

# What makes things cool? When breaking the rules can boost your cool factor

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Coolness helps sell everything from fashion and music to electronics and cigarettes. According to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, people and brands become cool by understanding what is considered normal, obeying the rules considered necessary, and then diverging from the rules considered expendable.

"Our research explores how brands and people become cool in the eyes of consumers. We reasoned that brands could become cool by breaking rules that seemed unnecessary or unfair, but not by breaking legitimate rules," write authors Caleb Warren (Texas A&M University) and Margaret C. Campbell (University of Colorado).

Defining the measure of coolness by its autonomy, the authors were interested in people and products that follow their own path rather than conforming to social norms. Across six studies, they looked at the influence of autonomy on perceived coolness.

In one study, participants were asked to evaluate an advertisement for a [brand](#) that advocated either breaking or following a dress code. Some participants read that the dress code existed for a legitimate reason (to honor war veterans), whereas others read that the dress code existed for an illegitimate reason (to honor a corrupt dictator). Results showed that breaking the dress code made the brand seem cooler when the dress code seemed unnecessary, but not when the dress code seemed legitimate.

Brands interested in showing how cool their products are can highlight

features of independence and uniqueness. The authors also point out that it is difficult to be cool to everyone. That is, what is perceived as cool by one group of [consumers](#) may seem too deviant for another group.

Finally, for policymakers hoping to curb risky behaviors, study results point out the benefits of messages that make desired behaviors more autonomous (and therefore cool) to the target audience.

"Collectively, our studies find that coolness is a subjective, positive trait perceived in people, brands, products, and trends that are autonomous in an appropriate way," the authors conclude.

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

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