Coolness as a trait and its relations to the Big Five, self-esteem, social desirability, and action orientation

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ABSTRACT

As coolness is often associated with status elevation and socially desirable valuation, understanding what entails coolness may prove useful in a myriad of contexts. In this study, we tested the two-factor model of coolness proposed by Dar-Nimrod et al. (2012), where Cachet and Contrarian domains of coolness are comprised of 14 facets (e.g., irony, confidence). Participants ($N = 225$) completed 120 items representing these 14 facets, as well as measures of the Big Five, action orientation, social desirability, and self-esteem. The findings largely replicated the two-factor structure of Cachet and Contrarian Coolness. Cachet and Contrarian Coolness factors incrementally predicted self-perceptions of coolness above and beyond the Big Five personality dimensions, action orientation, implicit self-esteem, age, and sex in a hierarchical regression. Cachet Coolness was the strongest predictor of coolness self-perceptions, with explicit self-esteem and Contrarian Coolness also significantly predicting self-perceived coolness. Findings suggest that the two factors of coolness capture elements of coolness that are not measured by common personality measures. These findings may have implication for studying the role of coolness in group dynamics and social relations across diverse age and ethnic groups.

What makes a person cool varies based on specific criteria associated with the person being evaluated. The content of coolness is also one that seems to change with time (see Dar-Nimrod et al., 2012). Presently for example, coolness is often associated with active social media presence (Hollenbaugh & Ferris, 2014), whereas terms like "nerd" and "geek" that were once considered uncool may actually be viewed as cool (Westcott, 2012).

One empirical approach to the study of coolness focuses primarily on the perception or evaluation of coolness rather than coolness as a trait. Oyserman (2009) characterized coolness as an identity-based construct, where it is both personal and social behavior-oriented. Oyserman suggested that cool behaviors are distinct and can be categorized as prosocial (e.g., volunteering), asocial (e.g., unprotected sex), or neutral (e.g., using the latest iPhone). Similarly, other studies most often concern adolescence peer relations and valuations (e.g., Jamison, Wilson, & Ryan, 2015; Rodkin, Farmer, Pearl, & Van Acker, 2006; Rudolph, Abaied, Flynn, Sugimura, & Agoston, 2011), or consumer attitudes in marketing research (e.g., Sundar, Tamul, & Wu, 2014; Warren & Campbell, 2014). Sundar et al. (2014) proposed a three-factor structure of coolness consisting of originality, attractiveness, and subcultural appeal. These factors, do show some parallel to the two factors found by Dar-Nimrod et al. (2012), but primarily address the evaluative component of coolness rather than coolness as a trait.

Another empirical approach to the study of coolness is to examine the term as a trait-based construct. Modern views of coolness seem to be constructed from two distinct amalgamations of personality traits; one of which revolves around social desirability, and the other around rebelliousness (Dar-Nimrod et al., 2012). According to this perspective, coolness is characterized in one of two ways; an individual focused on external valuations (i.e., social desirability) or an individual who is detached from mainstream culture (i.e., rebelliousness).

The first quantified approach to the study of coolness as a trait showed that across two studies, coolness consisted of two factors (Dar-Nimrod et al., 2012). The first (and predominant) factor was *Cachet Coolness*, or the aspect of coolness that entails socially desirable attributes (e.g., friendliness, attractiveness, personal competence) and is status bolstering. The second factor, *Contrarian Coolness*, entails more detached and less socially desirable attributes (e.g., rebelliousness, emotional control, roughness). In accordance to these two factors, athletes are likely perceived as cool because they are socially successful through their competence in a particular sport, whereas eccentric artists may accumulate their cool credentials because they are perceived as contrarian and rebellious.

Coolness and the elevated status afforded to behaviors and traits categorized as "cool" has been studied among children and adolescents, but the little available data shows a complex picture. Peers of same

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gender and ethnic group are considered cool; among American youngsters, coolness is also strongly associated with disruptive behavior, especially for African American (Jamison et al., 2015). In line with Dar-Nimrod et al.'s (2012) conceptualization of Cachet Coolness, coolness among school-age children largely overlaps with perceived social status (Kiefer & Wang, 2016; Rodkin et al., 2006). For example, elementary schoolers from aggressive groups as more likely to perceive tough peers as cool while non-aggressive groups characterize their socially popular (but not necessarily tough) peers as cool (Rodkin et al., 2006). The question remains as to whether the peers children perceive as being cool share common attributes beyond just elevated social status.

In order to examine the attributes related to coolness beyond the evaluative view, assessing the construct itself requires consideration for a range of relevant traits. Previous studies measuring coolness generally utilize single items that ask how cool a person, behavior, or an object is (Dinh, Sarason, Peterson, & Onstad, 1995; Jamison et al., 2015; Warren & Campbell, 2014) or Likert scale ratings of coolness, ranging from very uncool to very cool (Dar-Nimrod et al., 2012, Study 2; Sundar et al., 2014). In the present study, we seek to evaluate coolness as a broad set of trait domains composed of the 14 relevant facet-level traits identified in Dar-Nimrod et al. In previous research, these 14 facets boiled down to two factors of coolness - *Cachet* and *Contrarian* (Dar-Nimrod et al., 2012). That is, coolness can be reached in multiple ways. Those who are very attractive may need less of the other elements (e.g., drive for success, friendliness) to be considered cool by the cachet criteria. Those who are rebellious may need less roughness or irony to be considered cool by the contrarian criteria.

In addition to the evaluation of coolness as a trait, the present study also examined the relations of coolness with other established personality characteristics. The Big Five personality constructs (openness to experience, conscientiousness, extroversion, agreeableness, neuroticism) reflect the most central conceptualization of personality at this time (e.g., John & Srivastava, 1999; McCrae & Costa, 2003) and as such, they are essential for evaluating a potentially new personality construct. In addition, we examined how our measure of coolness-relevant traits correlated with social desirability, action orientation (based on the active vs. passive interpretation of the factors in the studies by Dar-Nimrod et al., 2012), and self-esteem (to capture the positive/negative evaluative component as argued by Ashton & Lee, 2001), as each of these constructs appear particularly relevant.

The main aim of this study is to examine the factor structure of coolness, with the expectation of recovering the two factors of Cachet and Contrarian Coolness found in Dar-Nimrod et al. (2012). The second aim of the study was to determine the correlates of these two factors. We predict that Cachet Coolness would correlate positively with every explicit measure that is construed as positive in our society (e.g., with being action oriented and having high self-esteem, as well as with openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and emotional stability in the Big Five). Furthermore, we expect it to correlate with an implicit measure of self-esteem (although this was not a strong prediction as the social desirability elements seem to be outward looking rather than reflective) and to be strongly correlated with a measure of exaggerated social desirability. We predict that Contrarian Coolness would correlate with openness to experience, self-esteem, and reduced sensitivity to failure or other external judgment (i.e., conscientiousness, agreeableness). We do not have predictions regarding the relation of Contrarian Coolness with emotional stability, although as far as emotional stability is related to the lack of emotional externalization, we expect the individuals who score high on Contrarian Coolness to score high on emotional stability. Therefore, this study was designed to extend the understanding of coolness and embed it in the context of other personality constructs rather than create and validate a measure of coolness. The last aim of the current study was to test the incremental prediction of the two coolness factors in predicting self-perceived coolness over-and-above the effects of demographic variables

and well-known personality traits. We expect that the two coolness factors will collectively show unique prediction of coolness that is not accounted for by these existing constructs.

1. Method

1.1. Participants

Two hundred and twenty five participants (145 females, 68 males, and 12 who did not indicate their sex) from an urban, North American university took part in the study. Participants were between 17 and 36 years old (M = 19.91, SD = 2.92), predominantly of East Asian (n = 115) or European (n = 83) ethnicity with the remainder claiming another ethnicity (n = 22) or not mentioning ethnicity (n = 5). Participants completed the survey in exchange for course credit.

1.2. Materials and procedure

Participants arrived at the lab to take part in a study that was designed to assess coolness. Upon giving informed consent they received the study package that included the following:

1.2.1. Coolness measure

The coolness measure was based on the 14 coolness facets identified in Dar-Nimrod et al. (2012). In 120 forced choice questions, participants identified the item that best represented them. Each of the items contained a descriptive sentence that reflected a category deemed cool in those studies. For example, participants had a choice between the following descriptive sentences: 1) I often use irony, OR 2) I hardly ever use irony; 1) I'm quite a passionate person, OR 2) I'm quite collected. The number of items per category (see Table 1) ranged from 4 (e.g., irony and roughness) to 12 (e.g., thrill-seeking, and hedonism). Because we expect a multi-factor solution, no internal consistency of the measure was calculated. The internal consistencies of the 14 facets are shown in Table 1.

1.2.2. Big Five

The Big Five personality constructs were measured using the Big Five Inventory (BFI 44: John & Srivastava, 1999), a 44-item measure that contains five subscales that represent each of the constructs. The measure comprises of 44 short-phrase items, rated on 5-point scales from 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 5 (*agree strongly*). All the subscales had acceptable internal consistency (openness - Cronbach's α = 0.73, conscientiousness - α = 0.73, extraversion - α = 0.79, agreeableness -

Table 1
Reliability and factor structure (pattern matrix) of self-reported coolness-relevant traits.

Category (number of items in the measure)	Internal consistency	Factor loadings[a]	
		Factor 1 "Cachet"	Factor 2 "Contrarian"
Rebelliousness (5)	0.44	− 0.061	**0.438**
Irony (4)	0.61	− 0.069	**0.457**
Roughness (4)	0.60	0.032	**0.369**
Emotional control (4)	0.60	**− 0.390**	0.167
Thrill-seeking (12)	0.86	0.083	**0.634**
Unconventionality (8)	0.62	− 0.072	**0.601**
Hedonism (12)	0.78	**0.402**	**0.384**
Communal values (4)	0.60	0.058	0.131
Drive for success (12)	0.71	**0.495**	− 0.183
Friendliness (11)	0.80	**0.607**	0.159
Personal competence (12)	0.71	**0.484**	**0.337**
Attractiveness (12)	0.87	**0.608**	0.172
Confidence (12)	0.76	**0.432**	**0.326**
Trendiness (12)	0.89	**0.447**	0.027

Substantial loading (> 0.30) are in bold.
[a] Extraction method - Principal Axis Factoring, rotation method - Direct Oblimin.