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ABSTRACT

In the 1990s and early 2000s, "cool' received substantial scholarly attention, some influential studies claiming that cool was becoming the dominant ethic in contemporary consumer societies, with increasingly global resonance. Yet it remains an elusive and complex phenomenon approached from numerous disciplinary islands, though sometimes curiously absent from studies of related phenomena such as fashion, 'authenticity', the 'hipster' and 'low affect'. In the light of developments since the early 2000s (including apparently substantial changes to the form and content of coolness), I argue here for the continued relevance of cool and the need for re-evaluation of key ideas of the 1990s and 2000s. The paper briefly suggests why cool has proved so tricky to work with, before identifying five key themes in existing studies, highlighting some contradictions which invite further endeavour, perhaps focused on renewed attention to cool in relation to forms of modernity.

Introduction

In 1970, Lyman and Scott identified cool as a 'new moral imperative' (1989, p. 145), calling for further study of its 'meaning, manifestations and metamorphosis' (p. 157). However, cool most explicitly arrived on the academic agenda in Europe and the US around the 1990s and early 2000s, an era notable for cultural celebrations of irony and nihilism. Authors claimed (Liu, 2004; Pountain & Robins, 2000) that cool was supplanting the protestant work ethic, having far-reaching implications for politics, parenting, education, health and consumption. In *The Conquest of Cool* (1997), Frank described how multiple forms of symbolic dissent had been successfully commodified in the US, helping to secure the future of capitalism. McGuigan's *Cool Capitalism* (McGuigan, 2009) and subsequent work built on this, unequivocally reframing cool as the principle legitimating narrative for neoliberal capitalism. This may be the case, but coolness has other dimensions (some obviously related, some perhaps less so), which may yet benefit from further investigation. Belk et al. (2010) and Haselstein et al. (2013) indicate the breadth of this tricky phenomenon, which has also been considered from varied disciplinary perspectives (sociology, cultural studies, psychology, philosophy, linguistics, anthropology, consumer behaviour and marketing studies, including nation branding). Furthermore, cool's

'attractiveness' has been described as 'increasingly transcultural' (Haselstein, 2013: 7), with several recent studies (e.g. Sigismondi, 2018) locating cool globally. Cool would seem to be implicated in the pressing questions of contemporary life – politics, identity politics, work in the so-called 'creative industries', transition from unsustainable behaviours and consumption, and it continues to be manifest in hugely popular cultural forms and artefacts. Studies of related contemporary phenomena (hipster identity, authenticity, 'low or blank affect') use the term 'cool' to get their points across, or as a synonym, though they rarely deploy cool theory (e.g. Arvidsson, et al., 2010; Boulton, 2007; Michael, 2015; Ocejo, 2017). One question for this paper, is why this might be. Furthermore, scholars who do directly address cool tend to rehearse complex 'origins' for it, offering lengthy caveats and warning audiences of its elusive and contradictory nature. This repetition may partly result from the dispersed nature of the work, which prevents authors assuming shared understandings, but it is also a result of unresolved contradictions in those understandings, as this paper will demonstrate.

First, I will outline some of cool's tricky, slippery qualities, accounting for some of the difficulties in resolving it as a concept (or working with it at all). Then, I will sketch out five distinct – but overlapping – cross-disciplinary themes in existing studies of coolness. This runs the risk of over-simplification and ommission, but the intention is not to evaluate their validity, but to demonstrate their similarities, differences and contradictions. Overall, this paper argues for a critical re-evaluation of cool theory, in conjunction with assessment of atypical new practices of cool, accelerated by recent significant political, social and technological shifts. It will point to some potentially productive pathways in selected authors' work, which are rooted in the relationships between coolness and adaptations to (past and present) forms of modernity.

The trouble with cool

Cool's elusive quality and complexity are legendary; Haselstein describes an internationally pervasive 'structural ambivalence" in the term, evident in both academic and everyday discourses (Haselstein, 2013, p. 7). In everyday speech, cool has numerous meanings and, at the time of writing, is still also used as a soft word of casual approval, similar to 'good' or 'ok'. This might highlight cool's widespread valorisation, but also its potential opacity and plurality of meaning. Indeed, in western-based fashion culture, cool has apparently diametrically opposed meanings – *either* fashionable, popular and socially sanctioned (a quality which can in itself be perceived positively as being 'in the know' or successful, or negatively, as inauthentic or lacking in imagination or confidence) or, it can *also* mean a quality which transcends both of these, where the cool person is not reliant on fashion and may even rebel against it (Brown, 2015, p. 159).

Cool things

Whether coolness is ascribed to an *object* or not is subject to complex dynamics within and between groups, with most things deemed 'cool' in everyday life (and by influential cultural intermediaries) continuously contested, in processes close to those governing fashion and fashionability. The signifiers of cool therefore tend to have fleeting validity. However, Pountain and Robins' much-cited book *Cool Rules: Anatomy of An Attitude*

(Pountain & Robins, 2000) attempted to define cool by extracting some hallmark signifieds identifiable in a wide range of twentieth century western cultural expressions widely perceived as cool. Their resulting cool criteria – narcissism, hedonism, rebellion, irony and detachment – continue to be cited. Their work also suggested that some signifiers *do* seem to be more resistant than others to the usual wasting dynamics, for example, sunglasses, which, in popular culture, have signified cool (variously nuanced) for decades: fashionability, rebellion, techno-rationality, masculinity, narcissism, glamour and affect control (Brown, 2015). In design-related media since the 1960s, the term cool has also been consistently used to describe a particular aesthetic – usually minimalist and modern, characterised by smooth unbroken surfaces formed from high quality materials (typified by Jonathan Ives' Apple products, which refer to the 1960s minimalism of Dieter Rams for Braun).

Self-reflexivity

The element of irony in coolness also presents some problems: if as Dinerstein (2017) notes, cool remains an honorific (though not always used thus), it can be flattering to be told you (or your belongings) are cool, and yet, it can also be a cool performance of cool to claim that you do not wish to be thought cool. Internet memesters have engaged in ping-pong status battles with statements like 'I was uncool before it was cool to be uncool' (first noted, ca. 2015; for similar, see *Maly & Varis, 2016*). This is not merely a geeky tautological joke – 'uncool' had become a term of approval among a certain, presumably American, online grouping wishing to distinguish themselves from 'try-hard hipsters'. Cool is therefore also a word used to signify authenticity, or, frustratingly, a lack of authenticity. If cool is 'the game of refusing to play others' games', it can also be refusing to play that game.

Moral contradictions

If this weren't enough, there are also moral contradictions. In 2004, Liu stated 'Cool is the techno-informatic vanishing point of contemporary aesthetics, psychology, morality, politics, spirituality and everything. No more beauty, sublimity, tragedy, grace, or evil: only cool or not cool' (p. 3). Many models of coolness are anti-social, even pathological, yet admiration for aspects of coolness appears in everyday discourse *and* academic study; for example, the detachment of the flâneur (a cool forerunner) has been perceived both as tragic and heroic (Tester, 1994); Merton's mid-century categorisation of responses to anomie (1967) also seems to contain admiration for cool – descriptions of the rebel, retreatist and innovator all valorise aspects of cool behaviour (Brown, 2015, pp. 97–8); Goffman demonstrated admiration for the composure he briefly, but explicitly, connected with the cool of Las Vegas casino dealers (Goffman, 2005], p. 227). Consciously or otherwise, this admiration permeates significant contemporary works (Belk et al., 2010; Dinerstein 2017; Macadams, 2002; Pountain & Robins, 2000), surviving Frank's and McGuigan's insistences that cool has been thoroughly neutralised and co-opted. This could indicate the pervasiveness of neoliberal consciousness but perhaps also begs the question of what – somehow – might not be contained and remains desirable about these qualities, something I will return to later on. An exhortation to 'be kind and be cool' emergent in popular culture more recently emphasises a socially engaged, not detached,

form. So-called 'wokeness' facilitated by rapid communication in social media has also suffused cool, even the fashionable kind, with moral and political *action* markedly absent from many theories of coolness. Meanwhile, other studies suggest that counter-cultural aesthetics and traditional masculine cool are helping to fuel radicalisation (Huey, 2015), far-right identities and populism (Nagle, 2017).

Together, it seems these complexities encourage hesitation. Informally, fellow scholars admit reluctance to open 'that can of worms' despite sensing cool's relevance to their work. This is especially evident in critical fashion studies, where cool theory might be expected to feature more: Evans described a demeanour very close to cool in the work of Alexander McQueen as 'hard grace' (Evans, 2007); Louise Dahl-Wolfe's fashion photography is known for its 'blasé' cool, but Arnold's analysis dealt with 'American-ness' (Arnold, 2002), leaving coolness undiscussed. When scholars do focus on one manifestation of cool, for example, the sartorial expression of 'lassigkeit' of WW1 German fighter pilots (Mentges, 2000), wider phenomena are alluded to, but contradictions tend to be avoided rather than addressed.

Unless we conclude these are alternative, not connected meanings, their coexistence raises multiple new questions about the precise nature of the social and economic relations between cool people and all the other people.

Themes in existing study of cool

Next, this paper groups existing approaches to coolness around five loose, overlapping themes (allowing for some sense of chronology) identifying areas of commonality and allowing the discontinuities to be more readily isolated and addressed: first, cool as a survival strategy and a crucible of cultural innovation in vexed experiences of modernity; second, as a mode of capitalism; third, as form of distinction among consumers, especially the young; fourth, as a necessary response to the culture of technical rationality; and finally, as a form of dissent expressed through performances of affectlessness.

Cool # 1: survival strategy and source of cultural innovation[

Although some pre-twentieth century origins of cool reside in philosophy, religion, the use of stimulants, and articulations of power in court society (Haselstein et al., (2013)), most authors (Dinerstein, 2017; Frank, 1997; Lyman & Scott, 1989; Macadams, 2002; Pountain & Robins, 2000) identify modern cool as an innovative cultural expression of dissent, forged in a variety of pressurised settings, most notably within 20th century Black American experience, drawing on African cultural precedents, where the underlying attitudes of cool were important modes of psychological survival. Specific emotional and bodily behaviours adopted under slavery, the stylistic innovations and embodied experiences of jazz culture in racist contexts are key. The scale and quality of Black American avant-garde cultural response to their modern urban experience is seen as a politically meaningful form of social distinction; even without overt political action, black stylistic subversions enabled 'a sense of collectivity amongst a subaltern social block' which 'encod[ed] a refusal of passivity' (Mercer, (1997), p. 431). Underpinning jazz was an ethic of *self-possession*; as Jafa said, '*the* existential issue for Black Americans' (Tate, 2003, p. 249). Behaviours were characterised by refusal to be controlled, while appearing to be

just compliant enough; deviating against white cultural norms, and innovating verbal, sartorial and bodily languages which embodied supreme composure – as Lyman and Scott put it, 'poise under pressure' (1970 [1989], p. 145). Respect and admiration for aspects of this cool are widely evident in the literature.

However, in the same contexts, serious social problems are also thought to have arisen from cool and its dominance (hooks, 2003; Majors & Billson, 1992): poor engagement in education, disconnection from emotions and relationships, unachievable goals of self-reliance, and destructive patterns of drug-use connected to the idealised 'laid back' demeanour. Studies have focused on men and coolness as an extreme/pathological form of 'ideal' masculinity, which has now pervaded popular culture. This gendering is complex (see Fraimen, 2003), and not necessarily justified, since coolness has historically and culturally also been associated with women (Brown, 2018; Lewis, 2011), and there are clear overlaps with conceptions of camp, even if academic attention has been less. In women, coolness has also been seen as both admirable and problematic.

Macadams (2002) and Dinerstein (2017) demonstrate the web of connections between Black American jazz cool and the 1950s Beat subculture, the outsiderhood of avant-garde gay writers and artists and a wider, burgeoning disdain for corporate America evident within a variety of 'counter-cultural' cools. A similar conception of cool can be applied to numerous other subaltern stylistic subversions (not that this has been exhaustive, especially in relation to female and LGBTQ subcultures). However cool manifests itself, in demeanour, dress or music, it constitutes 'admirable and enviable self-mastery' in the face of 'modernity and trauma' (Dinerstein, 2017, p. 33).

Cool # 2: cool capitalism

Authors also generally agree on cool's late twentieth century commodification, applicable to increasingly wide markets with scant claim to being marginalised by dominant society (Belk et al., 2010; Frank, 1997; McGuigan, 2009). White appropriation and commercial exploitation of Black American cultural innovations has a long history (Tate, 2003), and cool's trajectory cannot be seen apart from this. However, Macadams (2002) and Dinerstein (2017) describe how, through the late 1950s and 1960s, a cool characterised by a more broadly countercultural stance, expressed symbolically, chimed with an audience no longer at ease with post-war consumer capitalism. The cold war and growing cynicism towards authority, corporate power and the suburban consumer's 'good life' were understood by ex-hippy marketers who used cool tactics to advertise in the 1960s, selling mistrust of the corporate mainstream back to the would-be dissenters, neutralising their threat and stripping cool of much – if not all – of its original potential (Frank, 1997).

Tactics included ironic marketing strategies that contained self-reflexive cynicism towards promotional techniques, 'quietist' (apparently anti-status) aesthetics, and avoidance of displays of corporate strength (Frank, 1997). Viral and 'stealth' marketing in the late 1990s and early 2000s, developed this idea. Big fashion brands (like Diesel) deployed faux 'pirate' radio stations and stickered the streets, feigning the 'authentic buzz' of young indie club promoters and graffiti artists. Bohemia had been industrialised (Ross, 2003). At this point, cool had become increasingly synonymous with the values of neoliberal consumer capitalism. Boltanski and Chiapello have since noted 'the incorporation of the

artistic critique' (as cited in McGuigan, 2013, p. 236), and McGuigan has argued that cool was 'now at the heart of mainstream culture . . . not some marginal or dissident trend' (McGuigan, 2013, p. 265).

McGuigan cites Mark Zuckerberg's unstinting 'slacker demeanour' (McGuigan, 2013, p. 237) and the apparently counter-cultural persona and transcendent rhetoric of Steve Jobs (McGuigan, 2013, p. 238) as indicative of the triumph of neoliberal cool. Small scale 'hipster entrepreneurs', for example, with craft beer start-ups, could also be viewed as 'ideal neoliberal subjects' (Le Grand, 2020; McGuigan, 2014) despite apparently 'deviating' from current corporate norms. For McGuigan, cool 'entrepreneurs' are neither renegades, nor flies in the ointment. Their aesthetic innovations, like those of dandies, demi-mondes and bohemians before them, fuel trends, but the mode of individualism 'felt' by hipsters as an ethos of freedom and anti-corporate activism, is Foucault's 'homo oeconomicus', synonymous with neoliberal capitalism's underpinning philosophy (McGuigan, 2014, p. 229) – 'DIY' is also 'You're On Your Own'. The desire to be cool has been identified in several studies of labour in the new economy, and its precarious freedoms (Arvidsson, 2010; Neff et al., 2005; Ocejo, 2017; Scott, 2017). (Although not all of it fully supports the apparent pessimism of this approach, as we will see later on).

Cool # 3: distinction among consumers or the reworkings of class

Other scholars focus on cool as a form of distinction among consumers; especially, but not exclusively, those working in the 'creative industries' at the intersection of production and consumption. Not incompatible with McGuigan's thesis, this emphasises the element of *fashionability, trendiness* and taste. Cool may be elusive, but in the 1990s, a particularly controversial marketing profession – 'coolhunting' – emerged, based on extracting novel forms of cultural capital from urban youth. For Nancarrow et al. (2001), cool had morphed from Thornton's 'subcultural capital' to a more diffuse, Maffesolian 'tribal capital'; which increasingly consisted of ' . . . insider knowledge about commodities and consumption practices as yet unavailable to the mainstream' (Nancarrow et al., 2001, p. 315). The phrase 'as yet unavailable to the mainstream' groups the avant-garde with the 'innovators' and 'early adopters' of classic marketing theory (Rogers, 1962). Cool was found in more 'difficult' or 'decommodified' forms like vintage shopping. By 2010, Belk et al. stated that young people no longer looked for cool within themselves but in the marketplace. (Similarly, Scott has argued that the current hipster figure sits very close to Bourdieu's new petite Bourgeoisie (2017).

For Belk et al cool is 'a new status system largely replacing social class, especially among the young' (Belk et al., 2010). However, Michael (2015), Potts (2008), and Le Grand (2020) conclude that contemporary cool works more to *obscure* the workings of class than to replace it – through privileged appropriations of working class cultural fragments, or through deceptive performances of blindness to traditional hierarchies, like privileged British TV cook Nigella Lawson's exquisite detachment from the 'declassé': Lawson freely admitted to making 'no apology' for using Cola in her recipes, leaving no doubt as to the class-origins of her confidence (Potts, 2008, p. 14).

Michael and Potts both claim that since at least the 1990s, values underpinning cool/ hipness celebrate omnivorous, voraciously-proven tastes, confidently expressed, which come much more easily to those habituated with variety, likely from backgrounds already

possessed of cultural capital (Michael, 2015; Potts, 2008). Here, cool is mastery of post-modern aesthetics – an advanced capacity to play with abundant cultural resources to create 'an individual statement'. Michael found that afficionados frequently 'broke' rules of good taste, establishing new ones; sought forms which signify authenticity, rejected forms contaminated by commercialisation and therefore insufficient to suggest an 'interesting' (superior?) personality, upholding Bourdieu's ideology of 'natural taste' (Michael, 2015, p. 176). Those 'others' who were happy with forms deemed inauthentic, displayed an uncool 'uncritical acceptance of what the market provides' (Michael, 2015). For these authors, it is not *what* is liked but *how* it is liked.

For some, this leads to an apparent fading of the high visibility previously associated with 'cool' subcultural aesthetics. Indeed, Michael's interviewees perceived the classic subcultural commitment to group and aesthetic as an *uncool* narrowness of focus (Michael, 2015). The rules of 'alternative' taste don't disappear but become increasingly fluid, complex and subtle, actually requiring much *more* cultural capital to perform convincingly.

These positions highlight the aforementioned tensions between coolness and fashionability. Anyone conflating 'innovators' with 'early adopters' should heed Michael's point – 'It's really not hip to be a hipster' (Michael, 2015). The 'really cool people' – usually identified as young urban cultural intermediaries or emerging creatives – are eager to distance themselves – not just from the perceived mainstream but also from hipsters and 'try-hards'. Unsurprisingly, they prize individuality and autonomy (Campbell & Warren, 2012). Being avant-garde, they are 'hippest' when they show radical detachment from fashion's current 'rules'; however, Michael's respondents *both upheld and derided* the 'goal of trendiness' (Michael, 2015). This contradiction may explain some fashion scholars' reluctance to do business with cool.

Here, cool is not so much a performance aimed at surviving a wider reality, but a means to distinguish you from the others worrying close to you in displays of cultural capital and class – seemingly predominantly through an avant-garde relationship with fashion.

Cool # 4: cool as response to the culture of technical rationality

Cool has also been seen as primarily an emotional and behavioural response to the culture of technical rationality. Stearns' *American Cool* (1994) and Liu's *The Laws of Cool* (2004) both ground it in modernising forces of technology in industrial capitalism. Stearns focused on changes to emotional culture, as the unregulated and unscripted expression of emotion threatened efficiency and standardisation of service. Losing one's cool had become a social taboo, a 'problem' or 'weakness', to be met in the workplace with embarrassment, managerial intervention, quashed by what Liu went on to call the 'deadpan professionalism' of the skilled emotional labourer (Liu, 2004, p. 88). No sense of 'symbolic rebellion' against dominant forces are necessary to this mode of cool, though status may be associated with emotional competence.

Liu's argument is based on Fordist control and efficiency; cool is *required* of everyone in modern society. Coolness is emotional regulation in the service of capitalism. However it also features in modern leisure – Stearns (1994) speaks of emotionally intense 'outlets' like expressive rock music, which seems at odds with the idea of rock musicians as cool, though Liu (2004) solves this with his 'camo-tech' and 'deco-tech' (exaggerated cultural

mirrors or parodies, or elaborations on the theme) which accommodate a popular impulse to rebel. Many cultural forms associated with coolness, (counter, sub or mainstream) can be readily aligned with this idea. Like Kracauer's 'Tiller Girls' (Kracauer, 1995), or Britney Spears 'Toxic', a spectacular fantasy of excess and escape can nevertheless embody an aesthetic upholding the ideology of technical rationality.

Cool also derives from embodied encounters with machines. Mentges' study of German WW1 fighter pilots (2000) describes cool as an admirable attitude characterised by casual disdain for army rules and nonchalance towards risk, which suggested physical and mental preparedness for the sharp (and lonely) end of technological innovation, with the highest stakes. Pilots had to be 'at one' with the machine; more *like* a machine, with 'a controlled mind and a controlled set of senses, which had to be available every minute' (Mentges, 2000, p. 37). To stay attentive – essential for survival – they must detach themselves from fear. Mentges defines cool as status conferred on those capable of displaying special competence with the newest, most powerful technologies, requiring (or resulting in) more controlled response (in line with the normative western connection between coolness and masculine emotional control), but going beyond that to signify a much broader range of threats to mind and body arising from the technical and social risks of modernity. The aesthetic dimension Mentges explores is a protective 'toughness' in the impenetrable black leather aviator's jacket (whose associations with coolness persist). In imagery, such jackets – especially left unfastened – can signify an impressive relationship with the risks of modern life.

Cool # 5: nihilism and withdrawal – the cool of blank affect

The final distinctive theme concerns an apparently nihilistic response to overwhelming external forces: seen in certain European avant-gardes between the two world wars; in 1950s 'Beat' culture as part of the spread of cool from Black American experience; in Nouvelle Vague cinema, and coinciding with the growth of cool theory, in 1990s smart film 'slacker' myths of white disaffection (which resonate also with certain aspects of post-feminism and 'under-performativity'). These phenomena are distinct, but they share an apparently empty – rather than defiant – version of coolness, previously termed 'ecliptic cool' (Brown, 2015).

Sconce states that 'smart film' was 'almost invariably positioned in symbolic opposition to the imaginary mass-cult monster of . . . mainstream commercial Hollywood' (Sconce, 2002, p. 350), whatever the realities of capital's circulation, like many other cool commodities, but the tone of the symbolic 'rebellion' differs. He calls Linklater's *Slacker* (1990), a 'veritable ethnographic record . . . of hipster anomie' (Sconce, 2002, p. 350) typifying the ills of a generation, referencing emotional absence, emptiness and distance; 'concentrating, often with ironic disdain, on the 'personal politics' of power, communication, emotional dysfunction and identity in white middle-class culture (2002, p. 352). 'Dampened affect', 'authorial effacement' and blankness featured alongside 'dispassion, disengagement and disinterest' (Sconce, 2002, p. 359). Responding to moral critique of widespread exhibition of 'total disinterest' towards the world in film, Sconce defended this 'cool' as a survival tactic for producers and consumers critical of 'sellout hippies', but cognisant of their own complicity. They refused discredited or clichéd positions, clinging to ironic distance as an "until-further-notice" workaround, not *apolitical* but politics on a new

terrain.[1] This time and genre-specific example underscores the relevance of cool as a potential 'survival strategy' to apparently comfortable white society – and the moral ambivalence of this mode of cool. This resonates in Berlant's work on 'flat affect', 'under-performance' and 'different styles of minimal response':

> … underperformative style is a resource for many across generations and social locations, available to whoever can show up to withdraw into whatever "whatever" style works to maintain relationality in some way, while keeping things apprehensively, hypervigilantly, suspended. (Berlant, 2015, p. 211)

Ambition is tempered in this mode of being in the world, acknowledging the contingent and complex state of human subjectivity. Stacey (2015) interprets this cool as a refusal of traditional gendered performance in her analysis of Tilda Swinton, the 'mistress of flat affect'. However, for Gill (2016), 'cool postfeminism' is narcissistic, lacking substance and empathy, and loops back to neoliberal subjectivity.

Here, cool connects with the 'affective turn' in cultural studies, the psychology and sociology of the emotions (as well as study of emotional labour). Cooling the expression of emotion, or displaying impressive control over affective response, is not just a requirement of modernity but potentially a temporary survival tactic and a cultural and political position. This adds to the relevance, and the complexity, of cool.

Looking at these five themes, their overlaps are evident, and yet, it can be very difficult to grapple with the connections between them: a historical trajectory of cool's declining authenticity could be assumed, although this does not seem to be the case for Berlant, nor in the minds of consumers actively trying to buy it; the relationship with the culture of technical rationality is often ignored, and *seems* incompatible with the cool which focuses on fashionability. And is there any conceptual space for cool of some kind in excess of the narratives of neoliberal capitalism? The moral complexities and recent cultural shifts in expressions of cool underline this question, and also need to be addressed.

New considerations for cool studies

What follows here identifies some recent changes to both the form *and* content of cool (reflected in popular aesthetics, popular usage, and in research), which highlight these complexities or indeed present new ones, challenging existing theory and inviting further analysis.

High key cool

Where traditionally coolness signified unconventionality, independence or deviation from mainstream goals, some authors have attempted to understand coolness as a measure of success. Belk et al. (2010) found links between cool and 'high key' (or 'bling bling') consumption in the US, connected with the widely aspired-to luxury lifestyles of celebrity hip-hop stars. Cheeky subcultural innovations of early rappers like wearing stolen car badges as jewellery have been replaced by emphasis on pure economic capital and consumption of luxury brands. Belk finds 'bling' is a 'mutation' of cool resulting from its commodification.

Similarly, a Canadian study of personal traits (Dar Nimrod et al., 2012) suggested cool can be *either* 'caché' (status through mainstream success or popularity) or 'contrarion' cool (status through opposing norms and independence of societal approval). The concept of 'glam cool' (Brown, 2015) begins to articulate how these two seemingly oppositional meanings connect, applying Pountain and Robins' hedonism and narcissism. Dar Nimrod et al. also found that 'contrarian' coolness was *less evident* in contemporary popular conceptualisation than expected (2012, p. 183). 'Historical' associations of individualistic detachment and rebellion persisted but were accompanied by pro-social traits of friendliness, warmth and positivity.

Changes to the popular aesthetics of cool over the last 15 years or so may support this. In 2000, Pountain and Robins defined their criteria of rebellion, narcissism, irony and hedonism and confidently stated that 'no-one wants to be good anymore, they want to be cool' (p. 19). Morris and Brooker's *Nathan Barley* (2005) typifies these cool traits, and perhaps, McGuigan's neoliberal self. Set in London's youthful media industry of the late 1990s and early 2000s, *Nathan Barley*'s 'Shoreditch hipster' is narcissistic, hedonistic, avidly consumes rebellious symbols and revels in detachment from social responsibility – in one vignette, middle class Barley, who calls himself a 'self-facilitating media-node', promotes his website by spraying his 'tag' on an unconscious homeless man (referencing the 'guerilla marketing' of the period). In another, he flaunts his pleasure in smoking 'weed' live online, openly breaking the law and verbally mimicking a Rastafarian stereotype. A magazine in the show, called *Sugar Ape*, gets graphically re-presented to read *Suga Rape*, much to the ironic amusement of the characters. The magazine bears some resemblance to the actually existing *Vice* magazine, (London edition founded 2002), then renowned for avant-garde street fashion and hedonistic, provocative and politically incorrect content.

In marked contrast, six years later, Armisen, Brownstein and Krisel's Portlandia (2011–2018) parodied hipster myths of fashionable Portland, Oregan, similarly known for its gentrification and population of young urban creatives. In *Portlandia*, couples express concern for the providence of the organic free-range produce or engage in hipster enterprises with wholesome traditional crafts. Some sketches were filmed in a real Portland feminist bookshop; costumes reflected hipster trends including the (then current) frumpy minimalist or pseudo-traditional country/workwear aesthetic (known in certain internet circles as 'Amish hipster'). The show parodies a lifestyle celebrated and distilled by an actually-existing indie magazine founded in the US in 2011, *Kinfolk* (Bean et al., 2018) . Unlike *Vice, Kinfolk's* moral tone upholds tradition, honesty, warmth and sustainable simplicity, signified by abundant wooden surfaces and quiet graphics. *Kinfolk* also idealised (perfectly aestheticised) 'community' – 'if you see a bicycle in *Kinfolk*, it won't have a lock on it, because no-one would steal it in the *Kinfolk* universe' (Bean et al., 2018, p. 82).

Pro-social and political 'niceness' has also been claimed for cool in various fashionable products – upmarket streetwear brand *DSquared* urged 'Be Cool, Be Nice' for 'Anti-bullying week' 2018; in 2016 *Oliver Bonas'* family-friendly knick-knacks for British middle-class women, urged their owners not only to 'just be cool' *but also* that 'it's cool to be kind'. Michael's 2015 ethnography of hip young European urban creatives downplayed rebellion, narcissism and hedonism in favour of seemingly softer, more community-focused qualities like authenticity, 'openness', respect for others and being 'true to themselves'. English school girls who 'resist discourses of cool', opposed coolness with

being 'nice' (Paechter & Clark, 2016), in what could be interpreted as a counter-claim to cool, where it is cool 'not to try' competing with or appeasing the dominant group. Luvaas championed DIY cool as an emerging 'international ethic' which makes 'creative contribution to community' a '*moral* imperative of sorts' (Luvaas, 2012). Arvidsson questions the assumption that hipster artisans – 'petty producers' – are necessarily unable to subvert the status quo (2010). Even *Vice* is now strongly grounded in left-leaning liberal agendas surrounding identity politics. (*Nice*?)

Cool and 'passionate work'

Furthermore, Ocejo's ethnography of real 'hipster' bartenders, butchers, distillers and barbers (2017), does *not* find that the effort required to learn these skills and the sacrificing of 'respectable' careers is fuelled by a desire to be 'cool' in the sense of 'trendy', nor to play ironically at being working class, as familiar critiques might conclude. Instead, 'finding meaning' and feeling a sense of 'recognition' for good service is the goal. The techno-rationalist cool required of us all by modern systems and the automation of professions, is rejected for a cool of rebellion, hedonism and individuality, which is not recovered through Liu's 'weekend binge leisure' (Liu, 2004, p. 88) but through 'meaningful work'. If these jobs are considered 'cool' in *some* way (as Ocejo states) what kind of coolness is this, and how does it relate to previous theorisation? Dar Nimrod et al's study (2012) also identified 'passions' or 'skills' as markers of a cool person. Is this a morphing of ideals or of semantics? Or were previous theories always anyway incomplete?

Cool in contemporary activist subcultures

Contrary to the mythology of TV parodies, Ocejo and Arvidsson complicate interpretation of small-scale hipster entrepreneurship as ideal cool neo-liberalism. Other recent cultural practises involving explicit or implicit critiques of modern work, consumption and capitalism could also be more carefully considered in relation to coolness: anti-capitalism activism including Occupy, 'guerrilla gardening', the craft revival and activism around more sustainable consumption/waste reduction (for example, the 'visible mending' movement) are proudly detached from mainstream aesthetics and ideologies, innovative aesthetically, using style to reframe traditional activities as youthful and rebellious, and at times, break laws and chuck spokes in the wheels.

Indeed, had Pountain and Robins and the rest been writing just ten years later, they would have had far less convincing evidence for the general applicability of the anti-social thesis. These groups are social network-fuelled and aiming for societal transformation. If as Bauman noted, the loss of skills of survival – e.g. making and mending – was crucial to market dependence (as cited in McGuigan, 2009, p. 115), reclaiming them is potentially the radical first step away.

That such activities can become consumer trends like plastic 'living walls' or faux 'pre-mended' clothing (Middleton, 2014), or feed back into neoliberal individualistic ideologies, should not distract us from continuing to question the nature of the 'cool' appeal of these models. Cool is an established idealised trait in popular rebels *with* causes too: Black rights activists from Kathleen Cleaver (Brown, 2018) to Martin Luther King; trailblazers of more ethical/sustainable lifestyles from countercultures and the hippy movement; even

the fictitious incarcerated hero of *The Shawshank Redemption* (released concurrently with Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*) exuded stoic, apparently compliant resistance, which resulted in both a prison library and a successful escape. The coolness of these kinds of examples have, however, received less critical attention.

'Pro-social' cool?

It may nevertheless be premature to conclude that individualised narcissism, disdainful detachment, hedonism and nihilism, which have concerned many cool scholars, are necessarily absent from these 'ethical' cools. *Portlandia* questions the 'virtue signalling' and authenticity battles of the hip, proposing a continued narcissism, an activism based on strictly aestheticised consumption of food, clothing and shelter facilitated by privilege, and which will very likely be abandoned once the 'laggards' (Rogers, 1962) catch up. This reintroduces the dimension of class distinction, and is illustrated by the social media trend for adding depth to one's profile by hashtagging causes or 'liking' politicised, often ironic, posts about fashion (such as those of DietPrada). Indeed, critique of this activity exists within that same culture, where authenticity of commitment and conviction are routinely contested.

Deeper interrogation of what might loosely be termed 'pro-social cool' would therefore be beneficial. Aspects of activism loosely overlapping with certain hipster pursuits (e.g. opening a vegan coffee shop – identified as such by participants in Ruggero's ethnography of the Occupy movement in Philadelphia (2014), have been criticised from within for setting up *hierarchies* of alternative lifestyle, expressed through complaints of 'attempts to be cool', and again this distinction is also drawn through claims to relative authenticity. Critiques of detached – possibly irresponsible, possibly meaningless – forms of political engagement facilitated by the distance and ease of web-based interactions (so-called 'clicktivism' and 'slacktivism'), amidst reports of 'rising levels of narcissism' among youth (Lane and Dal Cin, 2018) bring us back to familiar territory. Performances of cool are also visible in the personae and rhetorics of far right leaders and their followers, facilitated by the perception of a feminised, liberal elite 'mainstream'. Obviously, the pro- or anti-social nature of perceived instances of coolness is dependent on many things, but the point here is two-fold – cool continues to be invoked, even if not clearly defined; and that some contemporary mutations would seem to make aspects of previous theory redundant, while others require it to be reframed.

Cool theory in the era of the network

The era of 'connectivity' (Van Dijk, 2013): 'web 2.0' and 'surveillance capitalism' (Zuboff, 2019) may also impact on theories of cool. If coolness is avant-garde consumption: what happens to the cultural capital of the 'innovators' when their emerging tastes are so readily harvested by big tech? If coolness is individualism, where the cool persona of the 'atomised' twentieth century amplified the (apparent) power of the individual to 'keep it together' in the face of challenging dominant forces, (Dinerstein, 2017): might a network society and its reconfigured forms of individuality value something else? A toe can go in the water here by considering the 'proto-cool' regency dandy (Walden, 2002; Brown,

2015; Haselstein et al., (2013)), who achieved superior status by cultivating an *appearance* of total self-sufficiency and effortlessness, communicated by silent, embodied disdain towards others, even those in royal authority. Dandies defied the court's right to determine fashions, instigating their own, hence dandyism has become a benchmark for comprehending the contemporary 'influencer'. Brummel was so confident of his individual power that he reportedly demanded, 'Let Paris come to me'. Is this audacity still enviable, or viable?

Burton (2020) states that in this new world of neoliberal self-entrepreneurship, distinctions between the dandy and the crowd have been effaced; we are all compelled to court attention for mere survival (p. 40). Not that Brummel did not labour for his status – his effortlessness was illusory, his life one long effort to cultivate status-boosting relationships and become socially influential; *but* perhaps in an analogue world, his efforts were easier to conceal. Building a *digital* network requires plain and public simulation of charisma and mercilessly bald quantification (and – given the weakness of the 'like' (Van Dijk, 2013, p. 10) – blandification) of impact. What is the online equivalent of one of Brummel's chief power tools, 'that calm and wandering gaze, which neither fixes itself nor will be fixed' (Lister, cited in Walden, (2002)., p. 111)? One tactic might be simply not to engage with social media, but prevalence of 'online presence-building' may make 'IRL' impressions, uncertified by social media, seem parochial and unreliable. As Bauman said, "would-be authorities [in this case, arbiters of cool] 'must tempt and seduce' because 'in the world of chronically underdetermined ends it is the number of followers that makes – that *is* – the authority' (Bauman, 2012, p. 67). Does this make the dandy's self-induced 'exile' look decidedly 'uncool'? Or might it make achievement of *apparently* effortless cool even more impressive, with new and more subtle signifiers, in new forms of engagement with technology?

Conclusion

The complex nuances in coolness make for an elusive target. It manifests itself differently among different micro-cultures, taking account of cultural and contextual differences, but compelling relationships exist between them. The potential for cool to be understood as a system, or as an idealised response to widely-shared conditions for life, is evidenced by connections with various conceptualisations of modernity, neoliberal capitalism and its cool corporate and national brands. The seductive quality of coolness would seem to remain critical to our understanding of culture and perhaps even urgent, since cool ideals may be thwarting transitions to more sustainable forms of life (in fashion consumption for example) and facilitating radicalisation.

Yet, discussions of cool are currently hampered by the need to repeat historical precedents, theoretical contradictions and discontinuities: the striking contrast in origins of Black American experience and white European aristocracy and upstarts, confusion between 'caché' and 'contrarion' cools, popularity versus withdrawal, dignity versus disdain, the 'uncool' of the average geek and the cool of (somewhat nerdy) tech gods.

Furthermore, what might be significant changes to the ethical stance of cool, alongside big structural shifts in society and cultural life, have been little considered in relation to existing cool theory – not that earlier cool theory is obsolete, nor that the anti-social trajectories feared by Liu, Pountain and Robins, and McGuigan are in remission. I would

argue, however, that the nihilistic, anti-social tone and aesthetics of much cool pop culture of the 1990s may have led to exaggeration of this aspect, which now distracts us from cool's continued hold. Existing theories may seem ahistorical or irrelevant, when rigorous reconsideration of vocabulary and emphasis, along with analysis of twenty-first century cool phenomena, may provide more efficient frameworks.

A strong chance of developing cool theory resides in its relationships with aspects of modernity. Fashion's relationship with modernity, currently being revised, is as relevant to cool as the culture of techno-rationality, yet it has been under-explored. Modernity is sometimes employed as a 'backdrop' to cool, with brief references made to 'anomie' across the literature. More sustained connections are made in the material on techno-rational cool; Liu describes cool at one point as 'the ethos of modern alienation' (Liu, 2004, p. 105). However, closer assessment of various conceptions of modernity in the work of cool scholars, and of how coolness features in accounts of late modernity, could help resolve some apparent contradictions by focusing away from 'how' cool is variously achieved by whom, to 'what' the shared ideals might be and why.

Lyman and Scott's essay 'Coolness in Everyday Life' drew on models of 'outsider' behaviour, and warned, not that cool had been commodified, but that 'risk had been democratised'. In their words, 'keeping cool is now a problem for everyone' (1989, p. 155). They focused less on consumer aesthetics of symbolic dissent and more on embodied performances of 'poise' under the 'pressure' of widely-shared experiences of modern, urban life discussed by Simmel, Goffman and others, now reforming under conditions of connectivity and surveillance. This invites numerous critical opportunities for the re-examination of specific manifestations of cool, but also a need to take a step back, and to re-examine cool theory in relation to current forms of modernity.

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