

Notes on “Cool” and “Nerds”

Last time, I gave you a lecture on three pretty different definitions of “cool” which were found on wikipedia.org. I would suggest that each of these definitions is one that makes sense, but that the real meaning of the word “cool” is only understood when you take all three into account.

1. Cool as elusive essence:

- Cool is something that is real, but cannot be exactly defined. It is something that people pursue, but which, because it is impossible to define exactly, it cannot be captured, copied, or manufactured. If something cool is copied, the “coolness” of that thing is diminished.

EXAMPLE: Nike Air shoes were, for some reason, very “cool” when they were first available. As more people began to wear them, they became less “cool” and some other clothing object suddenly was “cool”. Three rules of cool as defined in the New Yorker article “Cool Hunt” follow:

1. "The act of discovering what's cool is what causes cool to move on"
2. "Cool cannot be manufactured, only observed"
3. "[Cool] can only be observed by those who are themselves cool"

2. Cool as zero sum game:

- Cool is a social hierarchy system, and everything relates to everything else – and everyone relates to everyone else – in a way that is non-zero-sum. If person A is cooler than you, you are by definition less cool (or more uncool) than person A. Nobody is neutral in this system: (potentially) everyone is more cool than someone else, and less cool than someone else.

3. Cool as a fictional concept:

- Cool in this perspective is something that is created and managed by corporations in order to regulate economic activity. As Kalle Lasn very critically puts it, Cool is "*a heavily manipulative corporate ethos*". This suggests that companies use advertising to promote the idea that you can be cool (or *cooler*) if you buy certain objects, like Nike Air shoes or a certain kind of cigarettes. They then release new products, which are needed to maintain “coolness”, and this is how they ensure sales over the long term.

EXAMPLE: Bellbottom jeans, now known as boot cut jeans, have gone out of fashion, and come back into fashion, several times over the last fifty years. When bellbottom jeans went out of fashion, jeans cut a different way came into fashion. This meant people had to buy a whole new kind of jeans to stay “fashionable” and “cool”.

Nerds and Cool

Just as cool is very hard to define, the word “nerd” is very hard to define. However, this (messy) map of concepts and signals may help you in looking out for signals of these ideas in the media we’ll explore in the next few weeks.

