Searching the word “dope” in powerful databases such as Anthropological Literature, MLA International Bibliography, and the Nation Archive Premium yields literary wonders like “Photorefractive effects in polymer dissolved liquid crystal composites with fullerene derivatives.” In order to get any helpful results, you have to forego the word “dope” entirely and search “being cool”—and even then, magnetic fields and hypothermia dominate the results. What does this lack of relevant information mean for dopeness, its attainment, and dope people?

Google, on the other hand, returns films, graphics, and Urban Dictionary—all relevant to the search for dopeness. The modernity and sheer scale of Google allows one to learn more, but information-oriented academic databases facilitate the preservation of dopeness as an elusive concept. The fundamental concept of this opposition translates directly to our current dilemma, as both people who are dope; and people who want to be dope.

“Dope” has a unique existence and usage, due to its storied past and constantly shifting present. More so than “cool” or “awesome”, “dope” possesses an air of uncertainty in a way that truly epitomizes its dopeness. When my team interviewed dozens of people—of varying ages, with all sorts of interests and experiences—about dopeness, we did not expect or receive a consistent style of answer, or even “good” (witty, relevant, insightful) answers. And that truly is dope, on so many levels. Dope is so adaptive and subversive that it cannot be contained by definition. This is an utterly unparalleled cultural phenomenon—despite emotional and verbal ubiquity, there is little official recognition, much less an agreed-upon definition.

So, what happens when you quantify the unquantifiable?

In our interviews, without fail, those who considered themselves dope were highly offended at our penultimate question: are you dope? By pointing to obvious things like facial

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1 The action of sacrificing, or replacing, “dope” with “cool” is actually a recurrent trend. Why would one describe the full capacity of dopeness with merely “It’s, like, being cool”? By conflating dope with cool, one does not only fail to harness the full potential of dope, you are actively degrading that potential.
structures or hairstyles, they made a continual rebuttal to the perceived insinuation of not being dope. To be so blessed in life and yet questioned is the most unforgivable of insults. Ultimately, the true ramifications of researching and defining dope, as we have done, push the physical and emotional boundaries of humanity’s existence. Many of our interviewees recognized this on a subconscious level, immediately responding with the default, “It’s being cool” answer. The basicity of this response is not (necessarily) to be scorned or laughed at—these people are valiantly trying their best to maintain what little stability our civilization has. Likely for this same reason, Urban Dictionary—as comprehensive as it usually is—does not dig deeper into “dope” as a positive attribute. As a concept that is never articulated, dopeness maintains an importantly invisible place in our universe. The inability to attain, develop, or place any definitiveness around dope facilitates its effectiveness. Once one defines dope, they (or we) essentially annihilates it; without dopeness, our civilization is nothing.

Our project is similar to a home video, given the multitude of people emotionally and physically close to us. The exploration of universal truths, such as dopeness, means that no matter if you were interviewed, helped us develop our project concept, or even just laughed at us, you are connected both to us and dopeness as a whole.

That’s dope.

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2 It goes without saying that Urban Dictionary is quite in-depth for “dope” as slang for heroin.

3 Have fun trying to survive the alien invasion without being dope.