

## EVIDENCE

# The Science Of Cool

WHAT MAKES ONE CONSUMER DESIGN COOL AND NOT ANOTHER?

Take a look at the two water bottles below. The one on the left is pretty much your standard water bottle design: tall, clear, probably crinkly. The one on the right feels a bit less conventional, with its sleek aluminum shell shaped like an Erlenmeyer flask. In a survey of which is cooler, the bottle on the right would win right away, though both bottles serve the very same function.



Journal of Consumer Research

So what is it, exactly, that makes one design cooler than another? The difference is surprisingly tough to articulate. You might say it's because the bottle on the right is unconventional. But a water bottle shaped like a kangaroo would be unconventional, too, and you wouldn't necessarily consider it cool. There's more to it than just being different.

A VERY DELICATE  
BALANCE OF DOING  
SOMETHING THAT  
SHOWS THAT YOU GO  
YOUR OWN WAY, BUT  
YOU DO IT IN A WAY  
THAT IS SOCIALLY  
ACCEPTABLE."

scientists have spilled quite a bit of empirical ink on what makes something cool. They've basically whittled the phenomenon down to four main traits.

First, cool is a social perception, not an inherent quality. So, Pabst Blue Ribbon (PBR) has always been PBR, but it wasn't cool until Portland hipsters embraced it. Second, coolness is relative. One shirt from Walmart might seem cool compared

with another shirt from Walmart, but neither will be as cool as a shirt from H&M (which itself might seem less cool than another H&M shirt). Third, coolness is almost universally positive. And fourth, something that's cool tends to diverge from the norm.

It's this fourth trait--the unconventionality of cool--that seems to be the key. But in the past that trait been poorly defined. As shown by our example of the kangaroo water bottle, or even a real life product like a Segway, being

unconventional alone is not enough to be cool. And, in fact, designs or brands that diverge from the norm too much run the risk of being not just uncool but strongly disliked.



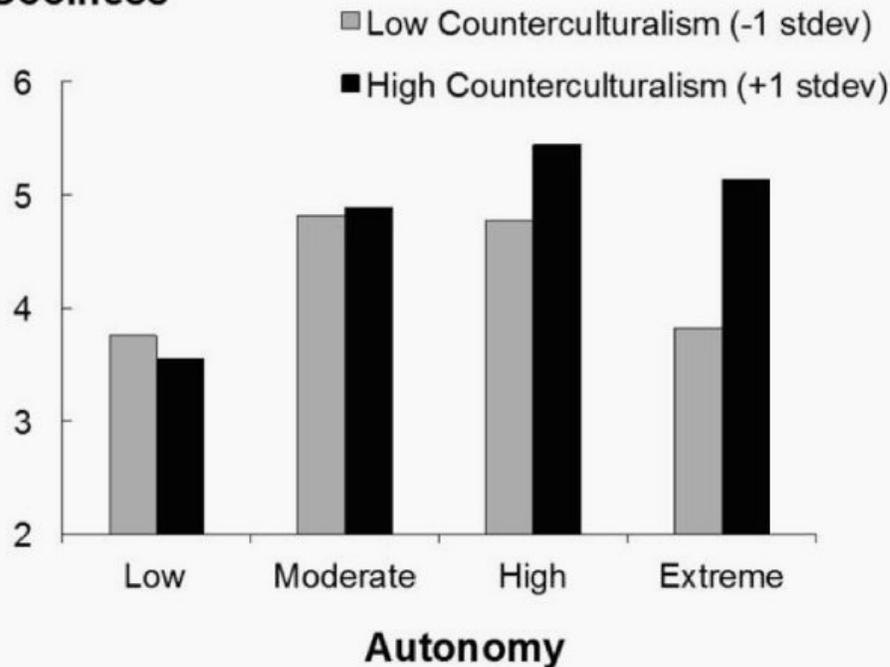
"BEING  
UNCONVENTIONAL  
ALONE IS NOT ENOUGH

Recently, marketing scholars Caleb Warren and Margaret C. Campbell tried to understand the connection between conventionality and coolness with a bit more precision.

"Being cool requires a very delicate balance of doing something that shows that you go your own way and do your own thing, but you do it in a way that is socially desirable or at least acceptable," Warren tells Co.Design.

In their most telling experiment, the researchers introduced test participants to four fictional fashion brands. Each brand was paired with a description that aligned it with a low, moderate, high, or extreme level of unconventionality. A "low" level of unconventionality was essentially the norm--something that followed the market. A "moderate" brand often conformed to convention, while a "high" brand often defied convention. Extreme brands were controversial.

Warren and Campbell found the highest coolness ratings among the brands in the middle: not too conventional, not too risky. A moderately unconventional brand was cooler than a typical brand; a highly unconventional brand was cooler than an extreme and controversial brand. This pattern mostly held true whether the raters (i.e., test participants) had countercultural personalities or not. In other words, even people who challenge convention as a lifestyle don't always think extreme unconventionality is cool.

**Coolness**

The researchers use the term "autonomy" instead of "unconventional."

Journal of Consumer Research

The lesson for designers is they need to know two things about an audience to make a product cool. First, what does that audience consider normal? (The design can fit slightly outside that mold.) Second, what does that audience consider the limits of *abnormality*. (The design should not cross it.) In the context of our water bottle designs, then, "Erlenmeyer flask-ish" rests beyond "clear and crinkly" but still within "kangaroo-shaped." (The unconventional water bottle is actually a Heineken design.)

"TOO MUCH COOLNESS  
CAN BE A BAD THING IN  
THE LONG RUN."

onto."

"Product designers, the good ones, know a lot of this implicitly," Warren says. "I think most of them are trying to be different or create things that are different in a way that's still accessible, or that people can latch

The perpetual concern for consumer designers, in particular, is that too much coolness can be a bad thing in the long run. A design that starts off as cool shifts the lines of conventionality, and then gets imitated so much

"If you're really doing something right, the chances are the coolness isn't going to last," Warren says. "Because you're going to shift what is the norm."

*[Image: Pabst Blue Ribbon via Flickr user Mark Faviell]*



ERIC JAFFE

Eric Jaffe writes about cities, history, and behavioral science.

Continued

[Twitter](#)

July 14, 2014 | 7:30 AM

[ADD NEW COMMENT](#)

[SIGN IN](#)

Type your comment here.

19 COMMENTS

MICHAEL ROLLER > ERIC JAFFE 22 DAYS AGO

Really interesting topic. I'm looking forward to reading more about the experiment in detail.

I think the sentiment from researchers on novelty is that whatever deviates from the norm must offer a perceived benefit (coolness or something else) that outweighs the potential risk of trying something new. Also, I wonder if different products carry different expectations on how important it is for them to be cool.

So, it's relatively low risk to try a different water bottle, but it's also not that important in feeling cool. On the other hand, an electronic device like an iPod is likely a very important symbol for coolness,

that the insights from this research are most useful when developing products that are low risk/high coolness potential products, like beer!



Share Link Reply

JACQUES FARMER > ERIC JAFFE A MONTH AGO

Fascinating study. Having begun to scientifically demonstrated how consistent the results are, it becomes possible to devise strategies using this data. For example, when faced with the task of "selling" a highly unconventional object/tool/..., part of the mission should also be to highlight where it parallels more conventional products (make it more familiar). Too often it is only the striking features that are further underlined.



Share Link Reply

DAAN MUNTINGA > ERIC JAFFE A MONTH AGO

Cool study. But then again: aren't all great brands a matter of "breaking the convention, but don't leave the room?"



Share Link Reply

MSW2139 > ERIC JAFFE A MONTH AGO

Yo scientists, you know what's not cool? When "marketing scholars" use "science" to try to understand why something is cool, only to come to the conclusion that, like, it's important to be different, but like, not that different.



Share Link Reply

JMCGARIGLE > ERIC JAFFE A MONTH AGO

Great summary. The marketing challenge is maintaining "cool" when alternative becomes mainstream. Apple does; Google wants to; Michael Kors is trying.

JMCGARIGLE > ERIC JAFFE A MONTH AGO

Summed up well. Once achieved, the marketing challenge is managing what happens when alternative becomes mainstream.



Share Link Reply

HIKENO SMITH > ERIC JAFFE A MONTH AGO

Never know that it was so cool lol very nice information  
<http://www.datesarena.com/>



Share Link Reply

Comment removed.

ADAM FERRIER > ERIC JAFFE A MONTH AGO

Very similar findings to my thesis in clinical psychology 'the underlying constructs of cool people'

[http://figshare.com/articles/Identifying\\_the\\_Constructs\\_That\\_Underlie\\_the\\_Concept\\_of\\_a\\_Cool\\_Person/888378](http://figshare.com/articles/Identifying_the_Constructs_That_Underlie_the_Concept_of_a_Cool_Person/888378)



Share Link Reply

LUIS > ERIC JAFFE A MONTH AGO

Who would have thought that getting prescriptions could be this cool:

[www.getmyrx.com](http://www.getmyrx.com)



Share Link Reply

ODONNELL > ERIC JAFFE A MONTH AGO

coolness. Tweens for example are making their first efforts to separate from the family and becoming independent, so two things; the opinions of their friends become inordinately important, and they 'try out' an unending parade of objects from the world (e.g. fashion, art, music a la McCracken's meaning transfer model) to construct unique transitional identities that conform with their groups' values. The very act of setting out to create something cool for this group will by definition make it uncool (e.g. the creative destruction of coolhunters).

As we age and become more secure with our independence, and we settle into our adult identities, perhaps we are comfortable holding onto the things we've deemed as cool for longer periods of time. Hence the enduring coolness of Apple and Google, so far.



Share Link Reply

SCOTT DUNHAM > ERIC JAFFE A MONTH AGO

There's more to elaborate on this. Essentially, all elements of have some sort of initial function to their purpose. Jay Doblin pointed this out years ago with his Discrimination article. It basically broke down the essential elements of design based off their natural price and their vernacular. Here's a link to an overview to his design matrix: [http://1.bp.blogspot.com/-CTI3eL3stnQ/TrSgmMJwnqI/AAAAAAAAABQ8/SswUs8itzmk/s1600/Discrimination\\_Jay\\_Doblin.jpg](http://1.bp.blogspot.com/-CTI3eL3stnQ/TrSgmMJwnqI/AAAAAAAAABQ8/SswUs8itzmk/s1600/Discrimination_Jay_Doblin.jpg) All products that are designed and produced have some sort of function that fits within their own vernacular. A solo cup, for example, a product that is designed to hold liquid, but the way that it's designed it a also a disposable item. This a macro element to the product. As far as the coolness factor goes, is more of a micro element that can be fit into each of these macro areas. Like the PBR can, it's got a cool design, but it's also a disposable item.



Share Link Reply

JUAN JOSE ARANGO CORREA > ERIC JAFFE A MONTH AGO

Very interesting. But even when you do something that becomes the norm, there are still rare chances that the product will still be

social group that will make products cool as if they were curators telling the rest what to do. Something I think should be taken into consideration



Share Link Reply

Comment removed.

**MARK BURGESS** > **ERIC JAFFE** A MONTH AGO

What makes something cool has always been fascinating. What if a firm can apply "coolness" to develop the iPod of their industry? Brands like Lacoste were cool years ago, lost it and have comeback. Reebok was cool years ago, lost it and is still trying to comeback. Apple has always been cool. Cool brands rest uneasy worrying that they may wake-up one day and lose their cool ... so to speak. Cool is something marketers need to identify and bottle for new products and design is the key element.



Share Link Reply

**CENTURY PACKERS** > **ERIC JAFFE** 2 MONTHS AGO

whoooo great.

<http://packersandmoversvimannagar.cmpune.in/>



Share Link Reply

**STEPHEN TAYLOR** > **ERIC JAFFE** 2 MONTHS AGO

PBR became cool in 1986 when Frank Booth blessed it in Blue Velvet, and became uncool when everyone else in the world decided it must be cool since Portland hipsters liked it.



Share Link Reply



 Share [Link](#) [Reply](#)

Comment removed.