

# What does it mean to be cool? It may not be what you think

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Do rebelliousness, emotional control, toughness and thrill-seeking still make up the essence of coolness? Can performers James Dean and Miles Davis still be considered the models of cool?

Research led by a University of Rochester Medical Center psychologist and published by the *Journal of Individual Differences* has found the characteristics associated with coolness today are markedly different than those that generated the concept of cool.

"When I set out to find what people mean by coolness, I wanted to find corroboration of what I thought coolness was," said Ilan Dar-Nimrod, Ph.D., lead author of "Coolness: An Empirical Investigation." "I was not prepared to find that coolness has lost so much of its historical origins and meaning—the very heavy countercultural, somewhat individualistic pose I associated with cool.

"James Dean is no longer the epitome of cool," Dar-Nimrod said. "The much darker version of what coolness is still there, but it is not the main focus. The main thing is: Do I like this person? Is this person nice to people, attractive, confident and successful? That's cool today, at least among young mainstream individuals."

In research that has developed over several years, Dar-Nimrod, currently a post-doctoral fellow in the Medical Center's Department of Psychiatry, and his colleagues recruited almost 1,000 people in the Vancouver, British Columbia, area, who completed an extensive questionnaire on the

attributes, behaviors and individuals they associated with the word cool.

In the journal article, the research is described as the first systematic, quantitative examination of what characteristics recur in popular understandings of the cool personality.

The researchers conducted three separate studies. In Study 1, participants generated characteristics that they perceived to be cool. In Study 2, two samples of participants rated dozens of these characteristics on two dimensions: coolness and social desirability. In Study 3, participants rated friends both on their coolness and on a variety of personality descriptors that were identified as relevant in the other studies.

A significant number of participants used adjectives that focused on positive, socially desirable traits, such as friendly, competent, trendy and attractive.

"I got my first sunglasses when I was about 13," said Dar-Nimrod. "There wasn't a cooler kid on the block for the next few days. I was looking cool because I was distant from people. My emotions were not something they could read. I put a filter between me and everyone else. That, in my mind, made me cool. Today, that doesn't seem to be supported. If anything, sociability is considered to be cool, being nice is considered to be cool. And in an oxymoron, being passionate is considered to be cool—at least, it is part of the dominant perception of what coolness is. How can you combine the idea of cool—emotionally controlled and distant—with passionate?"

At some levels, participants in the study still appreciated the traditional elements of cool, such as rebelliousness and detachment, but not as strongly as friendliness and warmth.

"We have a kind of a schizophrenic coolness concept in our mind," Dar-Nimrod said. "Almost any one of us will be cool in some people's eyes, which suggests the idiosyncratic way coolness is evaluated. But some will be judged as cool in many people's eyes, which suggests there is a core valuation to coolness, and today that does not seem to be the historical nature of cool. We suggest there is some transition from the countercultural cool to a generic version of it's good and I like it. But this transition is by no way completed."

Dar-Nimrod's main research interests are the effects of genetics and social environment on decision-making and health behaviors. The coolness research began when Dar-Nimrod was a doctoral student at the University of British Columbia. He and a fellow student, Ian G. Hansen, a co-author of the *Journal of Individual Differences* and currently an assistant professor at York College of City University of New York, argued over whether Steve Buscemi, an actor in the movie "Fargo" and the cable television series "Boardwalk Empire," is cool.

"Ian thought Buscemi was cool and I could not accept him as cool because he was so unattractive and seemed such a weasel," Dar-Nimrod said. "That got us thinking about just what coolness is."

The coolness findings could point to possible health impacts.

"Coolness may have some relevance to health behaviors," Dar-Nimrod said. "Smoking or drug use, for example, could be connected with a view of coolness that includes rebelliousness or a countercultural stance. This can inform future health research on behaviors. Is coolness related to people's choice of unhealthy behaviors, such body modifications, unprotected sex or even eating behaviors?"

Provided by University of Rochester Medical Center

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