

Consumers infer coolness from brand autonomy, says study

May 29 2014, by Margaret Campbell

Consumers perceive a brand to be cooler when it suggests it's true to itself and follows its own motives regardless of individual or societal norms and expectations, according to a University of Colorado Boulder study involving Texas A&M University.

However, the autonomous behavior of the brand needs to be contextually appropriate—not over the top—in order to be seen as cool as opposed to weird or rude, according to the paper published last week online and slated for the August edition of the *Journal of Consumer Research*.

"These findings can help us compare the brand successes of Apple versus Microsoft, for example," said Margaret C. Campbell, co-author and professor of marketing at CU-Boulder's Leeds School of Business. "Doing things that show you follow your own road, in spite of norms, leads others to perceive you or your brand as cool. But an extreme level of [autonomy](#), or autonomy that violates a strongly valued norm is not perceived as cool. So companies need to work hard to get the right level."

Caleb Warren, lead author of the study, is an assistant professor of marketing at Texas A&M. He began the research as part of his dissertation while he was a doctoral student at CU-Boulder.

In one experiment, [participants](#) read that a coffee retailer was changing its disposable water bottle design. They each looked at one of two mock-ups either with a familiar logo, Starbucks, or a fictitious logo, Sabbarrio.

Each participant rated the design's coolness factor and indicated a high or low inference of autonomy in the design, as well as whether the design was different in a good way or a bad way. Participants perceived the brand that introduced water in a unique new bottle to be cool, regardless of whether it was from the well-known or unknown brand.

In another part of the study, participants read about three real up-and-coming music groups. Different participants were provided different descriptions of the same bands that suggested varying levels of autonomy. The participants then chose four songs by the bands to download and keep. Participants were most likely to choose songs from the bands described as having moderate autonomy. Bands described as having low or extreme autonomy led to lower perceptions of coolness.

The research also revealed that countercultural [consumers](#)—those who are critical of society and societal institutions—perceive higher levels of autonomy to be cool and lower levels not to be cool, compared with non-countercultural consumers.

"The takeaway is that brands that convincingly express autonomy are likely to be perceived as cool," said Campbell. "Brands can express autonomy by producing products that are unique from existing options, expressing autonomy in marketing communications, or linking themselves to autonomous people."

Social campaigns intended to modify behaviors such as smoking should avoid making undesirable behaviors seem autonomous from mainstream society in order to keep from creating a cool perception of them, suggest the researchers.

More information: "What Makes Things Cool? How Autonomy Influences Perceived Coolness." Caleb Warren and Margaret C. Campbell, *Journal of Consumer Research*, 5/15/2014.

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