

# Self-Awareness

## Lesson Title: Being Cool, Part 2

### Grade Level: High School

#### Project and Purpose

Student groups analyze articles about “coolness” and present their information to the full group.

#### Essential Question

Is being “cool”...cool?

#### Materials

- Student worksheets from previous session: “The Nine Defining Qualities of Cool” based on the book ***How to Be Cool*** by Tom Hodgkinson
- Four signs posted in distinct areas of the room with copies of the associated article:
  - “The Secret to Being Cool”
  - “5 Tips for Being Cool”
  - “How to Be Cool”
  - “What’s Wrong with Being Cool?”
- Copies of the April 12, 2018 article “The Secret to Being Cool: Try Smiling” from the Society for Consumer Psychology as posted by *ScienceDaily*
- Copies of the May 1, 2014 *Time Magazine* article, “How to Be Cool: 5 Research-Backed Tips” by Eric Barker
- Copies of the Jan. 13, 2018 *Psychology Today* article, “The 2 Ways People Become Cool: New research shows that the 2 secrets to being cool lie within your personality” by Susan Krauss Whitbourne Ph.D.
- Copies of the Jul 21, 2014 *Psychology Today* article, “What’s Wrong With Being Cool? Surprising new research exposes the weaknesses in coolness,” by Jessica Grogan, PhD.
- **Note:** Set up work areas around the room. Provide each area with copies of the article associated with the signs (or load it onto available technology ahead of time); you should have enough copies so that each person winds up with one article.

#### Teacher

**Note:** This lesson will take two or more class periods to complete.

Set up work areas around the room. Provide each area with copies of the article associated with the signs (or load it onto available technology ahead of time); you should have enough copies so that each person winds up with one article.

1. Distribute the student worksheets and review the analysis on being cool students completed in the previous session. Ask them to determine the most important takeaway from the session about being cool. Tell students they will use their worksheets to complete another step in the exploration of coolness.
2. Point out the signs posted in the room. Tell students that each of these signs indicates an article about being cool. Each person will choose the topic they want to read about and work on by going to that area. (Determine and explain how students will self-select — en masse? Random name draws? Etc.?)



# The Secret to Being Cool: Try Smiling

Date: April 12, 2018

Source: Society for Consumer Psychology

## Summary

People often assume that being inexpressive makes them appear more cool, but new research suggests that smiling is considered more cool than an inexpressive attitude.

Researchers found that, “people are perceived to be cooler when they smile compared to when they are inexpressive.”

For many people, one of the unspoken rules for being cool is maintaining an emotionally inexpressive attitude. This message is reinforced through advertisements where fashion models rarely smile and by quotes from celebrities. In an article in the Huffington Post, Kanye West said he doesn't smile in photographs because “it just wouldn't look as cool.”

Researchers at the University of Arizona recently questioned whether this connection between concealing emotions and coolness was in fact true. In a series of experiments, the investigators showed participants photographs of celebrities and non-celebrities who were smiling or inexpressive, and their results call into question common assumptions about what makes someone cool. The study is available online in the Journal of Consumer Psychology.

“We found over and over again that people are perceived to be cooler when they smile compared to when they are inexpressive in print advertisements,” says Caleb Warren, an assistant professor of marketing at the University of Arizona. “Being inexpressive makes people seem unfriendly or cold rather than cool.”

The researchers asked participants to view print advertisements for a clothing brand, and the model in the ad was either smiling or not. The models included well-known celebrities such as James Dean, Emily Didonato and Michael Jordan as well as unknown models, and they were endorsing unfamiliar brands and well-known brands. Then the participants rated the extent to which the model seemed cool on a seven-point scale. The participants consistently rated the smiling models as cooler than the inexpressive models.

Warren was surprised that participants preferred the smiling pictures of James Dean, who is typically inexpressive in photographs and considered a cool icon. The study also showed that participants had a less favorable impression of the brand when the models were inexpressive.

Warren and his co-authors, Todd Pezzuti from the University of Chile and Shruti Koley from Texas A&M University, found one exception to the trend: competitive situations. When a news article showed mixed martial arts fighters who were going to face one another at a press conference, participants rated the inexpressive athlete as more cool and dominant than a smiling athlete. When the context changed to a friendly meeting with fans at a press conference, then the participants rated the smiling fighter as cooler. “This shows that being uncool or cool can depend on the context,” says Warren.

The findings not only have implications for advertisers who are striving to make favorable impressions with consumers, but also for people as they relate to one another. While it may be difficult to change engrained societal assumptions about how to become cool, Warren hopes this research will increase awareness about how people perceive one another. In a world of social media, for example, individuals may want to consider posting smiling pictures rather than inexpressive photographs.

“This inaccurate belief about how to become cool can influence the way we communicate with others, and being inexpressive can hurt relationships,” Warren says. “It also makes it more difficult to understand one another. For these reasons, being inexpressive isn't necessarily cool.”



# How to Be Cool: 5 Research-Backed Tips

By Eric Barker

*Time Magazine* May 1, 2014

## Who Hasn't Wanted To Be Cool?

We've all wanted to be cool. But research shows that it's not merely a shallow desire. Cool makes a difference in life.

For instance, charismatic leaders bring out people's best.

Via *The Charisma Myth: How Anyone Can Master the Art and Science of Personal Magnetism*:

*If you're a leader, or aspire to be one, charisma matters. It gives you a competitive advantage in attracting and retaining the very best talent. It makes people want to work with you, your team, and your company.*

**Research shows that those following charismatic leaders perform better, experience their work as more meaningful, and have more trust in their leaders than those following effective but noncharismatic leaders.**

### But can we become more cool if we try?

Yes. Fake it until you make it work.

As Olivia Fox Cabane, author of *The Charisma Myth*, explains, attitude can be taught and improved:

The most commonly held myth that I encountered when first doing this research was that charisma is an innate quality, that some people have it and some people don't and whatever you're born with you're stuck with. In fact, charisma's a quality that fluctuates. It'll be there one moment and gone the next. It's also a very learnable quality. So, a lot of people who are known today as some of the most charismatic people actually learned charisma step by step.

So what is cool and how can we embody it?

## 1) Less. If I had to sum up cool in a word it would be: less.

Cool doesn't try too hard. Thing is, trying is very effective in life and especially in relationships. So what gives?

By not trying, cool people signal, "I'm so smooth, I don't have to try to get what I want."

**As Olivia Fox-Cabane points out: James Bond doesn't plead, smile or fidget. He speaks slowly and calmly.**

Via *The Charisma Myth: How Anyone Can Master the Art and Science of Personal Magnetism*:

***Can you imagine James Bond fidgeting? How about tugging at his clothing, bobbing his head, or twitching his shoulders? How about hemming and hawing before he speaks? Of course not. Bond is the quintessential cool, calm, and collected character...***

***This kind of high-status, high-confidence body language is characterized by how few movements are made. Composed people exhibit a level of stillness, which is sometimes described as poise. They avoid extraneous, superfluous gestures such as fidgeting with their clothes, their hair, or their faces, incessantly nodding their heads, or saying "um" before sentences.***

## 2) Confidence

Want to know a quick trick for getting people to like you? Assume they already do.

**Yes, we all love confidence. Combine doing less with supreme confidence and you have the essence of cool.**

Researchers gave people a course in charisma and one of the factors that produced results was acting confident.

It's no surprise, but research shows self-esteem is sexy and looking stressed is not. For men, modesty can actually be a negative:

**'Modest men were not liked as much as modest women because they were viewed as 'too weak' for a man and because they were viewed as insufficiently confident and ambitious,' the U.S. researchers wrote.**

### 3) Know The Rules — And Break Them

People who are cool aren't oblivious to proper behavior, in fact, they're socially savvy.

But they deliberately break the rules when it benefits them.

In the paper "Coolness: An Empirical Investigation" **rebelliousness was found to be a key component of cool:**

*The second factor, which explained a more modest amount of the variance, was comprised of five elements each rated as more cool than socially desirable. The elements of factor 2 either did not load on factor 1 (e.g., irony) or loaded in the opposite direction (e.g., emotional control). **Rebelliousness had the highest loading, and is arguably its most central theoretical element.** This second factor better embodies the core construct identified as cool in the scholarly literature (Frank, 1997; Heath & Potter, 2004; Pountain & Robins, 2000). This factor presents coolness as more opaque, less active, and less engaged: coolness as detachment and camouflage. We termed this factor Contrarian coolness.*

Why is rule breaking cool? Breaking the rules makes you appear powerful.

### 4) Focus On Attitude And Body Language Will Follow

Are my hands fidgeting? Am I biting my lip? Am I nodding too much? Is my speech slow enough? ...That's enough to drive you insane.

**As Fox-Cabane explains, there's no way to monitor and optimize what every part of your body is doing. It's just too much:**

*In every minute we have hundreds of thousands of body language signals that are pouring out from us and broadcasting how we're feeling and thinking to everyone around...*

So how do we make our body language more cool? **By feeling cool on the inside, our body language will reflect that:**

*The same way that athletes get themselves "into the zone" you get yourself into a mental zone of whatever body language you want to emanate. And that way it will cascade through your body from whatever mindset that you wanted to get. So it really is mind over matter in the sense that whatever's in your mind will come out through your body language.*

### 5) Cool Isn't Always The Coolest

**Being cool may be a positive but don't assume it's the best attitude for all situations. There is no single perfect way to be.**

Being distant creates intrigue but the power of showing interest in others has been scientifically validated over and over again.

Sometimes being an outright jerk pays big dividends. Ironically, so does vulnerability.

**While seeming detached and calm has its benefits, so does being very enthusiastic.**

Via The Tell: The Little Clues That Reveal Big Truths about Who We Are:



# What's Wrong With Being Cool

Surprising new research exposes the weaknesses in coolness.

Posted Jul 21, 2014 by Jessica Grogan, PhD.

*Psychology Today*

## Source

*"Popularity was fickle and elusive, like trying to catch fireflies in a jar. You were either born with it or relegated to wallflower status according to the mysterious and unknowable workings of the universe." —Melissa de la Cruz, Keys to the Repository*

Coolness is mystifying. As a teenager, you labor to crack the code. You attune yourself to subtle changes in fashion, you stay on top of musical trends, and you use hip slang, but it still slips away from you at crucial moments. There seems to be something fundamental, even constitutional, about being cool. You either have it, it seems, or you don't.

But having it isn't entirely straightforward, either. Essential to our view of coolness is the experience of love-hate, because at the same time we admire the cool kids, we recognize their paradoxes—pretty and snobby, irreverent and rude—but the coolest kids are never too snobby or too rude. They seem to know just how heavy their foot should rest on the gas.

## Why We Admire Coolness

Researchers have tried to unpack the paradoxes inherent in coolness, and have focused in particular on the importance to it of violating, or setting oneself apart from, certain dispensable norms. According to the author of a study of cool kids in Japan: "Cool has a brittle cultural logic. It is a residual code that has turned itself into an emergent code. Its performative style is based upon and derives simultaneously from the symbols of both disaffiliation and association." (Maher, 2005)

Being cool, then, means breaking the rules, but only so much. According to one researcher, "The way people and things are cool is if they seem autonomous—they do what they want to do to regardless of what other people think. But in a way that is appropriate, seen as valued or efficient; it's different, without being harmful or worse." (Warren, 2014)

In a sense, coolness mirrors self-actualization. Self-actualizers are people (though rarely teenagers) who think for themselves. They don't conform to fit in. They've evolved beyond basic needs to higher-order needs. Instead of valuing things like belonging, they've come to value higher principles like self-sufficiency, beauty, and justice.

Maslow describes self-actualizers as autonomous, standing apart from their culture and environment in important ways. They might break or reject the rules that don't make sense. They might be detached or asocial at times. They "are not dependent for their main satisfactions on the real world, or other people or culture or means-to-ends, or in general, on extrinsic satisfactions. Rather they are dependent for their own development and continued growth upon their own potentialities and latent resources." (Maslow, 1973, 188)

The self-assuredness of cool kids looks like self-actualization. This is probably a big part of why we admire it to such an extent.

## Where the Cool Kids Go Wrong

However, new research reminds us that while coolness may mimic self-actualization, it's really something different. Cool adolescents are cool, in part, because they seem older. They reference a state of being that's years ahead of their peers. But this maturity is superficial. Instead of actually being years more

evolved than their peers, the “cool kids” might actually be behind them in certain crucial ways.

The negative outcomes for once-cool kids support this idea. A longitudinal study tracked 184 13-year-olds, following up at ages 14 and 15, and again at ages 21 through 23. It found that, as young adults, once-acknowledged “cool” kids had more difficulties in friendship and romantic relationships, were at greater risk for alcohol and drug abuse, and engaged in more serious criminal behavior than their “uncool” peers. They also seemed more immature, often blaming others for relationship problems and breakups, without taking responsibility for their own role (Allen, Schad, Oudekerk & Chango, 2014).

As Maher suggests, coolness seems to have a shallow quality to it. It’s a performance experienced at some distance from any coherent internal reality. Self-actualization, on the other hand, is a place that you get to through struggling with belonging, self-esteem, and intimacy in a genuine way.

In other words, coolness is like a game you appear to have won (having skipped many messy stages of development), but will ultimately lose (emerging into adulthood without the coping skills you would have gained had you actually passed through those awkward stages of development).

It might be gratifying (for some of us) to know that some of the kids you admired most in high school didn’t turn out as well as you did, and to realize that the years you struggled with belonging and self-esteem were developmentally essential. A 13-year-old who seems to have it all figured out is worthy of suspicion. As Maslow argues, self-actualization can’t be like taking an “escalator to the top of Mt. Everest” (Maslow, 1963). It comes through self-exploration, through spending some time in the wilderness, not just the center of town.

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## Notes

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## The 2 Ways People Become Cool

New research shows that the 2 secrets to being cool lie within your personality.

Posted Jan 13, 2018

*Psychology Today* by Susan Krauss Whitbourne Ph.D.

Being regarded as cool is something that you might desire, but is this a quality you really have control over? New research suggests that there is a strong personality component to being, as well as being considered, cool. University of Sydney (Australia) psychologists Ilan Dar-Nimrod and colleagues (2018) put the coolness criteria to the test in their study of the traits that contribute to this seemingly desirable quality.

Before we get any further, however, you might want to reflect on what you think contributes to the quality of being cool. Who are the really cool people in your own life? Is it the friend who just always seems to have control over her emotions, regardless of how dire a situation may be? Is it the co-worker who collects an avid crowd of listeners in the coffee break room? Perhaps it's an in-law whose every post on social media is commented on by tens, if not hundreds, of followers. It might even be a celebrity whose claim to fame is a distinctive and enviable quirkiness. As much as you'd like to be like them, you fear that it's just not within you to be that admirable individual with all that apparent popularity, and perhaps even a smug sense of self-satisfaction. However, coolness isn't an absolute quality. As Dar-Nimrod et al. note, what's cool now may not have been cool even a few years ago. For example, it's cool to stand out on social media, but it's also cool to be a member of nerd culture. This further complicates the situation, because you can't put a definite finger on the coolness quotient as it applies to those near and far from your social circles.

The Australian authors distinguish the two empirical approaches to coolness as focusing either on the evaluative qualities that lead people to be perceived as cool by others or the qualities on the inside you project to cause others to see you as cool. The evaluative qualities, the ones seen by others as cool, can be divided into originality, attractiveness, and the appeal a person has to a certain subculture. The personality traits you possess which correspond to being perceived in this manner are divided into two categories:

- The first is "cachet coolness," or the socially desirable traits of being friendly, agreeable, and competent.
- Directly opposed to these traits are those that fit into the category of "contrarian coolness," or the tendency to be detached, rebellious, and a bit rough around the edges.

Dar-Nimrod and his fellow researchers focused their work on these two personality trait dimensions via a questionnaire study based on the Five-Factor Model.

The primarily undergraduate sample (a perfect population for studying coolness) completed a measure developed when Dar-Nimrod was at the University of Rochester (Dar-Nimrod et al., 2012). Consisting of a set of 14 self-rated trait terms, the scale was found to split into the two dimensions corresponding to cachet and contrarian coolness categories. Included in the cachet ratings were terms such as caring, ambitious, warm, friendly, charismatic, attractive, confident, and trendy. The contrarian coolness items included being rebellious, sarcastic, aggressive, detached, adventurous (thrill-seeking), unconventional, and selfish.

Dar-Nimrod and his coauthors believed that cachet coolness "would correlate positively with every explicit measure that is construed as positive in our society" (p. 2), a pretty strong prediction, and that it would also correlate with high self-esteem. Additionally, the cachet-cool types should also be high in a desire to be seen positively by others, or social desirability. Conversely, those high in contrarian coolness should, the researchers proposed, be open to new experiences, high in self-esteem, and relatively insensitive to failure or external judgments. They should also, according to theory, be high in emotional stability, perhaps again reflecting this imperviousness to the opinions of others.

In addition to completing measures of perceived coolness and the Five-Factor personality traits, participants rated themselves on their primary “action orientation,” meaning their ability to apply themselves to goals. People with a strong action orientation, according to the authors, are able to “marshal their cognitive resources in service of a goal.” By contrast, state-oriented individuals are more easily distracted. The action-oriented are also less deterred by negative feedback and pursue their goals without stopping. A questionnaire measure of self-esteem asked participants to rate themselves using a fairly standard set of self-descriptors. To get at the “implicit” form of self-esteem, or the form of self-regard that people might not outwardly ascribe to, the Australian researchers used the rather unusual (but logical) measure of signature size. In keeping with the confidential nature of the students’ participation, the signature was measured from the consent form, which then was stored separately from the other data. The bigger the signature, the higher the implicit self-esteem. (By the way, how big is your signature?)

The findings from the coolness questionnaire analysis replicated the previous study on the coolness questionnaire itself by showing it separates into the two distinct factors predicted by the authors. Moving on from there, Dar-Nimrod et al. then demonstrated how the two varieties of coolness related to those personality traits. People high in cachet coolness, as the authors predicted, were also far more extraverted than everyone else, open to new experiences, and then high on the other desirable attributes of the Five-Factor traits: namely, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and agreeableness. Their explicit self-esteem was high, as was their action orientation.

Let’s not discount the benefits of contrarian coolness, though. Individuals receiving high scores on this quality were also more extraverted (though not as much as the cachet cool), and they also had high scores on emotional stability and openness to experience. As you might imagine, they were not high on conscientiousness or agreeableness, but not unusually low, either. Their action orientation was of the state variety, involving greater sensitivity to failure, rather than the ability to apply themselves to goals. Their self-esteem was high, though not as high as the cachet-cool, but their signatures were larger, indicating an inwardly high sense of self-esteem in the view of the authors.

**In summarizing their findings**, the authors maintain that the study of coolness is more important than ever, given the role of social media in contemporary life, which influences “people’s worldviews, identities, and attitudes.” If in fact being high on coolness can help bolster your identity, this means that you may want to work on some of those personality traits that are associated with the favorable pole of being friendly, open, self-confident, and goal-oriented. If contrarian coolness appeals to your rebellious nature, this can also promote positive self-esteem, as long as that desire to live more on the fringe doesn’t slip into true personality instability and self-doubts. Look at the people you admire for their coolness, and that might give you insights into how you can tweak your personality to increase your attractiveness to others.

There are more ways to seek fulfillment than to strive to be cool. The Australian study suggests, however, that what makes people cool may also help their relationships, self-esteem, and ability to pursue goals. Give coolness a chance, and you might surprise yourself with the results.

## References

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