authenticity</i>	
Authenticity	Southgate 2003; Horton et al. 2012; Moore 2004

As with scholars who consider cool a trait of a person, few scholars who consider cool to be an adjective that describes an object, attempt to formally define cool but often cite elements that are central to cool. Runyan, Noh, and Mosier (2013) identified a set of categories that seemed to capture well the sub-categories of elements of cool and I have chosen to largely utilize their categorization method with slight modifications. The sub-category labels I utilized were: (1) reference cool, meaning the cool stems outside

elements such as advertisements for the product, celebrities who wear it, and the broad popularity of the item. (2) Aesthetic cool, relating to the style of the item. (3) Singular cool, which is the result of the uniqueness or innovativeness of the good. (4) Personal cool, or the extent to which the item aids in self-identity, self-esteem and the like. And (5) functional cool, pertaining to the usefulness and quality of the good. Additionally, there were a few elements noted by authors that did not fit a particular sub-category and they are labeled as other.

Table 2.4 Elements of Cool in Products

Element	Authors
<i>Reference Cool</i>	
Able to create subculture	Sundar, Tamul and Wu 2014; Gloor, Krauss, and Nann 2009
Successful; Reference Cool	Runyan, Noh, and Mosier 2013
Aids in Self-Presentation; Has social currency	Runyan, Noh, and Mosier 2013; Gurrieri 2009
Associations with cool people	Gurrieri 2009; Raptis, Kjeldskov, and Skov 2013
<i>Aesthetic Cool</i>	
Attractiveness	Sundar, Tamul and Wu 2014; Raptis et al. 2016; Runyan, Noh, and Mosier 2013; Rahman 2013; Bruun et al. 2016
Desirability	Raptis et al. 2016; Bruun et al. 2016
Classic Aesthetics	Bruun et al. 2016
<i>Singular Cool</i>	
Originality/Innovation	Sundar, Tamul and Wu 2014; Raptis et al. 2016; Runyan, Noh, and Mosier 2013; Gloor, Krauss, and Nann 2009; Warren and Campbell 2014; Rahman 2013; Bruun et al. 2016

Bounded Autonomy	Warren and Campbell 2014
Exclusivity	Nancarrow, Nancarrow, and Page 2002
Authenticity	Nancarrow, Nancarrow, and Page 2002; Rahman 2013
<i>Functional Cool</i>	
Usability	Raptis et al. 2016; Runyan, Noh, and Mosier 2013; Bruun et al. 2016
Quality	Runyan, Noh, and Mosier 2013; Rahman 2013
<i>Personal Cool</i>	
Helps self-identity	Runyan, Noh, and Mosier 2013; Ferguson 2011
Fits my style	Runyan, Noh, and Mosier 2013
Establishes uniqueness	Runyan, Noh, and Mosier 2013; Warren and Campbell 2014
<i>Other</i>	
Fun	Gloor, Krauss, and Nann 2009; Rahman 2013
Gives meaning to life	Gloor, Krauss, and Nann 2009
Ritual	Nancarrow, Nancarrow, and Page 2002
Understated Marketing	Nancarrow, Nancarrow, and Page 2002

There is evident crossover or overlap between both the definitions and elements of cool developed by those who looked at cool in people versus cool in things. Most notably perhaps, uniqueness or the singularity of the person or the good was identified as critical to cool. The notion of cool either being a performance or presentation, or being a good that can aid in such a performance is also a commonality. The idea of cool being related to the aesthetics of a good or sense of style of a person is also a clear overlap. While less prevalent both cool things and cool people were seen as being successful or of high quality.

As noted, many of those researching cool chose not to proffer a fixed, definitive definition for what most agree is an elusive concept. For this dissertation, I chose to follow that model, and therefore, did not offer to, nor ask of my participants, a standardized, detail definition of cool. I accepted, as have others researching this concept, to allow instead allow the participants to address cool in a manner that was fluid and not formalized. That is, I let the definition and conceptual frame of cool emerge from the data. This is detailed in the next chapter in which I note the methodology followed for this dissertation.

Research Summary and Gaps

In this chapter, I traced the evolution of the concept of cool from its roots in Africa to its modern-day usage. The original concept of cool, denoting an attitude of detachment or nonchalance, has evolved until today it signals a dimension of commercial success. When cool was co-opted by advertising agencies of the 1960s, it gave rise to the notion that cool could be purchased, and cool evolved to a second main meaning, i.e., social attractiveness or being one with the crowd. As discussed earlier in this chapter, researchers have detailed the important role played by marketers. McCracken (1986), Latour (2005), and others have also noted the impact that marketers have on the development and interpretation of culture broadly, while Lasn (1999), and Frank (1997) have identified the impacts marketers have had on cool, specifically.

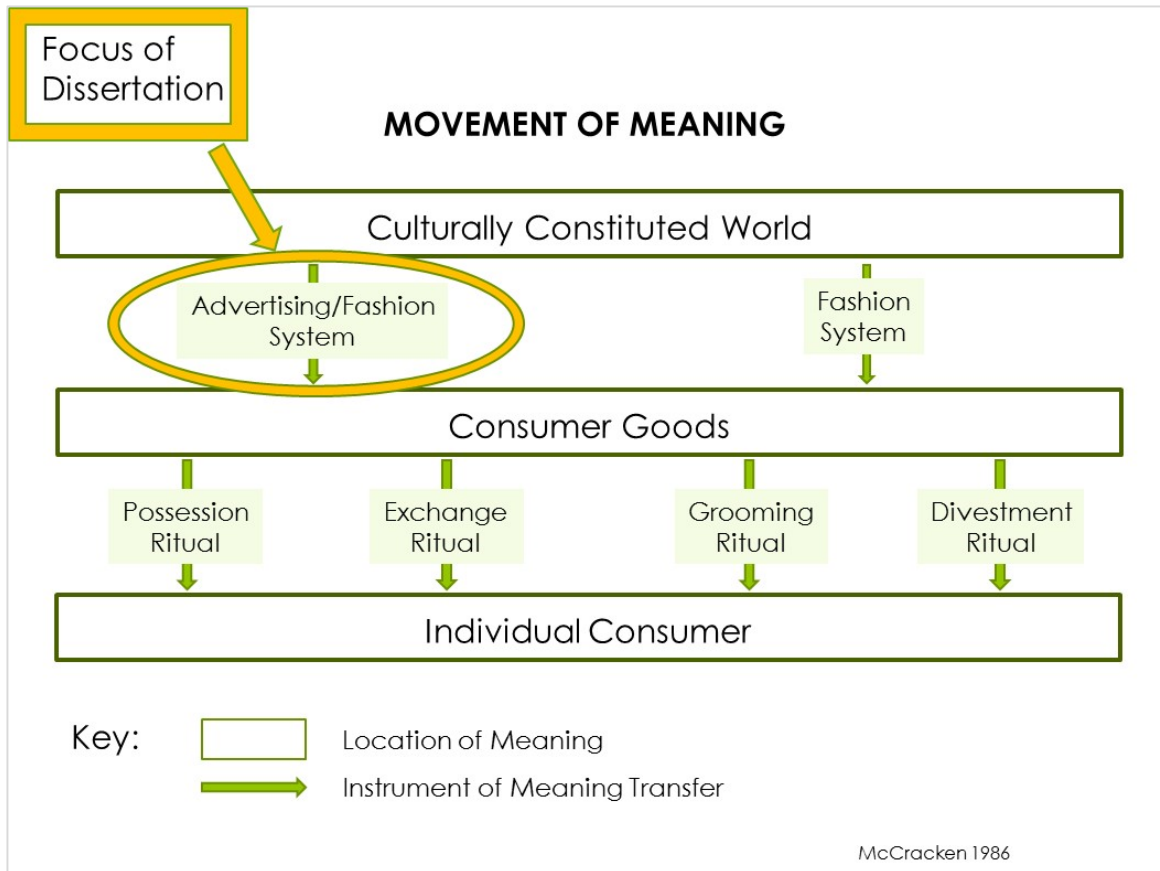


Figure 2.2 Movement of Meaning Model and Dissertation Focus

Marketers are critical actors in the “process by which consumer desires are culturally imagined and formed” (Atik and Firat 2013, 856). The marketing related research on cool conducted to date, while extensive, has focused solely and exclusively on consumer insights related to cool. As detailed earlier in this chapter, the consumer-focused research on cool has related to either its presence in people, or in products/things. As indicated in Figure 2.2, my research therefore extends the body of knowledge of cool by exploring the insights of how these cultural producers understand cool and how they work to imbue their products with the aura of cool. Cool, labeled the “dominant mode of affective comportment in the twentieth and early twenty-first century” (Kohlenberger

2015, 12), is at the center of the global economy and global culture, and better understanding of how it is perceived and created by cultural producers is warranted. I used a qualitative, interpretive approach to address my central research question - what marketing practitioners believe makes and keeps brands cool, and what strategies are they employing in order to manage their brands accordingly.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Overview of Methods

The goal of this research was to understand the perspectives of the marketing practitioners regarding what makes and keeps a brand cool. I examined the strategies marketing practitioners use to cultivate and maintain cool in their brands. Because a “commonly acknowledged goal of qualitative research is to create understanding” (Belk, Fischer, and Kozinets 2012, 185), a qualitative, interpretive approach was appropriate for this study. Specifically, I conducted in-depth interviews to develop a deep and nuanced understanding of what makes and keeps brands cool from the perspective of marketing managers. Geertz (1973) discussed the importance of providing a *thick description* when conducting qualitative research. The interview data provided sufficient depth and detail for a thick description of marketing strategies in the global marketing culture.

Research Design

I followed the guidelines of interpretive research, which focuses on delving deep into data to uncover theories and understanding rather than testing hypothesized relationships. Interpretive research stays close to the data or “close (sic) to the ground” (Geertz 1973, 320), and good qualitative research “goes beyond the facts of what was observed and said” (Belk, Fischer, and Kozinets 2012). The researcher must interpret findings and avoid the trap of “only reporting what is in the data” (Thompson, Arnould,

and Giesler 2013, 161). Interpretation provides a deeper, richer, and more meaningful understanding of the topic under study (Wolcott 1994). Interpretations are *grounded* in the data. They stem directly from the data, not from external theory superimposed on the data. In transforming the data through interpretation into a meaningful understanding, “interpretations must include perspective and voices of the people whom we study” (Strauss and Corbin 1990, 274).

Data Collection

Sampling

I employed a purposive sampling method (Lincoln and Guba 1985) to locate high-ranking marketing professionals in the sportswear industry. My informants all worked with brands that place a high value on cool. What they believe makes and keeps brands cool and what they do to make their brand(s) cool informed this research. The sample was fairly homogeneous in term of their professional qualifications, but I sought informants of different gender, ethnicity, race, job type (e.g. marketing, design, advertising, public relations), and company size (e.g. small, medium, large). I included individuals who worked at some of the industry’s highest profile brands.

I identified an initial set of informants using my contacts in the industry and sought additional informants to build upon insights that began to form during the initial coding and interpretation of data (Glaser and Strauss 1967). I used snowball sampling, asking initial informants to suggest additional individuals who might aid in the research process, to expand the informant pool (Moriarty 1983). I asked the informants to share

my contact information with prospective participants and allow them to contact me so as not to apply undue pressure.

My sample size of nineteen informants was based on data saturation. This is the point at which my interviews yielded insights that were repetitive and no new insights were forthcoming. Morse (1995) explained that achieving saturation is “the key to excellent qualitative work” and defined saturation as “collecting data until no new information is obtained” (147). Importantly, repetition of themes by various participants is not alone an indication of the saturation point. For qualitative studies, Morse (1995) noted, “it is often the infrequent gem that puts other data into perspective” (148). Simply hearing repeated themes is not evidence of saturation; it is the absence of new themes. A lack of saturation in qualitative research undermines the validity of the study in question; the subject matter being studied is not “fully explored” without saturation (Morse 1995, 149).

Core principles for achieving saturation as outlined by Morse (1995) include the use of a narrow rather than broad samples and theoretical rather than random or convenience sampling. For this body of work that involved interviewing seasoned, high level marketing informants from the streetwear/sportswear industry. This including individuals who have worked or are still working at some of the top brands in the industry. Ritchie, Lewis, and Elam (2003) noted factors that influence the saturation point in qualitative inquiry such as data collection methodology, sample heterogeneity, and budget constraints. Mason (2010) argued that PhD students are prone to ignore the concept of saturation and stick to a pre-meditated informant pool. In this instance, I strove to avoid that, and instead continued to interview informants until saturation had

been achieved. Methodological experts suggest that in comparable studies, saturation is typically achieved with 12 to 24 informants (Creswell 1998; Guest, Bunce, and Johnson 2006). As noted, I determined I reached saturation after the nineteenth interview.

Continuing to conduct interviews beyond that saturation point would have been wasteful of both the informants' time and mine.

Long Interviews

I collected data using long interviews (McCracken 1988) or in-depth interviews (Belk, Fischer, and Kozinets 2012). Long interviews enable the researcher to garner great insights from informants in a "sharply focused, rapid, highly intensive" manner (McCracken 1988, 7). Such interviews are appropriate when the interviewer "seeks an in-depth understanding of a topic that the research informant is able to speak about" (Belk, Fischer, and Kozinets 2012, 31) such as my informants' knowledge about marketers' perceptions and cultivation of cool. As noted by McCracken (1988), the long interview is a powerful qualitative approach that provides great insight without the repetitive and exhaustive exposures required by other methods.

I notified informants that the interview would be recorded, and reminded them of this fact just prior to the commencement of the interview. The recording device was purposefully inconspicuous in order to minimize potential artificiality in the interview. Interviews were held at locations of the informant's choosing that were quiet and free from distractions to create a comfortable environment for the informant (Belk, Fischer, and Kozinets 2012). In some cases, the location was the informant's office or conference

room. Many of the interviews were via Skype, some of which utilized the video component and others with only audio.

A grand tour question guided the interviews rather than a detailed, rigorously followed list of questions (McCracken, 1988; Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989). For this study my grand tour question was “what makes brands cool?” I was open to exploring tangential ideas, but guided informants back to the core topic when they discussed topics that seemed unrelated or only tangentially related to the concept of cool (McCracken 1988). Prompts to redirect the conversation included: “how does that relate to the concept of cool” or “can you describe how that relates to cool and what makes and keeps brands cool?”

I avoided asking yes or no questions or asking for rationales that may not exist. I used probes judiciously and strategically to elicit elaboration without interrupting the flow of an answer. I took notes during the interviews, in addition to recording them, so that I could prompt myself to circle back to earlier topics for further depth of discussion.

After interviewing a number of informants, I analyzed the data. Using the insights gleaned from earlier interviews, subsequent interviews were more direct. In later interviews, I probed new topics and ideas as my understanding of cool evolved. This followed a constant comparison approach to data collection (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

Each interview lasted approximately one hour and yielded an average of 22 single-spaced pages of transcription. Informant demographic and professional information is included in Table 3.1, below.

Table 3.1 Informant Characteristics

Name	Title at time of interview	Company Type at time of interview	Years Exper.	Years Street/ Sportswear Experience	# of Firms/ Brands
Sue	VP Merchandising	Accessories	33	23	3/15
Albert	Design Manager	Accessories	16	12	20
Robert	CEO	Footwear Accessories	26	17	8
Bernie	Creative Director	Boutique Ad Agency	27	7	5
Steven	Design Manager	Apparel & Accessories	10	10	2
Trent	VP Marketing	Apparel & Accessories	23	23	3/200
Aaron	VP Marketing	Footwear	25	25	9
Cameron	Director of Marketing	Accessories	21	16	26
Jim	CEO	Apparel & Acc. Design	25	20	30+
Porter	Industry Consultant	Footwear	15	7	3
John	VP Marketing	Retailer	16	16	3
Bill	VP Marketing	Footwear, Apparel, Acc.	14	14	1
Morris	Design Manager	Apparel	14	10	14
Renee	CEO	Footwear	22	22	3

Michael	Advertising Agency Exec	Apparel & Accessories	20	7	12
Bryson	Product Director	Footwear, Apparel, Acc.	29	29	4
Dexter	CEO	Footwear, Apparel, Acc.	25	20	32
Tony	CEO, Design	Apparel & Accessories	19	19	18
Phil	CEO	Advertising Agency	30	12	5

Analysis/Interpretation

I employed a comparative methodology for the data analysis, and evaluated cases to find “conceptual categories and conceptual properties” with high levels of “generality and explanatory power” (Glaser and Strauss 1967, 24). I considered both the commonalities and the unique distinctions between the sets of interview data through a “constant comparative method” (Glaser and Straus 1967, 101). I compared new data to the prior data to determine whether any changes in the analysis or interpretation were warranted.

I engaged in systematic data checking throughout the research process rather than collecting all of the data up front and then conducting an analysis (Strauss and Corbin 1990). O’Reilly, Paper, and Marx (2012, 250) stressed the importance of this approach, and noted that “central to constant comparison is the notion that simultaneous collection, coding, and analysis are crucial to the development of the theory and that, as much as possible, these three operations must be done together.” Through constant comparisons,

the researcher strives to find lower and higher level categories in the data, the latter of which generally emerge in the later stages of research.

Whenever possible, I conducted interviews with sufficient time to allow for data transcription and analysis between each interview. This aided in the constant comparison of the data. Scheduling constraints occasionally required that multiple interviews in a single a day or a few days. This limited the ability to do a full constant comparison after each interview. Most interviews were spread out over the course of days or weeks, which allowed transcription and analysis to occur between the interviews.

When timing did not allow for this, I conducted debriefing sessions after each interview. Debriefing allowed me to capture key thoughts and observations coming out of the interview that might otherwise be lost after a new interview was underway. I completed this debriefing as a form of memo writing, which aided in keeping observations or themes at the forefront of my mind for the next interview (Glaser and Strauss 1967). I then incorporated these observations into the line of questioning for successive interviews as a component of constant comparison. Specifically, I used a method of analysis developed by Spiggle (1994) that involves the following steps: categorization, abstraction, comparison, dimensionalization, and integration.

Categorization involves developing a system that *chunks* the data and labels it appropriately. The researcher develops chunks such that they have a coherent meaning. Spiggle (1994) suggested that such categorization can be deductive or inductive. I used the latter, “identifying emergent categories from the data” (Spiggle 1994, 493). Next, I used *abstraction* to reduce or collapse the data into what Spiggle (1994, 493) described as “higher-order conceptual constructs.” I moved from specific to more general themes. My

goal was to find commonalities among the chunks of data that created more robust constructs. Spiggle (1994) explained that the constant comparative approach “explores differences and similarities across incidents within the data currently collected and provides guidelines for collecting additional data” (493). Glaser and Strauss (1967), Strauss and Corbin (1990), McCracken (1988), and Lincoln and Guba (1985) used comparison-based data analyses.

Dimensionalization provides greater depth to the constructs the researcher identified during analysis. This involves identifying a particular construct and noting a continuum along which the construct resides or exists. Doing so clarifies and enriches the constructs, and provides a better perspective on relationships that might exist across constructs. Researchers can more easily integrate dimensionalized constructs (Spiggle 1994).

Integration involves clustering the constructs into a model that delineates the relationships or connections between them (Spiggle 1994). These relationships can take many forms including “hierarchical or ungraded, linear or recursive” (Spiggle 1994, 495). The present research was qualitative, and I did not attempt to find causal links.

Discovering marketing managers’ perceptions of ways to make a brand cool required analysis of the data and interpretation to develop “a synthetic, holistic, and illuminating grasp of meaning” (Spiggle 1994, 497). Such interpretation did not involve specific steps or procedures, simply a general translation of the analysis (Spiggle 1994). I looked for redundancies, themes, or patterns that emerged from the data. I sought to go beyond what informants said to develop a “representation of meanings as recurring themes producing an interpretation of interpretations” (Spiggle 1994, 499). As a result,

the interpretation is invariably subjective. I remained committed to “only short flights of ratiocination” (Geertz 1973, 322). Therefore, the theory I deduced from this interpretation is more supportable.

Thematic analysis influenced by theory. This form of analysis involves the examination of text, videos, and images to identify underlying patterns that might otherwise go unnoticed. Many qualitative studies use thematic analysis because it is a very flexible methodology (Braun and Clarke 2006). Braun and Clarke (2006) claimed that many qualitative works labeled as other methodologies (discourse or content analysis) are really thematic analyses. Thematic analysis is appropriate method for coding scenarios ranging from analysis that is strongly theory-driven to largely data-driven (Boyatzis 1998). This dissertation is data-driven. No past research focused on marketing producers’ perspectives of what makes and keeps brands cool. As a result, there is no theory on which to base my choice of analysis. Rather, I based my method on the data.

Boyatzis (1998) described thematic analysis as “a way of seeing” that enables a researcher to “see” a pattern within collected data (1). Thematic analysis is not a unique qualitative methodology unto itself, but rather a process that enables the encoding of qualitative data into a list of themes within data (Boyatzis 1998). Boyatzis (1998) explained that these themes either “describe(s) or organize” the data through a systematic and iterative process (4). Boyatzis’ (1998) four stages to thematic analysis include:

1. Sensing themes or “recognizing a codable moment” in which researchers remain open to the information being reviewed in order to “see” the patterns in the data.

2. Developing the ability to consistently recognize such moments and avoid projecting personal opinion or bias onto the data.
3. Developing codes. These codes include a label or name, a definition of the theme, and a description that enables one to recognize the theme. These codes can stem from three sources: prior theory, prior data or research, or inductive analysis of the data (as is the case in this dissertation).
4. Interpreting the information and themes in the context of a theory or conceptual framework (11).

I utilized NVivo, a qualitative software analysis program, to analyze the interview data. NVivo allowed me to enter interview transcripts and then easily highlight chunks of data as advocated by Spiggle (1994).

Rigor/Quality

Spiggle (1994) detailed two important steps in the analysis stage of research to ensure quality. The first step is iteration, which involves allowing the “preceding operations (to) shape subsequent ones” (Spiggle 1994, 495). This includes data that is to be collected, the participants that are to be involved, and the process by which inferences are made during data analysis. The second step is refutation in which the researcher purposefully attempts to find “negative cases” that counter inferences made during the analysis; Spiggle (1994) advocated taking a “general stance of skepticism toward one’s developing ideas” (496). I employed both steps while conducting this research.

It is important to acknowledge that I worked for eight years in the streetwear/sportswear industry and achieved an intimate knowledge of how marketers

perceive brands to be cool. Intimate knowledge of the subject of research prior to the study can be problematic. Belk, Fischer, and Kozinets (2012) noted the importance of “gain(ing) some distance” when the researcher has a great degree of knowledge on the topic of study (32). Glaser and Strauss (1967) observed the ability of the researcher to “get and cultivate...insights not only during his research (and from his research) but from his own prior experiences prior to or outside it” (252). They suggested that intimate research knowledge should be developed, but the primary focus must be the research and the data (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

I benefitted from insights gleaned from my experiences, but I was also conscious to avoid anchoring to any preconceptions that stem purely from this experience. I strived to maintain proper theoretical sensitivity (Glaser 1978). Theoretical sensitivity is a state of avoiding biases or preconceived theories in order to “remain open to what is actually happening” (Glaser 1978, 2). In many instances, I had both a personal and professional relationship with my informants. Long interviews require “a certain amount of intimacy,” (Belk, Fischer, and Kozinets 2012, 31). However, Belk, Fischer, and Kozinets (2013) explained that such intimacy can be a problem if the informant may “in effect say ‘You know what I mean’ and you can both assume that you do when in fact you have quite different implicit understandings of a phenomenon” (32). I avoided such situations by remaining alert to unstated implications and asking for clarifications after informants responded.

The level of experience of the informants also influenced the quality and rigor of this study. Collectively, the informants have over 350 years of professional experience, and over 300 years of experience specifically related to the streetwear/sportswear

industry. They worked for, partnered with, created advertising for, and designed products for over 300 brands in the streetwear/sportswear industry. This number includes duplicates, as the names of the specific brands each individual worked on were not provided. I found no past studies involving this industry that utilized an informant base with such a breadth and depth of experience.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Analysis of interview data yielded identification of five major themes as drivers of *cool* in brands. The themes include (a) *authenticity*, or a sense of the brand as being genuine or organic versus manufactured or manipulated; (b) *associations*, or the individual and collective images of the partners, endorsers, users and other connections that surround the brand; (c) *accessibility and the illusion of scarcity/exclusivity*, or the creation of the sense of specialness of the brand based on purposeful control of where the brand is sold and the development of a notion that the brand's goods are in limited supply; (d) *originality*, or the development of a reputation for being a source of innovation and creativity in terms of the goods the brand makes and the manner in which those goods are marketed; and (e) *storytelling*, or the use of a brand narrative approach to selling. The five themes are distinct from each other, but there are commonalities among them. The following section delineates each individual theme and describes areas of overlap. I include quotes from the informants to better capture the essence and depth of the data as it relates to established findings and theories in existing literature. All interviews addressed factors that drove ideas of cool in a brand.

Authenticity

When I asked marketing managers what makes a brand cool, my informants most frequently identified authenticity as a critical for making and keeping brands cool.

Almost all (17 out of 19) informants indicated that authenticity is a primary driver of cool in brands, and that establishing the brand's authenticity is necessary condition for streetwear/sportswear brands to be considered cool. Brands that are perceived by consumers as authentic could become cool, whereas brands that are perceived to be inauthentic were unable to achieve this status.

Authenticity is the focus of a widening body of research. It has been found to be a central concern of modern marketing (Napoli et al. 2014; Beverland and Farrelly 2010; Newman and Dhar 2014; Coary 2013; Spiggle, Nguyen, and Caravella 2012). Many researchers have discussed the importance of authenticity in branding without referencing its role in driving the perception of cool in a brand. For example, Grant (1999) labeled authenticity as “the benchmark, against which all brands are now judged” (98). This may be a result of a general sense of mistrust of corporations generally, and marketers specifically, and a belief that “authentic brands can counter this downward spiral of distrust” (Eggers et al. 2013, 341).

Definitions of authenticity coalesce around the idea of being true to one's spirit or character, despite external pressures and influences. Napoli et al. (2014) defined authenticity as “a subjective evaluation of genuineness ascribed to a brand by consumers” (1091). This aligns with the notion that authenticity is a social construct rather than an attribute that can be objectively judged by all (Beverland and Farrelly 2010). Other dimensions found to be at the root of authenticity include: *commitment to quality* (Liao and Ma 2015; Muraz and Charters 2011; Eggers et al. 2013; Napoli et al. 2014; Pattuglia, Mingione, and Cherubini 2015), *heritage* (Leigh, Peters, and Shelton 2006; Alexander 2009; Liao and Ma 2015; Muraz and Charters 2011; Spiggle et al. 2012; Napoli et al.

2014; Newman and Dhar 2014; Pattuglia, Mingione, and Cherubini 2015; Choi et al. 2015), and *sincerity* or *consistency* of core principles or values (Napoli et al. 2014; Beverland and Farrelly 2010; Muraz and Charters 2011; Spiggle et al. 2012; Eggers et al. 2013; Coary 2013; Choi et al. 2015; Morhart et al. 2015; Pattuglia, Mingione, and Cherubini 2015). Coary (2013) also noted the importance of *pioneering and innovation* in authenticity, and Eggers et al. (2013) included the importance of *customer orientation* in establishing authenticity.

The informants in the current study collectively indicated that the primary drivers of the perception of authenticity in a brand are: (a) having a core meaning or “DNA” to which a brand remains true; (b) having an authentic origin or brand story or heritage; (c) the use of a brand in a manner that consumers perceived to be authentic; and (d) the perception that the brand had a reason for being beyond being strictly commercial or profit-focused. Importantly, although having a core essence or DNA was important for a brand to be perceived as authentic, informants did not describe that core essence as being an anchor that holds a brand in an unalterable position. Rather, like DNA this core essence guided growth and development of the brand.

The informants in the current study repeatedly noted the importance and primacy of authenticity as imbuing cool to a brand, especially over a long period of time. For example, Cameron, Director of Marketing at an accessories company, stated “What drives coolness in these brands? I think probably first and foremost would be authenticity...remain(*ing*) authentic, continue(*ing*) to evangelize their authenticity...I think that that’s probably a key driver to success.” John, VP of Marketing at a retail company, also immediately brought up the centrality of authenticity to cool. He stated,

“Obviously, the biggest thing is the ‘authenticity’ factor. Our kid [the consumer] specifically will push anything away that feels forced. He sees through crap; he sees through bullshit.” This echoed the sense that authenticity can be a bulwark against corporate distrust, noted by Eggers et al. (2013). Bryson, the Product Director at a footwear/apparel company, felt that cool and authenticity were inextricably linked, and explained that “we’re in an interesting cycle today where authenticity, in my opinion, in the last five years (*has*) been the real definition of cool.”

Having a Core Essence or DNA

Multiple informants stated that having a core essence or DNA is one driver of the perception of authenticity in a brand. For example, Cameron noted that authenticity was related to “the DNA of a brand is at its essence, and how that DNA relates to that audience.” He went on to note that it was critical for brands to “never lose sight of that”. Similarly, Tony, the CEO of an apparel and accessories company, stated that: “Authenticity is just again, sticking to establishing a clear point of view and then sticking to it. Not jumping ship or switching sides or jumping on trends, things that don’t necessarily tie back to—I think you have to be clear in establishing who you are and what you stand for. Once you’ve done that, then you can be consistent about it.” Tony’s emphasis on consistency directly aligns with previous research that identified sincerity or consistency as a driver of authenticity. To be authentic and thereby potentially cool, brands cannot be fickle or change personas on a regular basis. Other phrases that were used to address the concept of maintaining a tie to the brand DNA were “sticking to your

knitting,” meaning to not stray to far from where a brand started, and “keeping it real,” which was described as by one informant as “when a brand is authentic to themselves.”

Having an Authentic Origin or Brand Story

A second driver of authenticity in a brand identified by the informants was having an authentic origin or brand story/heritage. This is distinct from the use of a storytelling framework as a driver of cool (discussed below). Bernie, the Creative Director for a boutique advertising agency, stated “you cannot clothe yourself in coolness unless you genuinely have an authentic story... a genuine story” that cannot be faked. Brands must then “(tell) your story in the most honest way”. This comment highlights the importance that coolness is not simply a superficial marketing tactic but must be built upon a real, honest history of the brand that has meaning to the consumer.

Informants felt that rather than create an artificial scenario or a take a traditional advertising approach, it was more authentic to speak to the actual history of the brand. Indeed, many brands use their story of origin to establish their brand authenticity. For example, Nike references its launch over 50 years ago as Blue Ribbon Sports by Bill Bowerman (a coach) and Phil Knight (a runner), who created their running shoe with a pattern made by a waffle iron. New Era references having supplied Major League baseball teams for over 70 years. Under Armour’s story emerged from Kevin Plank’s development of a technical undergarment meant to replace cotton t-shirts for use as a base layer in sports, while Adidas has the oldest brand story, dating back to the Dassler brothers’ development of an athletic shoe in the 1920s. Brands use these stories as

authenticity markers, points in time that indicate the *realness* of the brand as it relates to core customer value rather.

Conversely, having a fabricated or inauthentic story was seen as eradicating coolness from a brand and limiting the longevity of the brand's success. Trent discussed in detail a brand that he perceived to be based on an inauthentic story. He noted the brand, "founded itself as a surf brand. [Yet] they've never made a wetsuit. How can you do that? They're not a surf brand. If you're not authentic, if you're not rooted in that, you have no right to do all the other stuff that they're done." He acknowledged the brand was perceived to successful, but was at the same time adamant it was not a cool brand: "You won't find a single person at the top of that influential pyramid buy it. But you'll see a lot of money. Go to New York, and you'll see a complete building with (*the brand name*) on it with a sexy young girl, and mainstream America will start buying that stuff. To me, I don't think that's—it's the opposite of cool." He likened a genuine story to a building having a strong foundation. Without a story, "it'll come and go... When you're built on a weak foundation, which is a non-authentic story, then your building is gonna come crashing down." Brands who try to build a history linked to popular trends for consumers without having the true roots in that trend will be noticed as inauthentic. This marketing tactic may have commercial success but even if popular these brands cannot develop a sense of cool due a lack of authenticity.

The Use of the Brand in a Manner Perceived as Authentic

The third major driver of authenticity described by informants was the use of a brand in a manner that consumers perceived to be authentic. Sue, VP of Merchandising at

an accessories company, discussed New Era, in this light stating, “there’s a true level of authenticity” based on the brand’s status as the cap worn by Major League Baseball players. Other brands noted as having their authenticity (and therefore their cool) based on their use in a manner that was perceived to be authentic included The North Face, Puma, Adidas, and Nike. A large component of the authenticity of the latter two brands was believed to stem from the use of their products on the field of play in major sports, whether professional or collegiate. By having “started on the field,” and originated from “the actual products that athletes used in order to perform,” these brands were perceived to have a high degree of authenticity. The authenticity was granted to brands because it was believed that notable athletes chose the brand based on its performance capabilities rather than simply using the brand because they were paid to endorse it. These relationships of brands with those who use them and endorse them relates to a second key theme of associations, discussed later.

How a brand is used drives the perception of that brand’s authenticity beyond the sportswear/streetwear category. Robert, the CEO of a footwear and accessories company, noted Apple’s brand authenticity and coolness derive from the “authentic use” of the product in the design industry. He commented, “I think a lot of people think Apple is really cool...there is an authenticity to it. For a long time, Apple was the computer of designers. People that were doing design work, whether it was graphic or designing automobiles, or whatever, they were designing sneakers. That [Apple] was the product that those guys used.” He went on to note that he purchased an Apple computer when he established his own firm. “I felt that I was going back to a realm of designing and

creating again. And I just felt like if I'm going to be doing designing and creating, I need the computer that's made for the people that do that.”

Whether in the case of Apple in technology or a streetwear/sportswear brands, these examples indicate the coolness of a brand, to some degree, stems from an application or use that is perceived to be authentic.

Limits and Barriers to Authentic Cool

Profit focus

The final driver of authenticity described by informants is the perception that the brand's products have a *reason for being* that goes beyond being strictly profit-focused or commercial. In discussing this theme, informants usually used counter examples of marketing managers growing brands in ways that impeded those brands from being perceived cool. For example, a sportswear brand should focus on selling goods tied to performance as opposed to extending the brand into product lines not linked to sports. Informants referred to this as “logo-slapping,” when a brand produces goods that have no such tie to its core meaning and instead are sold solely to fully leverage brand's equity by selling items well beyond its core area. This is viewed as a cue that money, not mission, is the goal of the brand. And if money is the core value of the brand, the brand is not cool.

While brands drive profits for businesses, cool brands must make their core mission very distinct from earning profits. Selling products that are perceived to place profit ahead of purpose undercuts credibility, authenticity, and ultimately cool. A number of informants commented on this phenomenon. Bill stated “That becomes a blatant spit in

the face of the consumer, saying like, ‘Oh, we can buy you,’ which is essentially what you’re saying. Truth of the matter is our brand...you could have put that logo on anything, and it would have sold. Toilet paper. Whatever. It just would have sold.” In so doing, he pointed out, the net impression is that the brand is financially-driven, and focused on “sheer opportunism,” rather than having a genuine cause or motivation.

A loss of authenticity leads directly to the loss of cool for a brand. Informants noted a familiar but dangerous path followed by many brands. A brand gains followers, and caché, and is perceived to be a cool brand. An audience adopts the brand, but it is not the audience originally intended for the brand.¹ This is a critical moment for brands, because if they stray from their original essence, purpose, or DNA to cater directly to the new audiences for the sake of profits the brands undercut their authenticity and lose their cool. Informants note that the Timberland brand is an example of this.

Jim commented on the path taken by Timberland that undercut the brand’s authentic coolness, noting how the brand began to lose its voice or persona. Consumers found the brand appealing based on its rugged nature, its sense of authenticity. But as the brand grew it began to look to its consumers and retail partners for what direction to follow rather than relying on it’s the meaning of its core brand essence. He noted,

“Somewhere along the line, they said, ‘hey, we’re getting a ton of orders from whatever, inner cities or malls or whatever,’ so they (*asked*) ‘Hey, inner city store next to the projects, you guys buy a shit-ton of Timberland. Thank you for that. What do you want?’ Now this guy’s like, ‘I want pink shearling with leopard skin on the side of my boot [laughs],’ right? Then he said, “If you make that, I’ll order 5,000 pairs,” and then they go ahead and make it. The tables turned from them

¹ This was often the so-called *urban audience*: young men, usually minorities, from inner city areas.

being the dictator of a style to them requesting. They were like a deejay that takes requests instead of being a deejay that plays good music.

The end result was of these actions was a loss of authenticity, and in turn, a loss of cool.

Another situation that undercuts authenticity and cool is when consumers perceive a brand to have tried to buy its way into a category. Bill detailed just such a situation, where Nike bought [the rights to sell licensed apparel for] Manchester United² when their soccer business was not strong. The soccer fans reacted to Nike, “You’re just buying your way in. Whatever.” However, Nike was able to overcome this perception by investing significant resources on developing their products and soccer relationships and were eventually able to overcome this perception.

To be cool a brand must connect to consumers through a strong brand DNA, brand history or authentic use of the product not through expansion that solely capitalizes off of positive consumer perceptions leading to a loss of authenticity.

Trying Too Hard

Warren and Campbell (2014) found cool has roots in being distinctive or divergent from the norm, however being too different detracted from cool. They explained this as *bounded* autonomy being cool, but *unbounded* autonomy was not (Warren and Campbell 2014). Bounded autonomy was described as acceptable divergence from the norm whereas unbounded autonomy was divergence considered so extreme that it was perceived to be impractical, or unacceptable. From a brand

² Manchester United is a leading team in the English Premier League.

standpoint, this could manifest in a product launched in a category in which the brand has little legitimacy, the norm being the other products that have come before the new launch.

Other researchers have also addressed the interplay between cool, authenticity and trying too hard. Tapp and Bird (2008, 24) noted, “Any perception of trying too hard...is likely to alienate the target audience, as it smacks of a lack of authenticity.” Peattie (2007) also discussed trying too hard and cool, describing trying too hard to be cool as an “unconvincing attempt at cool” (p. 21). Finally, the online Urban Dictionary (2016) defined *trying too hard* in a similar manner; it is “an act of pushing oneself to fit in somewhere to where it becomes obviously unnatural”. It feels like people are trying hardest when they start to change themselves. These definitions resonate strongly with the information shared by my informants. Brand managers see brands that try too hard as uncool. Cool in brands must be an authentic cool emanating from true purpose and brand meaning rather than an effort solely to be cool.

Cool Brands as Dynamic

To be authentically cool, brands need to evolve over time. As culture evolves and changes, so does cool. So to be cool and authentic, brands must grow and evolve from their original brand meaning to stay relevant. This concept is akin to a brand lineage. As long as the brand is perceived to “stay true to who they were,” (Michael) then an evolution beyond a brand’s original offerings was reasonable and did not undercut the brand’s authenticity.

Brands that don't develop will lose their cool over time. On information pointed to a brand that "stayed so stuck on urban-centric, the look and the feel of the times, and never evolved with the consumer," and fell from its perch as a powerfully cool brand. Coherence, not consistency, is critical to building brands (Grant 2006) giving them the freedom to grow and adapt. My informant Cameron supported this stating, "[it] is not doing the same thing over and over again, but I think staying true to what your core beliefs are." Consumers expect brands to evolve.

Ultimately it is expected that brands will evolve. Doing so was generally believed to be critical to the ability of a brand to remain relevant. The absence of the continued evolution would very likely undercut the ability of the brand to be perceived to be a source of innovation or originality, another major driver of cool in brands that will be discussed below. It was simply the case that changes to the brand were seen as more evolutionary than revolutionary in nature.

Associations

The second major theme of managing cool from the perspective of the marketing manager relates to the associations with the brand that may be develop based on organic occurrences in the marketplace or as a result of actions taken on the part of the brand. The relationships referred to here include a variety topics including the users who choose the brand or are cultivated for their influence, formal endorser relationships, relationships with retail outlets, event sponsorships, and co-branding activities.

Relationships and brand associations are widely researched in marketing. The outlets through which the brand is sold, events with which the brand is associated, and

the endorsers or spokespeople aligned with the brand all impact the brand (Keller 1993). User imagery and usage imagery have been found to be an important aspect to build brand equity and help differentiate a brand with positive associations (Keller 1993). As noted by Keller (1993), the imagery or associations consumers have of the user base of a brand can also impact perceptions one has of a brand. Discussions with my informants made clear the critical importance of these aspects of brand relationships as factors driving cool in brands, in particular, user and usage imagery.

The congruence of associations leads to a sense of cohesiveness for a brand with greater congruence leading to greater cohesiveness (Keller 1993). Thus to create a cohesive, cool brand, managers need to find and maintain relationships with cool celebrities, influencers, retailers and events with which to be associated. Based on the “match-up” hypothesis (Kahle and Homer 1985), Kamins (1990) found that a better fit between the endorser of a product and that product’s image improved the impact of the endorsement. More recently, Till and Busler (2000) also found that fit played a role in the match-up hypothesis. My informants also indicated the importance of finding associations that fit with the image of cool they were working to cultivate.

Gwinner, Larson, and Swanson (2009) explained that the perceived fit between a brand and a sponsored event played a role in the extent to which “level of image transfer” occurred between two entities, leading the authors to caution managers that “they must also be cognizant of the image that the event projects because this image will be transferred to the sponsoring brand” (9).

My informants addressed the various forms of associations that positively or negatively influence brands' ability to be cool, including endorsers, influencers, collaborations, and retail partners.

Endorsers

The athletes a brand sponsors can either build or undermine the perception of the brand as cool. Choosing the wrong relationships, including which sports an athlete competes in, can also limit whether or not a brand is perceived as cool. Relationships with athletes in uncool sports have the potential to undermine a brand. My informants cite Adidas' association with tennis and specifically "some old white guy that played tennis 50 years ago" as an element that had the potential to undercut the coolness of the brand. In contrast, one of my informants explains that Nike's skill in maintaining cool brands allows it to use relationships with golf athletes to advance the brand despite their characterization of golf as "not a very cool sport." The sport and the demographic of the athlete and their fans seem relevant. The informant specifically discussed Tiger Woods and Rory McElroy as Nike's golf athletes, both young players known for breaking barriers. Nike managed to find cool athletes from an uncool sport reinforcing the perception of their strength in creating and maintaining Nike as a cool brand. Beyond golf, multiple informants noted Nike's ability to secure endorsements and therefore associations with the highest profile athletes in sports as a critical component of their cool.

Nike is viewed as one of the best managers of cool according to my informants and as evident in wider measures of cool brands. Nike was ranked as the fifth coolest

brand by the CoolBrands Council in their 2016/17 report (CoolBrands 2016). Many of my informants aspired to Nike's prowess in managing and maintaining cool brands. While Nike's prowess for maintaining cool brands is robust across all themes identified, one of the most powerful aspect of Nike's ability to remain a cool brand was attributed to Nike's skill in securing the most influential athletes: "[Nike's] innovation [is] that they've got great talent scouts. So always the next guy coming up is the Nike guy...they've got significant athletes in all the right sports...they probably operate more like a sports team than a sports apparel company. They're spotting the right talent." (Bernie). With the importance of users of brands imparting their imagery on the brand, the ability to cultivate the most influential users that fit with the image of cool being cultivated is critical. Recruiting the right people with whom to associate the brand is powerful route to building and maintaining a cool brand. Thus the skill of being able to determine the right people with whom to associate is part of the skill in managing cool.

Influencers

Celebrities are not the only people who make a brand cool. As noted by Keller (1993), the imagery or associations consumers have of the user base of a brand can also impact perceptions one has of a brand or of oneself as the user of a brand. Escalas and Bettman (2003, 339) declared, "brands used by member groups and aspiration groups can become connected to consumers' mental representation of self as they use these brands to define and create their self-concepts." Thus, it was not celebrities and athletes alone who through their use imbue cool into a brand. One informant suggested, "it can be what your friends are wearing" (Sue).

The brand's role is more about cultivating these associations as a means to make cool products and keep a cool brand. One informant explains it as, "...it's not really about what they do, it's what they make. They make a very cool [product], which has been adopted by some very cool people... [it is] their audience which is cool and defines them as a brand that's cool." (Bernie).

To keep brands cool, marketing managers must find ways to associate their brands with influential users perceived as cool and knowing what cool. Brands align themselves with key trendsetters; these are the individuals who are the tastemakers. If the brand is aligned with and accepted by these individuals their cool is passed on to the brand. The tastemakers are frequently noted for being at a top of an influence pyramid. One informant explained, "It's the pyramid of influence, right? Really, it's the kid on top that's gonna influence the masses. We say it's the captain of the football team. It's not all about everyone else in the school. The captain of the football team, he's the kid that gets it. He has his ear to the ground...he'll adopt it. Then he influences the masses." (Trent) So when building and maintaining cool brands, marketers value winning over a very small influential part of the market.

Today, many relationships are built through social media. Brands seek the influencers, people who care about cool, to approve of the brand and share the brand with others who value cool. It is difficult to recruit these influencers. One informant reports, "You can't buy them. You have to offer them something that gives them accessibility." (Sue). My informants discussed aggressively pursuing influential social media users. They seek them out and send them care packages, offer them early access to new releases, tours of facilities or events with paid endorsers. In the social media world of

two-way communication, influential individuals often value simple recognition from brands they admire.

Collaborations

A tool for expanding authentic cool brands is through collaborations. Brands in the streetwear/sportswear market use co-branded products to partner with other companies. Within the industry, marketing managers refer to these partnerships as a *collab* or *collabo*, short for collaboration. These partnerships are often promoted as Brand A x Brand Y.³ There are risks in these product partnerships if the brands are not the right mix. If one brand is on the verge of losing its perception of cool because it is becoming mainstream. For brands, these relationships can be an opportunity to expand their market and forge or strengthen brand meaning furthering the brands cool. However, if the collaboration doesn't ignite the brands can be seen as not relevant or as if they are trying to buy their way into a market.

If effective, collaborations maintain a brand's relevance and credibility therefore helping to make the brand cool. Some of the most effective collaborations are with small, highly media driven shops. Even if these collaborations don't produce high volume they create a lot of media attention that resonates with the top of the pyramid influencers. The collaborations and the media it ideally drives help validate the brand as cool especially with the correct cool associations. While less cool brands can use a collaboration as a springboard to gain cool, the big established cool brands use them to enhance their cool. Often times collaborations are limited production runs and the

³ See Sciarretto (2016) at <http://www.bustle.com/articles/162472-whats-in-the-olivier-rousteing-x-nike-collaboration-its-more-than-just-glamorous-sneakers-photos>.

scarcity works to make the collaboration and both brands even more cool by association. Informants explain this as the power and cool of both brands interacting making the shared cool even greater than one alone.

Retail Partners

Just as collaborations often include partnerships with retailers, the decision of which retailers at which a brand is sold can have a powerful impact on the cool of a brand. As noted by Keller (1993) and others, the associations of the distribution channel can also transfer to the brand. Sue directly addressed the importance of managing this factor. As one informant explained, “I mean are you in the cool places where they’re selling the cool jeans and the cool jackets and the you know cool backpack or latest watch or whatever it is? You know so you talk about...sitting next to you know other products that are considered to be cool.” The associations and proximity to cool or uncool can transfer to products sold together in retail outlets. As another informant noted, “Being in these much ballyhooed retailers around the world. Being in Collette....I think it says something. It makes a statement. Like, if everybody is killing to get in here and if we can get in here, that says that they thought something about us and so if they just by kind of say if the folks at Collette think we’re cool, then we must be kind of cool.” (Robert). So the location of where a brand is sold is critical to whether or not a brand is cool. However even with in the streetwear/sportswear industry the right retail outlet depends on the audience you are aiming for their cool. In these cases, the buyers at retail are one of the most formative tastemakers in establishing cool brands.

Accessibility and the Illusion of Scarcity/Exclusivity

A third theme identified as a driver of cool in brands is a limited supply (or the perception of a limited supply). For larger brands a distribution strategy limits exposure of the product to certain audiences to maintain cool. The scarcity principle (Cialdini 1993) posits opportunities people perceived to be scarce are more highly valued. This relates to commodity theory (Brock 1968, 246), which states, “any commodity will be valued to the extent that it is unavailable.” Thus managers keep brands cool and more valued through scarcity. My informants detailed the use of several strategies by streetwear/sportswear brands and considered them critical to imbuing a sense of cool in brands.

Luxury good manufacturers in particular have been identified as utilizing production limits to heighten demand (Catry 2003). Such good are neither rare nor exclusive, rather, “like magicians, they (*luxury good manufacturers*) are adept at pretending to do so by offering an illusion of scarcity” (Catry 2003, 10). An example of this is the Swiss watch industry, which sells a significant amount of inventory every year while “the ability to appear exclusive is preserved” (Sinclair 2015, 5). Such an approach has been labeled denial marketing (Parker 2012), or hunger marketing (Chen et al. 2014; Yang 2014). The ability to effectively deliver messages communicating limited quantities increases perception of uniqueness and status, which in turn impacts both brand preference and brand imagery (Jang et al. 2015). Scarcity has also been shown to increase arousal (Zhu and Ratner 2015), perceived exclusiveness, and popularity (Oruc 2015).

The illusion of scarcity and exclusivity has been defined as “an effort...to generate a sense of rarity through artificial shortages, limited series, marketing policies

such as selective distribution, or the selling environment” (Catry 2003, 11). The use of limited editions, an oft-employed strategy by sportswear/streetwear brands, creates an “ephemeral rarity” (Kapferer 2012, 458). Without rarity, there could be an “immediate dissipation of demand” (Kapferer and Bastien 2009, 318). Because “having rare possessions is a marker of one’s higher social standing” (Snyder 1992, 20), in the sneaker market limited editions drive demand among the “sneaker tribe” (Cunningham 2008, 2).

One driver of the purchase intent amongst consumers who wanted conspicuous limited edition products was a high need for uniqueness (Snyder and Fromkin 1977). Such purchases act as a “signal (*of their*) prestige and exclusivity to surrounding others” (Jang et al. 2015, 999). Perceived scarcity has been shown to create a presumption of greater expense and higher quality, and have a “significantly positive effect on perceived uniqueness” (Wu et al. 2012, 270). This increase in perceived uniqueness can lead to greater perceptions of value boosting, ultimately leading to increased purchase intentions (Wu et al. 2012).

Limited product availability may lead to greater perceived value. Just as consumers can view price as an indicator of quality, especially when other information is not available, so too might limited supply or availability be used as a cue to the value and uniqueness of a product (Verhallen and Robben 1994). A meta-analysis found “scarcity enhances the value of anything that can be possessed, is useful to its possessor, and is transferable from one person to another” (Lynn 1991, 10-11), with such affects being particularly heightened amongst those with, “greater than average needs for uniqueness” (Lynn 1991,12). Luxury brands, such as Gucci and Louis Vuitton, use limited distribution

and upscale environments to create the illusion of exclusivity (Carroll, Hurley, and Treacy 2009).

Beyond the apparel category, the Apple brand's focus on managing supplies of new products to heighten demand has been detailed (Wouters 2014; Hannah et al. 2014). Wouters (2014) noted that Apple uses "secrecy, (and) the illusion of scarcity to increase demand" (40). Such approaches lead to an increased perceived value of Apple's goods (Kapferer 2012, 457). Even the mass-merchandising retailer Target effectively used the illusion of scarcity to boost demand for a collection (Weller 2007).

Retail Segmentation

One strategy related to maintaining an illusion of scarcity or exclusivity was the development of an effective retail segmentation plan. Doing so was described as being central to the ability to maintain the aura of cool. It was acknowledged that even cool brands sold goods that were mass in appeal, and were distributed at mass retailers such as Famous Footwear, JC Penney and the like. What was critical was that the products sold in such outlets were perceived to be distinctly different from the product sold at more specialty focused retailers.

While it was critical to sell different goods across retail tiers, the higher up in these tiers, the more important it was to have differentiation between the goods carried at the retailers within the same tier. An example of this is JC Penney, Famous Footwear, and DSW might all be given access to the same product, with little to no differentiation. Yet at a higher level of retail, different colorways (items made up utilizing different color combinations) would be made available to retailers. At another level of retail, competing

stores might be given exclusive access, or an exclusive selling window to certain designs or colorways. While at the highest tiers, retail partners might be given the opportunity to create their own custom designs with full exclusivity from competing retailers.

When discussing the importance of segmenting a brand's offering between retailers, informants used Nike as an example of how one brand effectively manages this aspect of cool through the use of retail tiers. Nike distributes product across a wide diversity of retail outlets from big discount chain shoe store, large department stores to the most cutting edge boutique shops that are only known to the top of the pyramid influencers. Nike is able to keep a separation between the tiers of retailers and their consumers such that the perception of exclusivity is maintained. One informant describes how Nike consumers perceive this strategy as, "All these little mini-worlds that I don't need to know about, and then that product isn't for me. It's not the same product...if I'm that kid that's standing in line waiting for a release, I'm not gonna see those sneakers on a lot of people" (Tony).

When talking about managing the availability of product to increase cool, my informants felt that if a product was too widely available and lacked a strategy to keep it exclusive it would be hard to maintain a brand as cool. Segmenting products by distribution channel helped, "If you want to be cool, you gotta be a little bit hard to get" (Sue). Because the retailers at which they are sold impact the perception of brands, helping the retailer be cool is important for keeping the brand cool. Brands facilitate this by segmenting distribution so that different retailers sell different product so that the customer sees that the stores are unique.

Limited Editions

Streetwear/sportswear brands often employ a strategy of limited editions to drive a sense of urgency amongst consumers. These limited edition products are launched with a marketing communications indicating the product is not as widely available as others. In some instances, the quantities are very limited numbering in the hundreds for a Nike shoe, while in others it is not made entirely clear exactly how limited the quantities are. Numerous informants spoke of Nike's limited editions as critical to their sense of cool. They offer new limited editions, sometimes weekly to different retailers. This level of exclusivity puts a premium on the brand which works to cultivate the cool in that brand.

Effectively implementing this strategy requires a somewhat opaque launch cycle. Launching even limited edition products in a systematic manner would undercut the element of mystery that is critical to fully benefiting from the strategy. Some brands' execution of limited edition sneaker launches helps to impart a sense of mystery and cool to the brand. One brand that cultivates cool well creates an alliance with retailers where they regularly launch limited editions but keep the retailers in the dark for when and what limited editions will be. This creates mystery and drives rumors among select retailers and consumers. "It's craziness the way that they've set it up, but there's such a demand for it. That mystery, that not knowing makes it even more sexy and exciting to get that product (Trent). By keeping the brand fresh and mysterious brands can keep brands cool, even larger brands that might otherwise appear more mass produced.

Luxury brands attempt to build appeal for their brand beyond the audience that can afford them and beyond the quantities they would ever sell. Streetwear/sportswear

brands do the same, offering limited editions that very few individuals will be able to buy. In doing so, the entire brand is imbued with a sense of cool, not just the limited-edition offerings. One informant explains, “The Miami colorway for LeBron⁴ shoe is really cool and it trickles down into the cool of the regular releases that are dropped into Foot Lockers. [...] Foot Locker’s happy cuz it trickles down into those guys and then ultimately trickles down into Nike because Nike was the one that did the shoe for LeBron. However, the attention into the cool is of course driven into the limited edition” (SP).

From a retail perspective in the short term on any given product launch, scarcity and exclusivity strategies result in leaving some demand unfulfilled. This is extremely expensive requiring increased manufacturing costs and different packaging for each edition. However, in the long run, it is a worthwhile strategy because it enhances the perceived coolness of a brand. The top of the pyramid consumers who are highly focused on cool perceive cool as tied to exclusivity and knowingness. By requiring these consumers to seek out limited edition brands, sometimes camping out in front of stores overnight to get them the brand retains its cool. Less knowledgeable consumers don’t know how to navigate this mysterious retail limited distribution landscape so they are not able to disrupt the perception of exclusivity and cool. According to one informant, “They’re doing that just to continue to mystify their status as the cool guy. If they can do that, it trickles down and bleeds over to the masses, thinking that they’re still very relevant” (Dexter). Exclusivity helps to make a brand cool. Maintaining cool while growing the brand requires the employment of strategies to maintain the aura of exclusivity such as through the use of limited edition production. If done well, the higher

⁴ LeBron James, NBA basketball player and Nike endorser.

costs of the limited edition effectively work as a product strategy that builds the cool of the brand.

The Dangers of Wide Accessibility & Non-differentiation

While some cool brands successfully implement of a tiered distribution strategy and manage the illusion of scarcity/exclusivity, others failed in this regard. An inability or unwillingness to implement a segmented retail strategy was noted to significantly undercut the ability of brands to maintain an aura of cool for streetwear/sportswear brands. Many informants focused on brands once perceived to be cool failing to maintain this cool when they expanded to wider distribution.

They discussed a brand that originated in skate shops and urban boutiques, and enjoyed wide success. But with its success the brand grew and began to sell to a broader array of retailers and department stores. Unlike successful brands who managed to cross this chasm between exclusive boutiques and mass distribution and still maintain cool, this brand had a distinct lack of differentiation between the product sold to more mainstream, less exclusive retailers, and what it sold to its original core distribution partners of skate shops and boutiques. Rather than develop a tiered distribution strategy, this brand's product line was undifferentiated across all points of distribution. This affected the brand's illusion of exclusivity or scarcity and implied the brand cared more about driving sales than the streetwear audience that gave the brand its relevancy. One informant explained brands need to maintain their discipline to tell their retailers that you can't have every product. To maintain cool the brand must segment and structure its market by its cool target consumers and like luxury brands, not allow retailers equal access to products.

One informant shared how a good brand is firm with its retailers and if needed may tell them, “Look, man, this is not for you. This is not for your customers. Just be happy with what we give you cuz this can stop anytime.... and you’ll still lose out on your main stream of income.’ They’re very blunt about how they approach you and what role you play in the greater scheme of things.” (Dexter). To maintain cool with mass distribution, brands must successful segment the product. If the brand is everywhere, it has to be different everywhere.

Originality

Originality is the fourth theme that emerged from the interview data as a driver of cool. Originality is defined as the extent to which a brand is perceived to deliver various forms of innovation and creativity to the marketplace including new and unique products, ideas, or marketing approaches. Innovation is extremely important in marketing (Levitt 1960). Miller and Mills (2012) explained that perceived innovation can influence the extent to which a brand is perceived as a leader, and that “the more innovative, creative and unique a brand, the more likely an individual consumer perceives the brand as leading the way” (1472). Miller and Mills (2012, 1474) found brand innovation to be made up of five factors: “creativity, expressiveness, imagination, originality and uniqueness.” Freire (2014) broadly defined innovation in luxury fashion: “innovation consists in bringing new ideas, methods, techniques or new materials or methods of creation” (2669).

Brand innovation can drastically alter category dynamics, making other brands in the category seem more similar to each other compared to the brand offering the

innovation (Van Heerde et al. 2004). Perceived innovation is an important predictor of purchase (Ostlund 1974), and innovation can influence an organization's marketplace results (Hult et al. 2004).

Ward et al. (2006) identified creativity as being critical within the broader fashion industry in which streetwear/sportswear brands operate. "Continued development of creative products is especially important if a designer's image or brand is known to focus on innovation and leadership" (Ruppert-Stroescu and Hawley 2014, 21). Creativity is the "principal elixir of growth" (Petzinger Jr. 2000).

Past research on innovation focused on product innovation. The discussions with my informants reflected a broader view of innovation, which I label as originality. My informants' discussions of originality included not only the introduction of new products and also creativity in the marketing of these products. This view of originality aligns with the definition of marketing innovation developed by Tinoco (2010). Tinoco (2010) defined marketing innovation as "the generation and implementation of new ideas for creating, communicating, and delivering value to customers and for managing customer relationships in ways that benefit the organization," and posited that such innovation positively impacts a company's performance (5). Shergill and Nargundkar (2005, 32) defined marketing innovation "as including all the four Ps of marketing—product, price, promotion and place (distribution and supply chain)." The theme as expressed by informants represents a broad view of originality inclusive of all dimensions of marketing including new product development.

My informants described the importance of innovation and creativity to the perception of cool. This included increasing expectations for improvement and difference

between brands and new products that are introduced particularly as technology is quickly evolving. One informant explained the foundational value of originality, “I truly believe it’s evolution and more so progression and innovation. I think if you look at the common denominator by (*cool brands*), they innovate. They innovate themselves” (Cameron). The primary examples of originality noted by my informants as factors leading to coolness in brands were the development of: (a) new technologies; (b) unique designs; (c) new marketing approaches; and (d) an element of surprise or of the unexpected.

Technological Innovation

According to my informants, a brand’s technological innovation was a clear driver of cool. They stated that technological innovation tied a brand to its ability to maintain the perception of cool. One informant stated, “I think that technology is very important to how cool a brand is. How consumers look at them. If you keep releasing the same product over and over and over and there’s no new technology, you’re gonna get stale” (Steven). According to my informants, our tech-savvy society increases expectation for new technological innovation and the speed of that innovation in order for brands to be perceived as current and cool. This idea of remaining current and fresh as a core dimension of cool was present in much of my conversations with informants regarding the marketing managers’ perspective on cool.

One reason why technological innovations were perceived to be so important was that lagging behind in product development exposed the brand to significant risk in terms of being perceived as a copycat, and seemingly by default, uncool. One informant

addressed this notion, “If you’re late to the game, it just looks like you were copying, which it could just be production life cycle, to be honest with you, but it looks like you were copying. The companies that figure out speed to market are gonna be the ones that, from a product perspective, are gonna be looked at as fresh and cool” (John). To achieve and maintain cool, brands need to be current in technology and creating new and improved faster than their peers. Their designs and products should not appear derivative of their competitors but unique, new and at the front of the innovation curve.

Uniqueness in Design

Interestingly, technological innovation was identified to be important even in the streetwear/sportswear market in which most products are fashion products rather than strictly performance based products. John explained, “We look at innovation in multiple ways. Performance innovation is really important. Technology, visual technology innovation...They’re important from all aspects. The kid expects innovation. He expects new things to be in product. Whether they are actually being used to perform in almost doesn’t matter. They stand for ‘next’ and ‘future’ and ‘new’(John). Technological innovation in the sportswear streetwear category includes new manufacturing which enables new fabrics, new product shapes, and the weight of new products. This has lead to improved comfort performance but also new fashion and designs.

Informants shared that technology and fashion in cool are interdependent, “We don’t see why in time the two can’t intersect on every level. You shouldn’t have to go get a performance-based product and a cool product. You should be getting cool products that perform for you” (Bill). According to marketing managers, while technological innovation is important in the streetwear/sportswear category, new designs are also

important drivers of cool for brands. This may be due at least in part to fashion in the apparel-centric nature of the category. One informant explained, “It can be having, you know, having the latest color combination at the right time, or you know when the market shifts from basic to prints. Being out there and putting those prints in the market when most of the market is goin’, ‘where did this come from?’ That’s freshness” (Sue). One informant specified that brands innovate through collaborations in which two brands partner to create a co-branded product. The are one way informants felt that brands could constantly be new and original. Various iterations of styles and designs that can ensure a brand is innovative and therefore cool.

Marketing Innovation

Beyond technological or design innovation, informants identified the role perceived innovation in a firm’s broader marketing efforts can also aid in the building or keeping the perception of cool for a brand. Often, my informants equated innovation in cool with leading the market. For example, one informant shared, “We’re into a lot of silhouettes now and it’s become more important than ever that we’re constantly out in front of things, and that people view us as market leader. I think it’s actually critical to staying cool as a brand...” (Sue). Marketing managers, particularly when keeping a brand cool focused on the need to stay in front of competitors, doing different things and things differently than others in order to stay cool.

In order to lead in the marketplace, brand managers must carefully consider all aspects of marketing. Cool brands incorporate originality into everything from new product development to marketing communications and the lifestyle the brand espouses.

Bill discussed the broad manner in which originality was viewed, stating, “I think that you have to be able to understand that the way to stay cool is to constantly evolve and constantly change. While you certainly have a core, you vary it up. You bring in new looks, new feels, new campaigns, new talent, new what have you” (Bill). Innovation in cool brands, from the perspective of marketing managers, is not simply product-related.

The Importance of the Unexpected

Cool brands need to deliver not only innovation or uniqueness, but to also deliver the unexpected. Informants noted the importance of delivering something new, being a bit unpredictable or unexpected. Informants referred to this as surprising and delighting consumers. This could go beyond the product to the broad business model of the brand. For example, Tom’s is a brand built on a ‘one for one’ strategy with which every purchase helps one person. This originally applied to shoe sales, so each purchase of shoes included a pair of shoes donated to a person in need. When Tom’s added sunglasses to their product line and included eye exams in their business model, this was seen as an innovation.

One informant summed this up in talking about a successful cool brand that is original and cool by being unpredictable. “They’re always coming out with something different. They’re showing you something you haven’t seen before. You’re interested in what are they going to do next. They’re not predictable” (Sue). Unpredictability contributes to consumers’ perception of originality. It breaks through clutter and grabs consumer attention and because it is not expected it is perceived as unique. Critical here is perception that the brand appears original to be cool. A well managed cool brand is

able to portray itself as innovative. One informant explains this, “There (*is*) this constant, you know whether it was really innovative or it was just they were great story tellers,” (Sue). Innovation is part of the story of a brand being cool.

Storytelling

The final theme that emerged from interviews with my informants as a driver of cool in brands was marketing through storytelling or narrative. In linking narrative approaches to marketing, researchers have likened marketing plans to stories (Shankar et al. 2001), and brand managers to storytellers (Fanning 1990). Brand stories have been labeled “modern sagas” by Twitchell (2004, 485), who noted an exponential growth of this marketing strategy. Many organizations are adding the role of Chief Storyteller to their ranks (Pulizzi 2012).

Marketers use of a storytelling format supports the goal of creating memorable messages that activate later when faced with a purchase decision. Humans capture, store, and retrieve information in story-based formats (Woodside 2010). People use an episodic method to store and retrieve information. Humans experience cathartic sensation through stories, and brands often play “pivotal roles enabling consumers to achieve the proper pleasure” (Woodside 2010, 533).

My informants rarely used the word *marketing* when discussing the actions marketing managers take on behalf of streetwear/sportswear brands. Rather, they tended to speak about the *story* a particular brand told. In my data, I found that interviews included fifty percent (50) more references to ‘story’ than to ‘marketing.’ Informants perceived brands to be in dialogue with consumers. For example, one informant shared,

“Content is key. Building stuff around it. Not just doing your simple commercial, but being able to tell stories and storytelling...I think that having these pieces of content, having these stories you can tell, they bring you closer to the consumer because they make it more tangible” (Bill). By using dialog with consumers to create stories served to build relationships between the brand and consumers.

Storytelling works to link the brands story to the consumer and make the brand relevant and cool. My informant stated, “I believe that storytelling mentality speaks to the coolness of the brand...when I look at the brands that I respect and that we all seem to follow, the ones that do the best storytelling, are the most successful, and use that [storytelling] as their marketing tool. That is their marketing,” (Cameron). Successful marketing managers use storytelling to make and maintain cool brands. This aligns with research showing storytelling as an effective marketing strategy.

Consumers use stories to make sense of the world around them (Bruner 1986). Stories play a pivotal role by aiding in the development of “awareness, comprehension, empathy, recognition, recall, and provide meaning to the brand” (Singh and Sonnenurg 2012, 191). Brands, in fact, derive multiple benefits from a storytelling approach. Stories can promote action, allow brands to better communicate their essence, and communicate their value (Denning 2006). Telling brand stories can remove from focus “price sensitivities” and instead place the focus on a “positive emotion” (Chiu, Hsieh, and Kuo 2012, 272). Such brand narratives help develop a persona that is “well-defined, recognizable, memorable, and compelling” (Herskovitz and Crystal 2010, 21).

While some informants equated storytelling and strong marketing, many did not. To those in the latter group, storytelling had a positive connotation, whereas a traditional

marketing approach was seen in a negative light. For example, one informant shared, “I think whenever you start talking about marketing... there’s almost a negative connotation. Like marketing - you’re basically wanting to get someone at the end of the day. If you’re story[telling] ‘just listen to my story. I don’t need anything back from you. I just want you to hear what I have to say’ I think it’s pretty cool. If you’re on board with it, then cool,” (Michael). Storytelling is seen as a more authentic way to interact with consumers, rather than other methods seen as a crasser attempt to sell. Thus storytelling was more generally perceived to be more likely to lead to a perception of cool.

Advertisements that use narrative processing have been found to be more persuasive (Lien and Chen 2013), lead to greater brand associations and willingness to pay (Lundqvist et al. 2013), and result in higher brand ratings, purchase intent, and brand-self connection (Escalas 2004). Such an approach can yield higher ratings by consumers (Lien and Chen 2013). Buyers exposed to a storytelling approach were more animated and engaged when asked about the brand, whereas those not exposed to the brand story were more negative in both tone and focused on functional aspects of the brand (Lundqvist et al. 2013). The storytelling format leads consumers to process advertising differently, with fewer counterarguments to ad claims (Deighton et al. 1989). Consumers react to advertising using such a format in a more empathetic or emotional manner, and are more accepting of the “commercial’s verisimilitude and respond to it emotionally” (Deighton et al. 1989, 341).

Storytelling rather than more traditional methods of marketing communication, utilizes narrative elements and familiar plots and themes. Important elements of storytelling include: message, source of conflict, characters, and plot (Fog et al. 2010).

The best brand stories are concise, utilize humor, and involve themes of reversal (Chiu, Hsieh, and Kuo 2012). In a finding related to the notion mentioned above in the section dealing with authenticity, Fog et al. (2010) argued brands must develop an identifiable goal, not simply financially-oriented, that stems from the brand's passion or *driving force*. Indeed, authenticity has been identified as an important element of brand stories (Denning 2006; Chiu, Hsieh, and Kuo 2012). Pulizzi (2012) described storytelling as critical to “attract(ing) and retain(ing) customers (116).

Nike was again used by my informants to illustrate how managers effectively maintain a cool brand. They highlighted Nike's use of current topics relevant to youth, their athletes who can serve as characters, their cinematography and their plotlines to connect with consumers. Another informant, underscored the stories Nike tells, “The stories always tended to be the philosophy or the mantra that Nike believes in. It wasn't so much like Nike's better and Nike's gonna make you perform better, none of those all sporting good stories, either. It was always about human triumph over adversity. It was always about pushing yourself to the limit. It was always about anybody can be an athlete, if you have a body. All those things that were just not about what they were specifically pushing, at the time. It was a[n] inspirational almost cult-like message that they would send out. They would build a story around that,” (Dexter). By focusing the story on the core brand meaning and values rather than the brand and product, Nike is able to build an authentic connection to the consumers.

The rise in the importance of storytelling has been driven by the social media developments over the last decade. One informant spoke in detail regarding this factor, “With the Internet and with social media now, you can actually tell your own story and

have it be told in a way that's, going back to the beginning, authentic to your brand. Like, maybe just as early as ten years ago, if I wanted to tell a content piece, I'd have to work with a network or a magazine to do that. Then, I'm in the hands of them to edit it in the way that they see fit. Nine times outta ten, they screw it up. They don't do it right. Now that we have the ability and the power in our hands to tell the story that we want and the audience is receptive to it," (Jim). My brand managers focused on social media as enabling a storytelling through full control of that story. But other informants focused on the rise of social media fundamentally shifted the stage of the brand so that cool brands stories have expanded to include the marketing managers. One informant addressed this, "Before, the brands could just be the brands, but now, because of social media, the kids are following the owners. For me, I also have to be conscious. I can't just post [a photo] of me eating a sandwich with my family. It has to be me eating a sandwich at [an exclusive restaurant] in Milan. The people, these stories are what the kids start to believe in and think is cool or not cool. What it does, it puts more pressure on the brands to tell more stories because you can't just be your regular self; now you have to fit within the story that's aligned with your brand," (Renee). In the case of the storytelling of cool brands expanding beyond the stories advanced by the brand to include the characters and stories of the brand owners, the relevance of earlier themes of manager perspectives of cool also become apparent. The associations of the brands including marketing managers must enhance the cool story of the brand. As creators and enablers of cool brands marketing managers become an authentic link with the brands they admire.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

The goal of this dissertation is to identify what marketers believe makes and keeps brands cool. My analysis of interview data identified five themes, as represented in Figure 5.1 below.

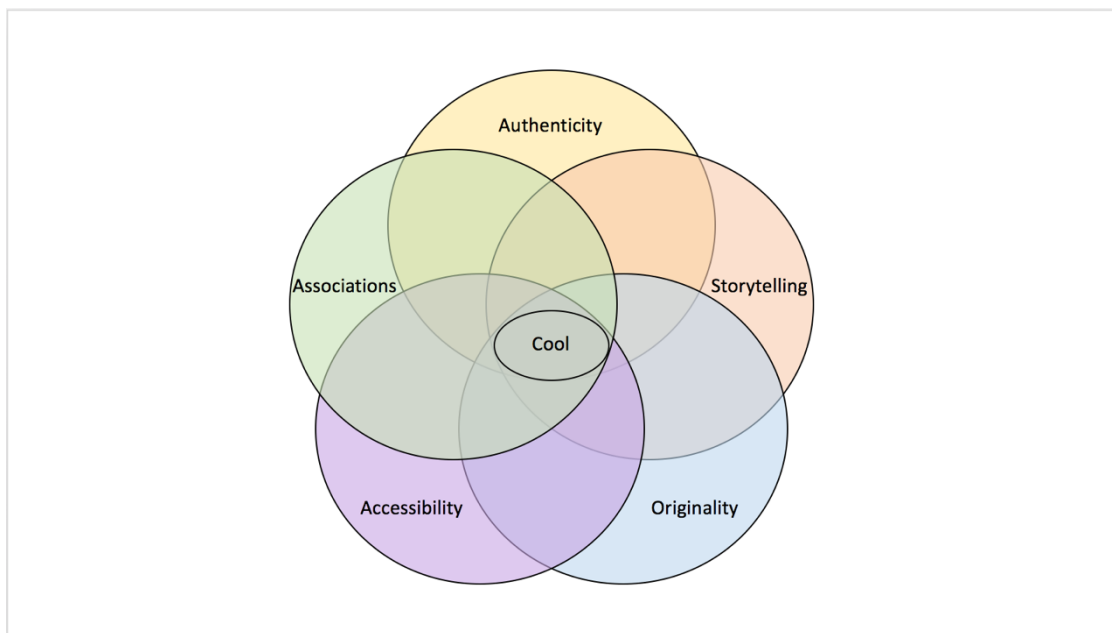


Figure 5.1 Five overlapping themes of cool brands.

As Figure 5.1 shows, interviews indicated that *cool* evolves from the points at which the themes Authenticity, Storytelling, Originality, Accessibility and Associations overlap. Brands develop an aura of cool if all of these themes are present, but only a small number of brands manage to meet the criteria for all themes. However, brands may also become cool despite the absence of one or perhaps even two of the themes. For example, a brand might take a more traditional approach to marketing communication

rather than the storytelling approach, but still manage to be cool. Given the centrality of the roles of authenticity, associations, and accessibility, it is much less likely that a brand perceived to be inauthentic would become cool.

The diagram shown in Figure 1 also speaks to the idea that while many brands can claim authenticity, only a subset of these brands will be perceived as being cool. The same is true of the other themes; a brand may take a storytelling approach to marketing, or have numerous positive associations, but, alone or even in concert with one or two of the other themes, these themes are insufficient to engender the perception of cool. It is the at the confluence of all five of the themes that a brand is most likely to be imbued with cool.

The Importance of Authenticity in Cool Brands

As was discussed extensively in the findings section, authenticity is critical to ability of a brand to be perceived as cool. The remaining three of the four other drivers of cool often interact with, or are assessed through the lens of authenticity. Consider for example associations.

But there is an important interplay between a brand's associations and authenticity that must be considered. A brand's associations with individuals, other brands, or other outside elements (a licensing partner or an activity the brand is used for) may reinforce or undercut the perception of authenticity. For example, a brand might be used by a noted influencer to *perform*. That performance could be skateboarding, for a skate-focused brand, playing baseball, for a sports performance brand, or climbing a mountain, for an outdoor-focused brand. Use by an influencer builds a positive

association between the brand and that person, as well as between the brand and the activity he/she performed. This leads to growth of the brand's perceived authenticity, due to the use of the brand in an activity that is authentic to the brand. Cool is imbued into the brand through its authentic nature, and by association with the influencer, the activity of the influencer, and the authenticity of the influencer and the activity.

And yet those associations can be viewed as either authentic or inauthentic depending on how they are developed. Brands can seek to generate associations by paying celebrities and/or athletes to use their product. Importantly, however, such arrangements can at times be seen as inauthentic in nature. Given the critical nature authenticity plays in the development of cool in brands, such associations perceived to be inauthentic can undercut the aura of cool in a brand.

My informants discussed Reebok facing exactly this issue, Reebok. Despite having roots as a fitness brand that primarily appealed to women, at one point Reebok strongly pursued endorsements from top basketball athletes and rap artists (Linnett 2002; Arango 2003). These associations felt inauthentic to consumers. One informant suggested this may be due to the sense that the artists who signed on to create Reebok products did so for money rather than a passion for the brand. Because the associations marketers pursued between the artists and Reebok were judged to be inauthentic in nature, the tactics that Reebok sought to legitimize itself as brand in the streetwear/sportswear market actually decreased its perceived authenticity, and ultimately undercut its ability to be perceived as cool.

As with associations, the originality displayed by the brand must be such that it maintains the sense of authenticity. The innovations generated by the brand, or the

creativity displayed from the brand must be in keeping with the DNA or core meaning of the brand, and not feel as if they are “coming out of left field.” And at the same time, profit can not be seen as the sole primary rationale for the development of the innovations. Rather the innovations must be seen to stem from the the brand’s core DNA, and to serve a higher motive than just profit. Violation of either of these motivations runs the risk of undercutting authenticity, and in turn, the aura of cool.

Storytelling is also very closely tied to authenticity in that the stories that the brand tells are often meant to reinforce the authentic nature of the brand. It was clear from my conversations with my informants that brands in the streetwear/sportswear industry spend devote a great degree of their effort and focus on reinforcing the legitimacy of their authenticity as a way to ultimately become or remain perceived to be cool. Storytelling is an action taken by the brand that tells the consumer “Here’s who we are as a brand. If what is important to us is also important to you, you should buy us.” Or perhaps even more so “you should join us.” The stories often focus and reinforce the DNA of the brand, or the origins of the brand, even though the brand may have grown far beyond its origins.

Of all of the themes identified, accessibility is the one least tied to authenticity. In contrast, the theme with which accessibility has the greatest interplay is associations. By managing the outlets in which the brand is sold, the types of products sold in various outlets, and the quantities in which they are sold, the brand is able to maintain its appeal to influencers and lead consumers. This allows the brand to maintain associations that are critical to the develop and maintenance of the aura of cool.

Traits versus Tactics

One manner in which to categorize the five themes identified as drivers of cool is whether they are a trait that is almost inherent, or intrinsic to the brand versus a tactic that is utilized by the brand. Amongst those characterized as a trait, authenticity is first and foremost.

Central to authenticity is having a genuine origin, or brand story, and a core meaning, or DNA, that are tangible and persist over time, and provide the brand with a reason for being beyond sheer profit. These are characteristics of a brand, and thus best seen traits. While managers can try to craft authenticity, without these core elements, it is likely to be seen as manufactured, and thus inauthentic.

To a large degree a brand's associations are a characteristic of the brand. Managers can and should attempt to manage a brand's associations, but fundamentally what consumers come to associate with a brand is not fully or perhaps even primarily controlled by the managers of that brand. Managers may want certain influencers to use the brand, may want certain stores to stock it, and may want certain consumers to buy it, but these associations cannot be entirely controlled or dictated by managers. Associations are therefore best characterized as a trait of the brand, as opposed to a tactic the brand can utilize.

Originality can be seen as both a trait of the brand and a tactic employed to manage cool. Based on their track record, or the tactics they employ, brands can be perceived to be steeped in or have the trait of originality. It was also clear from the informant interviews that originality or creativity is an important tactic as a driver of cool. Originality includes focusing on innovation in a range of product-related areas,

including technical innovations and product aesthetics. Beyond product development efforts, creativity in terms of marketing programs or events was seen as an important driver of cool.

Storytelling involves the use of a particular approach to brand marketing. It is very clearly a tactic utilized by brands as opposed to a trait that is characteristic of the brand.

The final theme identified, accessibility, is best viewed as a tactic employed by marketers meant to manage or segment product availability. Certain retailers can buy a particular type of good, and other (more exclusive) retailers can buy a product line that is sufficiently or distinctively different, often in smaller quantities, to create the illusion of scarcity of supply. There are ways to increase the perception of exclusivity of certain products. These include the use of materials perceived to be rare, the establishment of very high price points to limit demand, and the setting of limited quantities of the products. All of these actions are tactics taken by managers to increase the likelihood that a brand is viewed as scarce and/or exclusive.

Interactions Among Themes

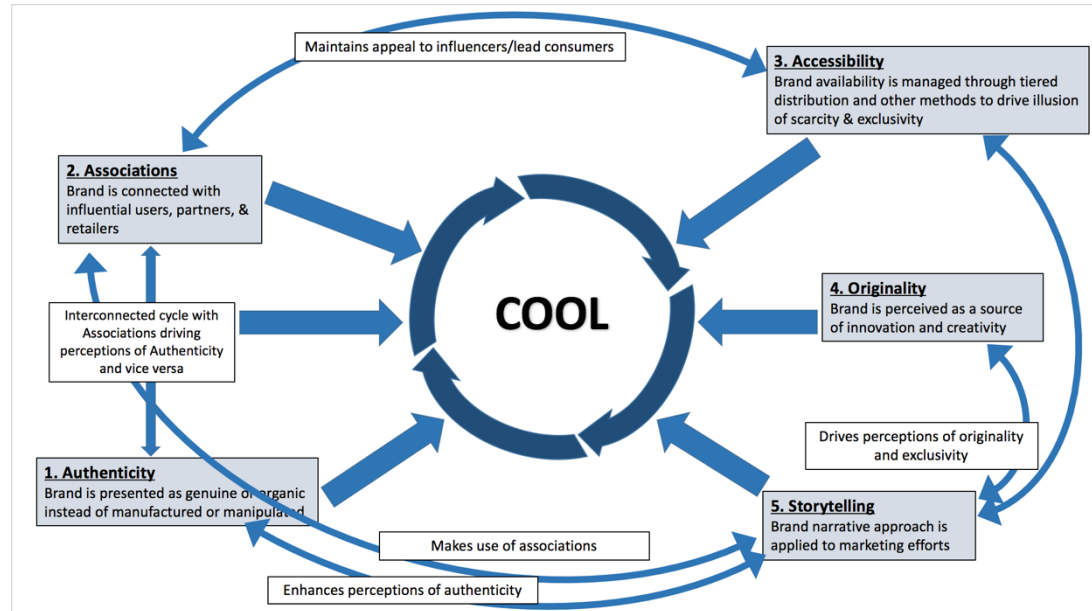


Figure 5.2. Interactions among the Drivers of Cool Brands

Figure 5.2 depicts the various interplays between the five core themes and how they both directly influence the perception of cool in a brand and also interact with the other themes. Beyond its interplay with associations, for instance, accessibility also can be seen to intermix with storytelling, as the notion of the brand as being exclusive or scarce is at times part of the story told by a brand. Originality, too, interacts with storytelling, with the latter serving to reinforce the perception that the brand is an originator, delivering innovation and creativity to the market. Storytelling interacts with yet another theme, associations. Marketers can selectively choose which associations they want to highlight that can serve to reinforce perceptions of cool, of authenticity, etc.

The dual pointed arrows in Figure 2 illustrate the notion that, for instance, while storytelling utilizes a brand's associations to build and reinforce the perception of cool, the act of storytelling also serves to reinforce those associations. This bidirectionality is

true of many, if not most, of the interactions between the themes. Another example is the bidirectional interactions between authenticity and associations. Authenticity drives associations, as influencers and lead consumers may be more apt to use a brand that is perceived as authentic. In turn, associations between an athletic brand and an athlete (for example) can serve to reinforce the authentic nature of the brand. These interplays can become to some degree self-sustaining, virtuous cycles for brands.

The same bidirectional interaction can be true of associations and accessibility. A brand seen as inaccessible will be appealing to, and therefore maintain associations with, influencers and lead consumers based on its perceived exclusivity. In turn, the brand's associations with these influencers and lead consumers provide it with the power that it needs to dictate segmented distribution strategies to its retail partners, which are critical to maintaining its appeal to those same influencers/consumers.

Ultimately, these interactions among the themes, as well as the themes alone, serve to maintain the brand's ability to continue to be perceived as cool. However, a problem with any individual theme can be disruptive to the cycle depicted. Should, for example, a brand cease maintaining its illusion of scarcity and exclusivity, the combination of a lack of perceived differentiation of the product in the marketplace, the perceived oversupply of goods, and the subsequent loss of associations between the brand and influencers and lead consumers, are very likely lead to the brand's no longer being perceived as cool.

Integration and Alignment with Past Research

As noted earlier, my work was meant to add to our knowledge on cool, but specifically about cool in brands (as opposed to people). Table 5.1 below indicates both the overlaps between my findings and prior research, as well as areas where my work has added new insights.

As it relates to what was labeled reference cool, my findings are aligned with prior research indicating people considered cool can aid in the ability of making a brand cool. My research makes clear, however, that other associations of a brand can be important cool building blocks. Specifically, *collabos* (or co-branded offerings) and retail partners were identified as cool driving (or undermining) factors.

Table 5.1 Revisiting the Elements of Cool in Products

Element	Comments based on Findings from this Dissertation
<i>Reference Cool</i>	
Able to create subculture	Not addressed by informants
Conveys Successfulness	Not addressed by informants
Aids in Self-Presentation; Has social currency	Addressed by some informants
Associations with cool people	Identified by study informants as a major component of cool in brands. Endorsers, influencers, collaborations, and retail partners can either build or undermine the perception of the brand as cool.
<i>Aesthetic Cool</i>	
Attractiveness	Design innovation was a sub-theme to originality
Desirability	Not addressed by informants
Classic Aesthetics	Not addressed by informants
<i>Singular Cool</i>	

Originality/Innovation	Identified by study informants as a major component of cool in brands. While past research on innovation focused on product innovation, study informants had a broader view that included not only product technological and design innovation but also innovation in the marketing of these products.
Bounded Autonomy	Identified by study informants as being connected to authenticity; evolving is believed to be critical to the ability of a brand to remain relevant, however unbounded autonomy is viewed as the brand “trying too hard”, which undermines authenticity.
Scarcity/Exclusivity	Identified by study informants as a major component of cool in brands. Informants felt that if a product was too widely available and lacked a strategy to keep it exclusive (e.g., retail segmentation, limited editions), it would be hard to maintain a brand as cool.
Authenticity	Identified by most informants as a primary, essential component of cool in brands. Driven by (a) having a core meaning or “DNA” to which a brand remains true; (b) having an authentic origin or brand story or heritage; (c) the use of a brand in a manner that consumers perceived to be authentic; and (d) the perception that the brand has a reason for being beyond being strictly profit-focused.
<i>Functional Cool</i>	
Usability	Use of a product in a manner perceived to be authentic
Quality	Noted by some informants but not identified as a major theme. Possible to have been considered a given by others.
<i>Personal Cool</i>	
Helps self-identity	Not addressed by informants
Fits my style	Not addressed by informants
Establishes uniqueness	Addressed above in Singular Cool
<i>Other</i>	
Fun	Not addressed by informants

Gives meaning to life	Not addressed by informants
Ritual	Not addressed by informants
Understated Marketing	Storytelling, a form of understated marketing, was identified in the current research as a major component of cool in brands. Storytelling was seen as a positive, authentic way to interact with consumers, whereas traditional marketing methods were seen as a more crass attempt to sell.

Singular cool, or the element of cool related to uniqueness was a major component of what my informants indicated drove cool in brands. They noted the importance of the illusion of scarcity and exclusivity in brands, and identified specific strategies and tactics to drive these elements. One heretofore unidentified strategy was the use of tiered distribution on the part of brands. As detailed in chapter 4, this strategy was perceived by my informants to play a critical role in properly managing the associations for brands, allowing them to grow by selling products in more “mass” outlets, while maintaining the appeal to lead users and influencers.

I have listed authenticity as a component of Singular Cool, and there are certainly elements that support that assessment. For central to the concept of authenticity was the notion of a brand’s DNA. By definition, DNA is unique to a brand. While other researchers have noted the relevance of authenticity to cool, I believe my work adds to this research in a number of ways. First and foremost, I do not believe the central nature of authenticity, at least as it pertains to streetwear/sportswear brands, has been noted by prior researchers. Authenticity was seen as a necessary, but not sufficient condition for establishing cool in brands. In fact, there was some indication that it a formative building block for cool.

Not all aspects of authenticity match perfectly with the notion of Singular Cool. I have noted for example, that an element of authenticity, use of a product in a manner considered to be cool, in the category of Functional Cool.

Another aspect of my work that supports and extends our understanding of cool is the idea of marketers using storytelling approach to aid in the process of imbuing cool in their brands. My informants were largely aligned in terms of the importance of this specific type of what might be labeled understated marketing.

Future Research

Future research may determine whether some, none, or all of the themes also drive coolness in brands in other markets. Would the same themes drive a technology brand to be cool? Perhaps, as informants noted similarities between Apple and Nike. Apple's attempts to drive the illusion of exclusivity and scarcity with its product launches clearly align with a cool theme. Informants also described Apple as being cool based on the use of the products by designers to create interesting product designs. The association with designers conveys authenticity and imbues Apple with coolness, just with streetwear/sportswear brands.

Another area of future research could explore whether the rule that suggests only small brands can be cool is outdated. All informants mentioned Nike as a brand that is cool. When I asked directly if Nike was in fact a cool brand, most informants answered definitively that it was. When I asked about the belief that only small brands can be cool, most informants disagreed and pointed to Apple as a counter-example. This aligns with the findings of an unpublished article by Hillary Leonard and myself. We asked

consumers to name a cool brand, and more than half of consumers named either Apple or Nike (both very large, established, and profitable brands).

If Nike and Apple achieved this status, can all big brands be cool? If so, how does this happen? Is big now cool? Or are these brands, despite their size, somehow not perceived to be big? Schutz, CEO of Starbucks, discussed the challenge of growing the Starbucks brand while staying in touch with what led to its original success stated. He stated, “It’s hard to get big and stay small” (WNYC 2016). Future research may yield insights on this important topic.

An additional area of future research is to address whether there is a temporal order to the themes of cool. Does a brand first become authentic, then develop associations, utilize a plan to segment its product to limit access and develop the illusion of scarcity and exclusivity, and so on in a kind of step-by-step process that results in cool? Based on the analysis of my interviews, a storytelling framework is an unlikely genesis for a cool brand. Informants described storytelling as a more effective manner in which to communicate a brand. However, authenticity, originality, or associations needed to exist in order for the storytelling approach to be relevant. Likewise, accessibility and the illusion of scarcity/exclusivity cannot serve as a genesis of cool for most brands. Instead, limited editions and limited supplies may fuel a sense of cool that began with one of the other themes. The illusion of scarcity and exclusivity is critical in driving and then sustaining cool, so it cannot precede the storytelling phase in the temporal order of a brand becoming cool.

It is unclear, however, whether there is a necessary temporal order of cool based on the remaining themes. Authenticity and originality may be antecedents or requisite

factors for cool, and associations may act as the linchpin to actually imbue brands with cool. Brands must be authentic and innovative, but until the associations are built up by influencers (celebrities, “the kid who gets the kid,” leading retailers, other brand partners, the purpose for which the product is used), the brand has only the latent capability to be cool. Associations would then activate the latent nature of cool within the brand. This is an area where future research might shed further light on the topic of cool.

Finally, future research might prove productive in exploring the topic of whether only people can be cool or whether brands themselves can become imbued with cool that is lasting. Many researchers believe that only people, not brands, are cool. Yet my practitioner informants largely did not concur with this assessment. Work by Warren and Campbell (2014) aligns with the view shared by my informants. Additional work that directly addresses this topic is warranted.

Limitations

The present study is limited to cool as related to the streetwear/sportswear industry. It is beyond the scope of this work to suggest that the themes and sub-themes described herein are relevant to other industries. Any such application should proceed with caution. A second limitation is that while I strove to achieve saturation before discontinuing further interviews, it is possible that additional interviews would have yielded insights that contradicted, modified, or amended those in my sample. A related limitation is that, as with any industry, managers working in streetwear/sportswear become familiar with each other. Discussions about brands within the industry occur quite naturally at conferences and meetings, and industry lore may arise regarding the

success or failure of a given brand. Thus, the viewpoints of the informants may not be entirely independent. It is impossible to determine the extent to which such discussions or common industry thinking may have influenced the information that my informants shared with me.

An additional limitation is this work was retrospective in nature. Memories can fade and are often influenced by a number of factors. It may be that the histories shared with me by my informants were colored by such faded memories or a desire to preserve a particular informant's self-image or prestige. The use of 19 informants minimized the impact of any such occurrences, but they cannot be ruled out. Finally, I was personally familiar with a number of the informants. I remained alert for unspoken shared meanings between myself and the informants, but cannot rule out the chance that some arose. This may result in the omission of a relevant information from an informant.

I believe, however, these limitations are more than counterbalanced by the strengths of this work. Many streetwear/sportswear brands work to achieve the status of being a cool brand. My informants confirmed that managers pursue cool. Articles, such as those by Emmerentze Jervell and Germano (2015) and Lindsay (2004), addressing the ways in which brands may maintain their cool appear regularly in the popular press. However, the actions that managers of these brands take to try to achieve cool is largely unaddressed by academicians. Nike, more so than any other brand in the streetwear/sportswear industry, managed to achieve and maintain the perception of being a cool brand. Thus, this dissertation contributes to the field, fills a gap in current literature, and helps define this elusive and yet, critically important topic.

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