



**Cool Brands and Hot Attachments: Their effect on consumers' willingness to pay more.**

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Cool Brands and Hot Attachments: Their Effect on Consumers' Willingness to Pay More.

### **Abstract**

**Purpose** – This paper explores how motivations to stand out and fit in through consumption affect consumers' perceptions of subcultural and popular brand coolness. Importantly, how do perceptions of brand coolness affect consumers' formations of hot, emotional brand attachments and their willingness to pay more?

**Design/methodology/approach** – This study incorporates survey data from consumers regarding cool brands. A structural equation modeling approach is used to assess the relationship between the variables of interest.

**Findings** – Susceptibility to influence is positively related to desire for unique consumption. While this desire may be fulfilled by both subcultural and popular perceptions of brand coolness, only subcultural coolness has a positive relationship with the willingness to pay more. The importance of an emotional brand attachment is established between both dimensions of brand coolness and price premiums.

**Originality** – This research contributes to a nascent body of literature empirically exploring brand coolness. It builds on past literature that notes the tension between standing out and fitting in conceptualizations of coolness by assessing individual differences. Significantly, it examines specific attributes of cool brands to explore the differences in how subcultural and popular perceptions of brand coolness relate to important marketing outcomes.

**Research limitations** – This study is based on cross-sectional survey data. As brand coolness is often transitory, longitudinal research on trends focusing on different elements of brand coolness may shed light on the cool brand lifecycle.

**Practical implications** – Firms wanting to position brands as cool should emphasize how the brand can help consumers stand out. If a cool brand is already well-known, resources should be allocated to building hot, emotional attachments in order to command price premiums.

**Keywords:** brand coolness, subcultural, popular, optimal distinctiveness theory, deviance regulation theory, emotional brand attachment, price premium

**Paper Type:** Research paper

## Introduction

Once reserved as the reaction of a small minority to mainstream society, being “cool” has become embedded in consumer culture (Pountain and Robins, 2000; Belk *et al.*, 2010). The concept of *cool* is now equally applicable to both brands used by unique subcultures, and popular, iconic brands loved by the masses (Warren *et al.*, 2019). For decades, marketers have been chasing the elusive and alluring concept of cool. The pursuit of cool continues today as seen in recent headlines from Fast Company: “Can Tesla still be cool if it’s a rental car? Apparently, yes”; “Inside Jeff Bezos’s failed attempt to make Amazon ‘cool’ like Apple and Nike”; and “Athletic Greens is now a unicorn. Its unicorn goal: Be this generation’s cool beverage” [1].

Because cool can mean different things to different people depending on the person, culture, place, etc., cool is often described by synonyms like trendy, fashionable, rebellious, detached, or others (Mohiuddin *et al.*, 2016; Rahman, 2013; Suzuki and Kanno, 2022; Warren *et al.*, 2018). Early academic research sought to capture the essence of cool through conceptual and qualitative explorations of coolness (Belk *et al.*, 2010; Bird and Tapp, 2008; Nancarrow *et al.*, 2002; Southgate, 2003). Over the past decade, research has shifted to focus more empirically on defining coolness and discovering cool characteristics and outcomes (Bagozzi and Khoshnevis, 2022; Warren *et al.*, 2018, 2019; Warren and Campbell, 2014). In 2014, Warren and Campbell define cool as a “subjective and dynamic, socially constructed positive trait attributed to cultural objects inferred to be appropriately autonomous” (p. 544). This conceptual definition, together with a scale for consumers’ perceptions of brand coolness (Warren *et al.*, 2019), equip both marketing theory and practice to further investigate questions arising about cool brands.

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3 Nike, Apple, Samsung, and Adidas are seen as being both cool by some individuals and  
4 uncool by others (Warren *et al.*, 2019). For example, one person may think Adidas is cool  
5 because it is widely known and liked — this helps them to fit in. At the same time, another  
6 person may think Adidas is uncool because everyone wears it — this keeps them from standing  
7 out. There is a tension as to whether coolness is perceived by individuals as helping them  
8 achieve a goal of either standing out or fitting in (Belk, 2019; Belk *et al.*, 2010; Warren and  
9 Campbell, 2014). Optimal distinctiveness theory (ODT) explains that this tension lies within  
10 everyone (Brewer, 1991). Consumers want to stand out, but not at the risk of social isolation.  
11 Consumers want to fit in, but not to the exclusion of being able to express themselves uniquely.  
12 Which is more important to consumers when considering the purchase of cool brands? Deviance  
13 regulation theory (DRT) complements ODT by explaining how consumers make behavioral  
14 decisions based on information about standing out rather than fitting in (Blanton and Christie,  
15 2003). While many dimensions of cool personal traits, products, and brands have been  
16 developed, the present research focuses on the two aspects of cool brands that are closely related  
17 to consumers' desires to stand out and/or fit in: subcultural cool and popular cool. Subcultural  
18 cool reflects the perception that a brand will help consumers stand out by being unique and  
19 distinctive from others (Warren *et al.*, 2019). Popular cool brands are related to goals of fitting in  
20 due to perceptions that the brand is widely accepted and liked by most people (Warren *et al.*,  
21 2019).

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47 The purpose of the present research is to examine how consumer goals of standing out  
48 and fitting in affect perceptions of brands consumers think are cool and how the perceptions of  
49 those attributes affect marketing outcomes. Specifically, do subcultural and popular brands  
50 create hot, emotional attachments? Brand relationships, such as “hot” affect-based emotional  
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3 attachments (e.g. love, desire, and connection), predict future interactions with brands (Dwivedi  
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5 *et al.*, 2019; Fetscherin *et al.*, 2021; Jiménez and Voss, 2014; Thomson *et al.*, 2005). Are  
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7 consumers willing to pay more for their cool brands? The current study utilizes structural  
8  
9 equation modeling to answer these important questions. In line with ODT and DRT, consumer  
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11 desires to stand out and fit in are positively related to one another, with the desire for unique  
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13 consumption providing a lens through which consumers perceive cool brands. While this desire  
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15 to stand out may be fulfilled by both subcultural and popular perceptions of brand coolness, only  
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17 subcultural coolness has a positive relationship with consumers' willingness to pay more.  
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19 Additionally, for cool brands that are seen as highly popular, the importance of emotional brand  
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21 attachment is established for consumers' willingness to pay price premiums.  
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27 This study contributes to both the marketing theory being developed around coolness and  
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29 the managerial practice of implementing relationship and pricing strategies for cool brands. First,  
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31 it employs two individual difference variables, susceptibility to influence and desire for unique  
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33 consumption, to understand the interplay of consumer motivations to stand out and fit in through  
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35 using cool brands. ODT and DRT are applied to build on the literature that addresses the tension  
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37 present in conceptualizations of cool (Belk, 2019; Belk *et al.*, 2010; Warren and Campbell,  
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39 2014). In doing so, the present research answers the call to investigate how individual differences  
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41 in consumption goals affect perceptions of cool brands (Warren *et al.*, 2019). Understanding how  
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43 these individual-level characteristics relate to cool consumption builds on existing literature that  
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45 considers the tension between standing out and fitting in. At the same time, it helps managers of  
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47 cool brands tasked with developing strategies to address these goals. Next, the importance of an  
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49 emotional brand attachment is established between both subcultural and popular perceptions of  
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51 brand coolness and price premiums. By focusing on the cool brand attributes of subcultural and  
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3 popular, the present research enhances the extant literature by illuminating specific coolness  
4 components and their relationship with important downstream outcomes (Warren *et al.*, 2019).  
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8 Building on the developing brand coolness literature and incorporating ODT and DRT  
9 into our theorizing of cool brands, this article begins with a brief overview of the concept of cool  
10 and how it is addressed in the marketing literature as it relates to our research questions. Next,  
11 we highlight ODT and DRT and develop our research model. We then describe the methodology  
12 used to test our hypotheses and present the results of our study. After a discussion of the findings  
13 and their managerial implications, we conclude with limitations and suggestions for future  
14 research.  
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## 26 **Literature Review**

### 27 *The Transfer of Cool*

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29 The ability for coolness to be transferred from culture, to brands, to individual consumers is  
30 crucial to the marketing of cool brands. The history of cool cannot be traced back to objects, but  
31 to culture (Frank, 1998; Gerber and Geiman, 2012). According to the theory of the movement of  
32 meaning, objects are not inherently meaningful, but obtain their meaning within the culture that  
33 created them (McCracken, 1986). More recently, consumer culture theory research describes  
34 how consumers transform the symbolic meanings embedded in culture, products, brands, and  
35 marketing messages to further their own identity and lifestyle goals (Arnould and Thompson,  
36 2005). The 1960s hippie culture is known for distinctive fashion and symbols, such as the peace  
37 sign. People unassociated with the “peace and love” hippies could still co-opt their *cool* by  
38 donning bell-bottoms, wearing their long hair loose around their shoulders, or mimicking their  
39 rebellious attitude toward authority (Frank, 1998). Many recording artists, such as rapper  
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3 Eminem and rock n' roller Elvis, have been accused of appropriating a cool, black aesthetic  
4 (Belk *et al.*, 2010). These examples demonstrate the ease of meaning transfer and how it creates  
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6 the opportunity for people to sample a subculture without being a part of it.  
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10 Thanks to media and marketing forces, the current state of what is cool may be  
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12 discovered by opening up social media or queuing up the latest hit on Netflix. As coolness is  
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14 transferred to those outside the subculture in which it was created, the attitudes and brands of the  
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16 culture are more widely adopted. This transfer of meaning gradually waters down the more  
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18 rebellious attributes of cool and allows cool to be represented by more socially desirable traits  
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20 (Belk, 2019; Belk *et al.*, 2010). As the boundaries of what is considered cool expand, it becomes  
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22 achievable by more people. A coolness that is available to the masses through meaning transfer  
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24 can be a persuasive marketing tool and a point of differentiation for brands.  
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### 30 31 *Coolness in Marketing*

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33 The allure of cool to individuals is manifold: status, attention, self-expression, respect, inclusion,  
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35 etc. (Southgate, 2003; Belk *et al.*, 2010). Marketers' early efforts to tap into this consumer desire  
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37 led to a globalization of cool, allowing companies to capitalize on the monetary success of cool  
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39 trends (Belk *et al.*, 2010; Mohiuddin *et al.*, 2016; Southgate, 2003). Marketers have succeeded to  
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41 the point that "consumers now look for cool in the marketplace more than within themselves"  
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43 (Belk *et al.*, 2010, p.183). Several perspectives examine the concept of cool, including  
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45 consumption practices in fashion, music, art, and transportation, as well as marketing practices in  
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47 advertising, retail, and media (Belk *et al.*, 2010; Jiménez-Barreto *et al.*, 2022; Loureiro *et al.*,  
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49 2020). Previous research uncovers general themes in the meanings of cool (Rahman, 2013),  
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51 personality traits of cool people (Dar-Nimrod *et al.*, 2012, Dar-Nimrod *et al.*, 2018), cool design  
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3 attributes in technological products (Sundar *et al.*, 2014; Tiwari *et al.*, 2021), and the importance  
4 of luxury values to perceptions of cool brands (Loureiro *et al.*, 2020). Additionally, factors such  
5 as autonomy (Warren and Campbell, 2014), emotional expression (Warren *et al.*, 2018), humor  
6 (Warren and Reimann, 2019), and creativity (Im *et al.*, 2015) are also subjects of investigation  
7 into perceptions of coolness.  
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15 Definitions of cool in the literature are numerous and varied. In many studies it is  
16 commonly defined or described by synonyms. However, this does not address the complexities  
17 of coolness that are the subject of this present research on brands. The current study adopts  
18 Warren and Campbell's (2014) definition of cool brands as a "subjective and dynamic, socially  
19 constructed positive trait attributed to cultural objects inferred to be appropriately autonomous"  
20 (p. 544). The first part of this definition, "subjective and dynamic, socially constructed," points  
21 out that the perception of what is cool in a brand differs by person and context. The contrasts in  
22 how individuals perceive cool brands may be explored through differences at an individual level.  
23 Loureiro *et al.* (2020) find individual differences in four consumer luxury values (i.e. financial,  
24 functional, individual, social) as positively related to brand coolness. Individuals who are highly  
25 countercultural, or more skeptical of society in general, think brands that diverge from the norm  
26 are cooler than brands that do not (Warren and Campbell, 2014). While Warren *et al.* (2019) find  
27 no correlation in the need for uniqueness or innovativeness with a complex, structural concept of  
28 brand coolness, it is possible that uniqueness plays a role in individual dimensions of brand  
29 coolness.  
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50 The most recent research on cool brands adds to the nomological network by looking at  
51 novel antecedents and consequences in different contexts and cultures including Pakistan (Attiq  
52 *et al.*, 2022), Vietnam (Khoi and Le, 2022), Japan (Suzuki and Kanno, 2022), and the US  
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3 (Bagozzi and Khoshnevis, 2022; Jiménez-Barreto *et al.*, 2022). Bagozzi and Khoshnevis (2022)  
4 add product quality as an antecedent to brand coolness and provide support for the autonomous  
5 function of brand coolness through examining the material self as a boundary condition that  
6 regulates the effect of brand coolness on word of mouth and purchase intentions. Brand coolness  
7 as a hierarchical structure developed by Warren *et al.* (2019) is supported and generalized across  
8 gender, age, income, education, and marital status (Bagozzi and Khoshnevis, 2022). Extending  
9 Loureiro *et al.*'s (2019) research on coolness in a luxury context, Suzuki and Kanno (2022)  
10 examine the benefits of luxury co-branding with widely popular cool brands to achieve *masstige*,  
11 or mass prestige. Khoi and Le (2022) show that luxury hotel brand coolness positively relates to  
12 customer brand engagement through brand satisfaction and brand love. Attiq *et al.* (2022) also  
13 find a positive relationship between brand coolness and brand engagement, and add a new  
14 outcome of cool brands: customer psychological well-being. Finally, Jiménez-Barreto and  
15 colleagues (2022) distinguish between product and service brand coolness and find service brand  
16 coolness enhances communal brand connection and loyalty.

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Coolness in products and brands contributes to brand relationships such as desire, brand love, and self-brand connection (Bagozzi *et al.*, 2021; Loureiro *et al.*, 2020; Tiwari *et al.*, 2021; Warren *et al.*, 2019). Brand relationships, in turn, have a strong impact on both behavioral intentions of consumers (e.g. paying more) and actual customer behavior, such as purchase (Park *et al.*, 2010). Even though there are several relationship types in marketing literature (e.g. brand attachment, self-brand connection, brand love, brand identification, and brand trust), the consensus is that they are all positively associated with brand loyalty (Khamitov *et al.*, 2019). Brand loyalty is positively related to relative price, suggesting that strong brand relationships affect consumers' willingness to pay more (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001). The structural

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3 concept of brand coolness is also positively related to behavior intentions such as buying,  
4 repurchasing, spreading word of mouth, and paying price premiums (Bagozzi and Khoshnevis,  
5 2022; Warren *et al.*, 2019). These findings frame the contribution of the present study in  
6 extending the limited research connecting brand coolness to both brand relationships and price  
7 behavior. While some previous research addresses questions that necessitate the use of the “big  
8 idea” of brand coolness and the related complex, higher-order model, the current study examines  
9 the tensions of standing out and fitting in through the lens of two, simple concepts: subcultural  
10 cool and popular cool.  
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## 24 **Conceptual Development and Hypotheses**

### 25 *Standing Out and Fitting In*

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27 In the 1950s and 1960s, two streams of research developed that shape current thinking about  
28 standing out and fitting. The first (conformity) stems from social psychology and sociology —  
29 the study of individual’s motivations to conform in small group settings (Blanton and Burkley,  
30 2008). The second (uniqueness), rooted in personality and clinical psychology, is centered on an  
31 individual’s motivation to be unique in order to be a fully realized, healthy human (Blanton and  
32 Burkley, 2008). These two seemingly opposing streams of research are bridged through  
33 compromise perspectives, like optimal distinctiveness theory (ODT). According to ODT,  
34 individuals have an optimal point of distinction that guides competing motivations of  
35 assimilation (i.e., fitting in with others) and differentiation (i.e., standing out from others). If  
36 individuals feel they are pulled too far from their optimal point, they will take corrective  
37 measures to return to equilibrium. The point of optimal distinctiveness is different for each  
38 person because everyone has different thresholds for uniqueness and belonging. According to  
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3 ODT, only a balance between these needs brings satisfaction (Brewer, 1991; Brewer and  
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5 Gardener, 1996).

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8 While ODT is useful in explaining individuals' global identities, the current research  
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10 questions address consumers' judgements and consumption behaviors (Blanton and Burkley,  
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12 2008). By focusing on behavioral decision making, deviance regulation theory (DRT)  
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14 complements ODT by explaining how people make judgements based on differences instead of  
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16 similarities (Blanton and Christie, 2003). DRT assumes that individuals are driven by a basic and  
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18 immediate concern for maintaining a positive self-image. Two foundational principles of DRT  
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20 are that difference is more informative than similarity, and that this asymmetry structures social  
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22 behavior. Individuals decide how to behave based on the consequences of standing out, rather  
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24 than on the consequences of fitting in (Blanton and Burkley, 2008). DRT finds that people desire  
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26 to stand out from others by deviating from social norms, but in a *desirable* way (Blanton and  
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28 Christie, 2003). People make hundreds of decisions and judgements everyday about what to  
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30 wear, how to act, and, regarding this current research, what is cool, why, and if they are willing  
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32 to pay more for it. In the context of cool, brands that diverge from the norm, or what is socially  
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34 expected, are considered cool only when the deviation seems appropriate, the norm is considered  
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36 illegitimate, or the divergence is not extreme (Warren and Campbell, 2014).  
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#### 44 *Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence and Desire for Unique Consumption*

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46 To operationalize this research, two constructs that take consumption into account are utilized:  
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48 the normative dimension of *consumer susceptibility to interpersonal influence* (NCSII) and the  
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50 *desire for unique consumer products*. While the label *desire for unique consumer products*  
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52 implies an exclusive focus on only products, the construct is defined and measured more broadly  
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3 as a desire for unique consumption through products, services, and experiences (Lynn and  
4 Harris, 1997). The desire for unique consumer products is driven by the more general need for  
5 uniqueness and positively relates to consumers' need for uniqueness (Lynn and Harris, 1997a;  
6 Tian *et al.*, 2001). Based on this extant literature, we assume that the desire for unique consumer  
7 products will manifest itself not only through products, services, and experiences, but also  
8 through brands, which may serve to enhance uniqueness through their symbolic qualities and  
9 reflect a consumers' personal experience with a product (Keller and Lehmann, 2006). If a  
10 consumer is searching for a unique product (i.e., the newly trending platform shoe) she should  
11 also be aware of how the brand she chooses will reflect that uniqueness. Because this research is  
12 related to cool brands and their attributes—and not just cool products—it refers to this construct  
13 as *desire for unique consumption* (DUC) for the remainder of the paper. The relationship  
14 between these constructs as well as their connection to cool brands are modeled in Figure 1. The  
15 following sections discuss the relationships in the model in more detail.  
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40 NCSII is defined as “the need to identify or enhance one's image with significant others  
41 through the acquisition and use of products and brands, the willingness to conform to the  
42 expectations of others regarding purchase decisions” (Bearden *et al.*, 1989, p.474). In other  
43 words, how important is another person's influence on an individual's consumption preferences  
44 and behaviors? NCSII, based on McGuire's (1968) influenceability theory, assumes that some  
45 consumers are more susceptible to the influence of others in their preference for, and purchase  
46 of, consumer brands (Bearden *et al.*, 1989). An individual's goal to verify or enhance self-image  
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3 may be accomplished through identification (Lam *et al.*, 2010). In the context of the present  
4 study, identification is via cool brands. Individuals adopt cool brands because they want to  
5 identify with others in order to build or maintain important relationships. By definition though,  
6 cool brands not only help people identify with others, but also help to stand out from others.  
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12 Do consumers who rely on the influence of others in order to fit in desire unique brands  
13 that stand out? This relationship has been explored with mixed findings. Most studies exploring  
14 these two motivations hypothesize a negative relationship but find weak or no support (Clark and  
15 Goldsmith, 2005; Lynn and Harris, 1997a, 1997b; Tepper and Hoyle, 1996; Tian *et al.*, 2001).  
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17 Lynn and Harris (1997a) not only find no support for the hypothesized negative relationship, but  
18 a significant positive relationship that they explain by connecting both the desire to stand out and  
19 fit in through consumption to “the use of possessions to define oneself in relation to others” (p.  
20 611). They suggest that ODT explains the desire for both motivations as consumers find their  
21 optimal balance of distinctiveness. Later studies provide further support for the positive  
22 relationship between these two motivations (Ruvio, 2009; Ruvio *et al.*, 2008).  
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35 The desire for unique consumption is defined as “the extent to which consumers hold as a  
36 personal goal the acquisition and possession of consumer goods, services, and experiences that  
37 few other possess” (Lynn and Harris, 1997a, pp. 602-603). People prefer socially acceptable  
38 ways of being unique and unique consumption may help them meet that goal (Lynn and Harris,  
39 1997a). ODT supports that consumers who are susceptible to influence may desire unique brands  
40 in order to find optimal balance in social contexts (Brewer and Gardner, 1996). However,  
41 individuals’ optimal points of distinctiveness are tied contextually to the setting (e.g., work or  
42 home) and culture (e.g., independent or interdependent). DRT does not assume that standing out  
43 or fitting in is good or bad, or that one is better or worse – instead it focuses on the importance of  
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3 *difference* in making decisions (Blanton and Christie, 2003). A basic principle of DRT is that  
4 deviant behavior (i.e., information that is unique) provides more information about a person than  
5 conforming behavior. Therefore, when making consumption decisions, individuals will  
6 ultimately filter their desire to conform through their desire for unique consumption. This, along  
7 with the previous studies that find a positive relationship between constructs related to standing  
8 out and fitting in, leads to the following hypothesis:

19 *H1. Consumers' normative susceptibility to interpersonal influence is positively related*  
20 *to the desire for unique consumption.*

#### 26 *Cool Brand Dimensions: Popular and Subcultural*

27 The exchange between an individual's self-image and social-image is related to the goals of  
28 differentiation and assimilation (Brewer and Gardener, 1996; Reed, 2002). In order to explore  
29 how these goals affect consumers' perceptions of cool brands, the present research adopts two  
30 dimensions of cool brands that are closely related to the goals of standing out and fitting in:  
31 subcultural cool and popular cool.

32 Subcultural brand coolness is associated with autonomy and independence from the norm  
33 (Warren *et al.*, 2019). A consumer's desire for unique consumption (DUC) can be met with  
34 scarce, new, or custom products, services, and experiences that few others possess (Lynn and  
35 Harris, 1997a). This desire may be fulfilled by subcultural brand coolness. For example, if a  
36 consumer desires a unique women's platform shoe, a cool brand that is seen as subcultural, apart  
37 from the mainstream, would signal uniqueness because few others (i.e., the mainstream) possess  
38 it. At high school homecoming dances around the country, Jessica Simpson and Steve Madden  
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brand platform shoes are a common sight. However, the boundary-pushing, independent shoe brand, Jeffery Campbell, is less common and therefore more noticeable and differentiates the wearer from her peers. Often associated with niche groups of consumers, subcultural cool brands may be perceived as scarce since they are only produced in quantities to supply a narrow target market. Subcultural coolness is also associated with the beginning of the cool brand lifecycle when a brand is still relatively novel (Warren *et al.*, 2019). This novelty may meet a consumer's desire for unique consumption through the perception of being new, and therefore not widely possessed. Consumers' desire for unique consumption is satisfied by possessing something different than what most people have (Lynn and Harris, 1997a). Cool brands that are high in perceptions of subcultural coolness are those that help consumers to stand apart from the crowd by being different (Warren *et al.*, 2019). Deviance regulation theory (DRT) tells us that people are defined by what makes them different (Blanton and Christie, 2003). This is supported by self-concept research that finds people delineate themselves in terms of their uncommon and distinct attributes more than their common ones (Blanton and Christie, 2003). As such, it is expected that consumers who desire unique consumption via different, scarce, new, or custom offerings will perceive subcultural brand coolness as being able to help fulfill their goals.

Therefore, we hypothesize:

*H2a.* The desire for unique consumption is positively related to the subcultural dimension of brand coolness.

Popular cool brands are those that are “fashionable, trendy, and liked by most people” (Warren *et al.*, 2019, p.39). Brands considered popular today most often began as ones considered cool by

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3 niche groups of consumers. As niche brands gain notice and attract followers, they may become  
4 cool to the masses and less associated with their autonomous roots (Belk *et al.*, 2010; Warren *et*  
5 *al.*, 2019). Cool brands seen as popular may be less associated with the novelty, scarcity, and  
6 customization sought by individuals with a desire for unique consumption. However, cool brands  
7 that are widely admired, as popular ones are, can still contribute to consumers' need to stand out  
8 through unique consumption, as these brands are visible symbols of status (Warren *et al.*, 2019).  
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10 And while they are more widely known, popular brands may still use tactics to incorporate  
11 perceptions of newness (e.g., new product lines), scarcity (e.g., limited editions), or  
12 customization (e.g., personalized features and combinations). Although a popular cool brand  
13 may not retain its initial distinctiveness, it can still provide some measure of distinction. This  
14 leads to the following hypothesis:  
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31 *H2b.* The desire for unique consumption is positively related to the popular dimension of  
32 brand coolness.  
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38 The next logical step for this research is to assess whether DUC is more strongly related to  
39 subcultural cool or popular cool brands. One might expect that subcultural cool is more strongly  
40 associated with DUC because consumers perceive this dimension as helping them stand out from  
41 mainstream society. Two antecedents that drive DUC are individuals' need to be unique and  
42 their status aspiration (Lynn and Harris, 1997a). People who are high in a need for uniqueness  
43 dislike feeling similar to others (Fromkin, 1972; Snyder and Fromkin, 1980). These individuals  
44 would be less favorable toward popular brands that are widely recognized. In addition to  
45 satisfying a desire to be unique, people consume brands that communicate their status (Lynn and  
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Harris, 1997a). Brands that are unique and/or scarce, as subcultural brands are, effectively communicate and fulfill status aspirations (Lynn and Harris, 1997a). In addition, while cool brands that are perceived as highly subcultural may naturally incorporate a consumer's desire for newness, scarcity, and customization, those considered popular may have to rely on marketing tactics to fulfill these goals. Hence, we hypothesize:

*H2c.* The desire for unique consumption will have a stronger positive relationship with the subcultural dimension of brand coolness over the popular dimension of brand coolness.

### *Emotional Brand Attachment*

In groundbreaking work on brand relationships, Fournier (1998) finds that brands are active relationship partners. As such, a brand relationship can evoke hot, affect-based emotions and emotional attachment (Fournier, 1998; Thomson *et al.*, 2005; Park *et al.*, 2010). Extant research finds that brands perceived as cool are related to intense emotions, like love and desire (Attiq *et al.*, 2022; Khoi and Le, 2022; Loureiro *et al.*, 2020; Warren *et al.*, 2019). This research adopts Thomson *et al.*'s (2005) conceptualization of emotional brand attachment as it is consistent with previous literature and captures a broad array of emotions that reflect attachment in brand relationships (Fournier, 1998). An emotional brand attachment is composed of three dimensions: affection "warm feeling towards the brand," connection "feelings of being joined with the brand," and love/passion "intense and aroused positive feelings towards the brand," (Thomson *et al.*, 2005, p.80). Consumers who perceive a brand to be like themselves are more likely to form emotional brand attachments (Japutra *et al.*, 2018, 2019; Malär *et al.*, 2011; Thomson *et al.*,

2005). Consumers can use brands that are highly symbolic, like cool brands, to verify their actual self-image or enhance an ideal self-image (Sirgy, 1982). Consumers using a cool brand to verify their self-identity should feel that the brand is congruent with their actual self. While consumers using a cool brand to enhance their self-identity would see the brand as being congruent with their ideal self. Either way, both verification and enhancement of self-identity offer a path to enhance an emotional brand attachment (Japutra *et al.*, 2018; Malär *et al.*, 2011). Both subcultural and popular perceptions of brand coolness could be used in signaling an individual's identity. A person who sees himself as unique and set apart from the crowd, or desires to be, will lean toward cool brands that are perceived as more subcultural. Alternatively, a person who desires to be popular and liked by many people may buy a brand that is widely known and loved, to fit in with peers. As these identity projects are often considered to be goal driven, a second path for cool brands to emotional brand attachment is the attainment of goals that are self- or socially- oriented (Arnould and Thompson, 2005; Grisaffe and Nguyen, 2011). Cool brands may help consumers accomplish goals of standing out or fitting in, thereby encouraging an emotional attachment to a cool brand. Building on this existing research, both popular and subcultural perceptions of cool brands are expected to have a positive relationship with emotional brand attachment. Hence we hypothesize:

*H3a.* The popular dimension of brand coolness is positively related to emotional brand attachment.

*H3b.* The subcultural dimension of brand coolness is positively related to emotional brand attachment.

Building on these predictions, we explore which dimension of brand coolness, subcultural or popular, leads to a stronger emotional brand attachment. Extant research shows that the strength of attachments can vary and, as attachment strengthens, feelings of affection, connection, and passion also grow stronger (Thomson *et al.*, 2005). Cool brands, with the ability to connote distinctiveness about consumers, have high symbolic value. Escalas and Bettman (2005) find that symbolic brands “that communicate something about the user yield stronger effects than brands that do not” (p.388). They go on to posit that popular brands, because they are widely used, may not be able to communicate important details about the user that would lead to greater symbolic value (Escalas and Bettman, 2005). This implies that subcultural cool brands may lead to a stronger brand attachment than popular cool brands. According to DRT, behavior that makes you stand out, or deviate from a norm, sticks to your identity and provides more information about you than conforming behavior does (Blanton and Christie, 2003). The subcultural dimension of cool brands may communicate more about the consumer, thereby increasing the symbolism of subcultural cool. It is expected that the more symbolic, subcultural cool brand will form a stronger emotional attachment than the widely known, popular cool brand. Therefore, we offer the following hypothesis:

*H3c.* The subcultural dimension of brand coolness will have a stronger positive relationship with emotional brand attachment than the popular dimension of brand coolness.

*Willingness to Pay a Price Premium*

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3 Consumers' willingness to pay a price premium is a basic indicator of loyalty and a key link  
4 between the core facets of customer-based brand equity and purchase (Keller, 1993; Netemeyer  
5 *et al.*, 2004). Brand uniqueness, how different a brand is from its competitors, is one of the core  
6 facets of customer-based brand equity (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 1993; Netemeyer *et al.*, 2004).  
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10 Consumers are willing to pay more for a brand that is unique, and that willingness is a strong  
11 indicator of brand loyalty and purchase behavior (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 1993; Netemeyer *et al.*,  
12 2004). Bairrada *et al.* (2018) find a positive relationship between brand uniqueness and price  
13 premiums through the mediating effect of brand love. Unique brands enable consumers to  
14 differentiate themselves from others, contributing to their own desire to stand out (Bairrada *et*  
15 *al.*, 2018). As individuals consume distinctive brands, they should be willing to pay more for a  
16 brand that not only has unique attributes, but helps them express their individuality. Brands  
17 perceived as being subcultural cool are those that help consumers stand apart from the  
18 mainstream and signal connections with objects or groups that affirm their individuality. These  
19 subcultural cool brands should, therefore, command higher prices.  
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35 Netemeyer *et al.* (2004) also identify popularity as a brand association and an important  
36 nomological correlate to the core facets of consumer-based brand equity. Aaker (1996) argues  
37 that brand popularity, as one aspect of brand leadership, is a measure of brand equity. Brands  
38 that are popular are both well-known and liked by many people leading to heightened brand  
39 familiarity. As familiarity with a brand grows, the ability of consumers to recognize and recall  
40 the brand also increases. The combination of high brand awareness and the positive brand image  
41 of popular brands should allow the brand to command larger margins through price premiums  
42 (Keller, 1993). The life cycle of cool brands describes how brand coolness begins with a small,  
43 niche group of consumers but as the brand grows and becomes cool to a wider audience it loses  
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3 some of its autonomy, but gains familiarity, market share, and the ability to command a higher  
4 price (Warren *et al.*, 2019). Because cool brands command a higher price than their uncool  
5 counterparts (Warren *et al.*, 2019) and both popular and subcultural are attributes of brand  
6 coolness, it is expected that both brands that help people stand out and fit in will benefit from the  
7 ability to price their brands at a premium. Therefore it is hypothesized:  
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17 *H4a.* The subcultural dimension of brand coolness has a positive relationship with the  
18 willingness to pay a price premium.  
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23 *H4b.* The popular dimension of brand coolness has a positive relationship with the  
24 willingness to pay a price premium.  
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31 However, since brand popularity is not considered a *core* facet of brand equity (Aaker, 1996;  
32 Keller, 1993; Netemeyer *et al.*, 2004), it is not expected to be related as strongly to the  
33 willingness to pay a price premium as unique, subcultural brands. DRT offers an explanation for  
34 how unique brands may outperform popular ones in driving price premiums (Blanton and  
35 Christie, 2003). Since unique brands provide more distinctive and memorable information about  
36 a consumer than popular ones, they may be perceived as providing greater value. Perceived value  
37 is a trade-off between what one gets and what one must give up (Netemeyer *et al.*, 2004). When  
38 consumers perceive that they are “getting more” from unique brands over popular brands, they  
39 will place more value on them and be willing to pay more for them. Thus:  
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3 *H4c.* The subcultural dimension of brand coolness will have a stronger positive  
4 relationship with the willingness to pay a price premium than the popular dimension of  
5 brand coolness.  
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12 Previous literature, including self-expansion theory and consumer culture theory, explain how  
13 consumers use brands to expand or build their self-identities (Arnould and Thompson, 2005;  
14 Aron and Aron, 1986; Belk, 1988). As consumers use brands to project their identity, their  
15 relationship with the brands intensifies. Emotion-based attachment is evidenced by a desire to be  
16 close to the attachment object, separation anxiety, and feeling safe when the object is near  
17 (Bowlby, 1969). Consumers are willing to invest their own resources (e.g., social, financial, and  
18 time) to maintain the relationship and closeness to the brand (Park *et al.*, 2013). One way  
19 consumers invest in the brands they are attached to is by paying more for them than other similar  
20 brands. Previous literature finds a positive relationship between brand attachment and a  
21 willingness to pay a price premium (Fedorikhin *et al.*, 2008; Jiménez and Voss, 2014; Thomson  
22 *et al.*, 2005) as well as other pro-brand behaviors like purchase intention, brand loyalty, and  
23 brand advocacy (Bagozzi *et al.*, 2021; Dwivedi *et al.*, 2019). Consumers who feel love,  
24 connection, and affection for a cool brand should be willing to invest financial resources to  
25 obtain the object of their attachment by paying more for it. Therefore, we hypothesize;  
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47 *H5.* Emotional brand attachment has a positive relationship with the willingness to pay a  
48 price premium.  
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## 51 52 53 **Research Design** 54 55 56 57 58 59 60

### *Sample*

Previous research suggests that a desire for coolness is prominent among youth and dwindles in importance with age (O'Donnell and Wardlow, 2000; Bird and Tapp, 2008; Belk *et al.*, 2010; Mohiuddin *et al.*, 2016). This is reflected in samples for empirical research as well (Bagozzi and Khoshnevis, 2022; Im *et al.*, 2015; Rahman, 2013). In line with this previous literature, the target population of this study is U.S. individuals between the ages of 18-39 years. In 2019 the population of adults in this age group was 97,897,048 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). Assuming a confidence level of 95% and a margin of error of 5%, a suggested sample size of 385 was determined. Qualtrics, an online research company, selected and randomized a sample in accordance with our target population. Potential survey respondents received an email inviting them to participate and outlining survey length and incentives available. The email did not include any other details about the contents of the survey to avoid self-selection bias. Qualtrics screened out respondents who finished the questionnaire in less than half the expected time and gathered 386 usable responses. The researchers removed thirty responses due to non-response or improper response to the brand nomination prompt. This resulted in a final sample of 356 participants (64% female, 34% male, and 2% other) with an average age of 30 years.

### *Measures*

This study employs previously published and validated scales measured using a 7-point Likert format. Respondents were asked to indicate their agreement with each item from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Table I provides the items used to measure each construct. *NCSII* is measured with eight items from the normative dimension of Bearden, Netemeyer, and Teel's scale (Bearden *et al.*, 1989). The four items used to measure the *DUC* are adapted from the scale

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3 by Lynn & Harris (1997). The *popular* and *subcultural* components of brand coolness are each  
4 measured with four items from the brand coolness scale (Warren *et al.*, 2019). Consumers'  
5 *willingness to pay a price premium* is measured with three items adopted from Netemeyer *et al.*  
6 (2004). Finally the three dimensions of affection (four items), connection (three items), and  
7 passion (three items) measure *emotional brand attachment* (Thomson *et al.*, 2005). To reduce  
8 complexity while preserving the multi-faceted nature of the construct, facet-representative  
9 parceling is employed to measure emotional brand attachment (Little *et al.*, 2013). The items for  
10 each of the three dimensions were averaged and then used as indicators for the higher-level  
11 construct of emotional brand attachment as in Malär (2011).  
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31 Following previous research on brand coolness, subjects were asked to nominate a brand that  
32 was cool *to them* (Warren *et al.*, 2019; Warren and Campbell, 2014). To ensure that the cool  
33 brand nominated was not simply salient (i.e. top-of-mind), but one that truly reflected the  
34 respondents personal idea of cool, the nominated brand was recalled using an adapted actual self-  
35 congruence scale (Sirgy *et al.*, 1997). This two-step approach encourages respondents to take  
36 their time and think about the cool brands they like, and then narrow those down to a cool brand  
37 that best fits their idea of cool. Brands nominated were diverse: apparel and accessories (Adidas,  
38 Nike, Converse, Champion, Gucci, H&M, Hot Topic, Old Navy, Pink, Puma, Shein, Under  
39 Armor, Vans, Zara), electronics (Apple, Nintendo, Samsung, Sony), Google, Coca Cola,  
40 Walmart, Amazon, and many other less well-known brands receiving fewer than three  
41 nominations.  
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## Analysis and Results

### *Measurement Model Assessment*

A two-step approach (Gerbing and Anderson, 1988) was employed to test the proposed model. A confirmatory factor analysis in AMOS (Version 26) assessed the reliability and validity of the measures and the results are presented in Table 1. The model fits the data well ( $\chi^2 = 473.81$ ,  $df = 284$ ,  $p < .000$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 1.67$ ,  $CFI = .97$ ,  $TLI = .97$ ,  $RMSEA = .04$ ,  $SRMR = .04$ ) meeting all cut-off criteria (Hu and Bentler, 1999). All factor loadings are significant ( $p < .001$ ), supporting convergent validity. The constructs internal consistency is supported with significant composite reliabilities (CR) equal to or greater than .8, with a range between .8 and .96 (Hair *et al.*, 2019). The average variance extracted (AVE) is .5 or above for all constructs demonstrating convergent validity (Hair *et al.*, 2019). These measurement items appear in Table 1. Discriminant validity is supported as the maximum shared variance (MSV) is less than the AVE for each construct. Further, the square root of the AVE is higher than the interconstruct correlations related to that factor for each of the constructs as seen in Table II (Hu and Bentler, 1999; Gaskin *et al.*, 2019). The descriptive statistics and interconstruct correlation matrix are provided in Table II.

----- Insert Table II About Here -----

As survey research was used for data collection, the research design addressed some common causes of common method bias (CMB) including decreased motivation and increased satisficing (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003, 2012) including the pre-testing of scales, payment of respondents, assurance of anonymity, attention checks, and a request to “be thoughtful and

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3 honest” with their answers. Respondents also saw a message of appreciation at the beginning of  
4 the survey as expressions of gratitude act as a moral enforcer (McCullough *et al.*, 2001). As  
5 such, expressions of gratitude should encourage respondents to act in a positive, helpful way  
6 (Raggio and Folse, 2009).  
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11 In addition to addressing its potential in the survey design, evidence of CMB was  
12 assessed utilizing two marker variable tests. The authors collected a 4-item marker variable that  
13 measured experience and expectations of service quality in restaurants. This variable 1) is not  
14 theoretically related to the substantive variables in the model and 2) is influenced by similar  
15 causes of common method variance (CMV), two primary determinants of marker variable  
16 quality (Simmering *et al.*, 2015). The four items are measured on a 7-point Likert format scale  
17 with responses from strongly disagree to strongly agree like the other variables in the survey.  
18 The marker variable appears near the end of the survey, has a similar number of items, and  
19 requires perceptual, subjective responses similar to the substantive variables (Simmering *et al.*,  
20 2015). Additionally, this marker variable is also used in the brand coolness study by Warren *et al.*,  
21 (2019). As per Malhotra, Kim, & Patel (2006) the second smallest correlation was used to  
22 partial out the marker variable correlation from the substantive variable correlation matrix. All  
23 coefficients that were significant in the hypothesized structural model remained statistically  
24 significant after controlling for the marker variable in the model, indicating that common method  
25 variance does not represent a significant threat in our data. The test that is most highly  
26 recommended for detecting common method variance is the CFA Marker technique (Podsakoff  
27 *et al.*, 2012; Richardson *et al.*, 2009). This test was performed following the technique illustrated  
28 by Williams *et al.*, (2010). The tests show that although the data does have some level of CMV  
29 (i.e., the statistically significant comparison of the Baseline and Method-C model), it is not  
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3 significantly biasing the results (i.e., the comparison of the Method-R and Method-U models).

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5 Taken together, the two marker variable tests indicate that bias from common methods is not  
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7 altering the substantive findings in our study.  
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### 10 11 12 *Hypothesis Testing* 13

14 The hypothesized model was tested with structural equation modeling using AMOS (Version  
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16 26). Commensurate with the literature, age, gender, and income were included in our model as  
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18 control variables however, their inclusion did not significantly change any results and were  
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20 removed from further analyses. The error terms of the latent constructs for popular and  
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22 subcultural were correlated in the hypothesized structural model. While this practice is cautioned  
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24 against as a *post hoc* tool to improve model fit, it is justified when the variables share  
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26 components by design (Hermida, 2015) and in the case of multiple mediation (Preacher and  
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28 Hayes, 2008). As both subcultural and popular are dimensions of a structural model of overall  
29  
30 brand coolness (Warren *et al.*, 2019), and both perform the role of mediating variables, the error  
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32 terms are expected to correlate. The model was tested with and without correlating the error  
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34 terms of the latent constructs for popular and subcultural and demonstrated no changes in  
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36 significance of any hypothesized relationship. The covariance of popular and subcultural was  
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38 significantly correlated (.118, CR 2.03,  $p = .04$ ) and the following results reflect that relationship  
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40 in the model. The results suggest that the model fits the data well ( $\chi^2 = 551.04$ ,  $df = 290$ ,  $p <$   
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42  $.000$ , CFI = .96, TLI = .95, RMSEA = .05, SRMR = .09) (Hu and Bentler, 1999). While a SRMR  
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44 value of less than .08 is considered good fit, .09 is acceptable when paired with the other model  
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46 fit indices (Gaskin *et al.*, 2019; Hu and Bentler, 1999). Results of our hypothesis testing are  
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3 presented in Table III and below with the standardized beta coefficients, critical ratios, and p  
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14 The first hypothesis is supported as NCSII is positively related to DUC ( $H1, \beta = .57, CR$   
15  $= 8.36, p < .001$ ). DUC is positively related to both perceptions of subcultural ( $H2a, \beta = .56, CR$   
16  $= 8.22, p < .001$ ) and popular cool ( $H2b, \beta = .21, CR = 3.21, p = .001$ ). Confirming  $H2c$ , the  
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18 positive relationship is stronger for subcultural cool brands than popular cool brands. The  
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20 statistical significance of this difference was tested by comparing the model with one that  
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22 constrained the paths from DUC to both the subcultural and popular dimensions of brand  
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24 coolness. The difference in the chi-square from the original model ( $551.04, df = 290$ ) and the  
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26 constrained model ( $589.0, df = 291$ ) is significant ( $p < .001$ ). Therefore, the above findings show  
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28 that  $H1, H2a, H2b$ , and  $H2c$  are all supported. NCSII explains 33% of the variance in DUC and  
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30 these explain 31% of the variance in subcultural cool and 4% of the variance in popular cool.  
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38 Turning to the outcomes of popular and subcultural brand coolness perceptions, the  
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40 relationship with emotional brand attachment was tested. In line with  $H3a (\beta = .29, CR = 5.36, p$   
41  $< .001)$  and  $H3b (\beta = .50, CR = 8.88, p < .001)$  both dimensions of cool brands are positively  
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43 related to emotional brand attachment. To test  $H3c$ , the unconstrained model ( $551.04, df = 290$ )  
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45 and the constrained model ( $551.4, df = 291$ ) were compared. However, there was no significant  
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47 difference in the strength of these relationships leading to a non-significant relationship for  $H3c$ .  
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51  $H4a$  is supported, as consumers are willing to pay a price premium for a cool brand they perceive  
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53 to be subcultural ( $\beta = .31, CR = 4.37, p < .001$ ). However, cool brands perceived to be popular  
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do not have a significant influence on a consumer's willingness to pay more for the brand (H4b,  $\beta = -.04$ , CR =  $-.61$ , n.s.). A comparison between the unconstrained model (551.04,  $df = 290$ ) and the constrained model (561.0,  $df = 291$ ) found a significant difference supporting H4c ( $p < .01$ ). Across the entire sample, we found that consumers are willing to pay between 10% and 15% more for their cool brand than another similar product by a different brand (mean = 3.64, median = 3; where 3 = 10% and 4 = 15%). Support for H5 was also found ( $\beta = .33$ , CR = 4.42,  $p < .001$ ) for a positive relationship between emotional brand attachment and the willingness to pay a price premium. The amount of variance explained by the independent variables in emotional brand attachment is 39% and willingness to pay is 31%.

## Discussion and Implications

The current research explores the relationship between consumer motivations to stand out and to fit in through the consumption of cool brands, addressing a tension commonly found in the literature on coolness (Belk, 2019; Belk *et al.*, 2010; Warren and Campbell, 2014). It specifically examines the role of two dimensions of brand coolness that represent this dichotomy: popular coolness and subcultural coolness. Additionally, this research assesses associated marketing outcomes by testing how the perceptions of popular and subcultural coolness differ in the formation of hot, emotional brand attachments and willingness to pay price premiums.

Consistent with the theory of optimal distinctiveness (ODT), we found that consumer susceptibility to normative influence (NCSII) is positively related to the desire for unique consumption (DUC). This desire for unique products may be fulfilled by both subcultural and popular perceptions of brand coolness. However, perceptions of subcultural brand coolness are more strongly related to the desire for unique products than the popular dimension. Both

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3 perceptions of subcultural and popular brand coolness may equally lead to an emotional brand  
4 attachment, but only subcultural cool has a positive relationship with the willingness to pay a  
5 price premium. The importance of an emotional brand attachment is established between both  
6 dimensions of cool and price premiums. Finally, emotional brand attachment is shown to be  
7 positively related to price premiums for cool brands.  
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### 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 *Theoretical Contributions*

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19 The empirical findings illuminate the evolution of brand coolness literature in three aspects: 1)  
20 further exploring the tension between standing-out cool and fitting-in cool; 2) addressing the  
21 ability of cool brands to form hot, emotional attachments; and 3) supporting the role of those hot  
22 attachments in consumers' willingness to pay a price premium. This research also answers calls  
23 by Warren and colleagues (2019) to explore both individual dimensions of brand coolness and  
24 individual differences that may affect those dimensions. In order to better understand the tension  
25 between standing-out cool and fitting-in cool, the present study adopts the two individual  
26 differences (i.e., the normative dimension of *consumer susceptibility to interpersonal influence*  
27 (NCSII) and the *desire for unique consumption* (DUC)) and the two attributes of brand coolness  
28 (i.e., subcultural and popular cool) that best anchor two opposing ends of that spectrum.  
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42 However, rather than viewing these dimensions as endpoints on a spectrum, *optimal*  
43 *distinctiveness theory* (ODT) treats individual differences relating to standing out and fitting in  
44 as positively related needs (Lynn and Harris, 1997a, 1997b; Ruvio, 2009). The current research  
45 similarly applied ODT to support this positive relationship but shows how consumers make  
46 decisions by relying on *deviance regulation theory* (DRT). The findings indicate that when  
47 making judgements about brands they perceive as cool, individuals filter their need to fit in  
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3 through their desire for unique consumption. Further, this desire for unique consumption is more  
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5 strongly related to the perception that a cool brand will help consumers stand out rather than fit  
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7 in. When consumers perceive a brand as cool, it is the subcultural aspects of that brand that  
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9 fulfill their desires for unique consumption, not the popular aspects. However, the individual  
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11 differences of NCSII and DUC explain only 4% of the variance in popular perceptions of cool,  
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13 as compared to 31% of subcultural perceptions of cool. Since extant literature has not assessed  
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15 these relationships, comparisons to explain the results are not possible. One potential  
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17 explanation is the brand nomination method extracted brands that were mostly considered to be  
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19 popular, even though steps were taken in the survey design to encourage thoughtful, self-  
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21 congruent nominations that were not simply prominent. Future research should examine brand  
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23 coolness, and its dimensions, in regards to a particular brand, as suggested by Bagozzi and  
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25 Khoshnevis (2022).  
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31 This research contributes to brand attachment literature by adding two attributes of cool  
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33 brands, popular and subcultural, as antecedents to emotional brand attachment. Findings suggest  
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35 that hot attachments, those based on emotions rather than cognition, are formed by both  
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37 perceptions of popular and subcultural dimensions of cool brands. Brands are often regarded as  
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39 part of an individual's identity, an extension of themselves (Belk, 1988). Consumers use brands  
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41 to enhance or verify both their self-identity and their social identity, and in doing so, form hot,  
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43 emotional attachments to the brand (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006). Counter to what was expected,  
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45 this study finds that subcultural and popular perceptions of a cool brand are similarly related to  
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47 emotional attachment. One explanation for this finding may be that brand relationships are not  
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49 only influenced by how a consumer views the brand, but also by what the consumer believes  
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51 *others* think of the brand (Reed, 2002). Popular brands are cool to a large portion of consumers  
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3 and as such, still offer the distinction as visible status symbols of cool. Further support for this  
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5 argument is found in research on symbolic brand qualities that finds prestige, or being widely  
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7 admired, and uniqueness are similarly related to brand love (Bairrada *et al.*, 2018). Finally, the  
8  
9 popular dimension of coolness is more important later in the cool brand life cycle, after a brand  
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11 has become mass cool (Warren *et al.*, 2019). This suggests that cool brands perceived as popular  
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13 have been around longer and therefore consumers may have had more time to form a relationship  
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15 with them.  
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19 Finally, the study contributes to the pricing literature by exploring the effects of cool  
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21 brand attributes and emotional brand attachment on the willingness to pay a price premium. The  
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23 relationship between subcultural perceptions of cool brands and price premiums is stronger than  
24  
25 popular perceptions of cool brands and price premiums. In fact, this study finds that popular  
26  
27 perceptions of cool brands are not related to the inclination to pay higher prices, suggesting that  
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29 if cool brands command higher prices it is more likely due to perceptions that the brand will help  
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31 the consumer stand out. This supports the existing literature that suggests uniqueness as a more  
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33 influential indicator of brand equity than popular (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 1993; Netemeyer *et al.*,  
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35 2004). According to DRT, “as norms for behavior become more common, social concerns  
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37 regarding that action will exert less influence on behavior” (Blanton and Burkley, 2008, p.101).  
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39 This implies that as the perception of popularity for a cool brand increases, it has less power to  
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41 influence behavior, like paying more for the brand. This research finds emotional brand  
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43 attachment to be positively related to a willingness to pay more, suggesting that brands high in  
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45 perceptions of popular may still be able to tap into price premiums by strengthening their  
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47 emotional attachment to the brand. This important finding has significant implications for  
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49 marketing practitioners. In marketing a brand that is perceived as being cool to the masses, it is  
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3 important to create emotional attachments between the customer and the brand to benefit from  
4 price premiums.  
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### 10 *Managerial Implications*

11 Managerially, it may be difficult to harness *cool* as a reliable point of differentiation since  
12 brand coolness is subjective and differs from person to person (O'Donnell and Wardlow, 2000;  
13 Warren and Campbell, 2014). However, both contemporary research and history demonstrate  
14 that "coolness" is worth striving to achieve (Frank, 1998; Warren *et al.*, 2019). The findings here  
15 provide insight into how managers understand consumer goals of standing out and fitting in and  
16 how they affect perceptions of what is cool in a brand. Across the sample, consumers are willing  
17 to pay between 10% and 15% more for their cool brand than another similar product by a  
18 different brand. These premiums are driven more strongly by subcultural perceptions of cool.  
19 The first important take-away for managers is that consumers, even those who are influenced by  
20 others in consumption choices, perceive coolness in brands based on information about the brand  
21 that is seen as unique. Focusing on how owning or using a cool brand makes a consumer  
22 different is key in communicating coolness to consumers and in supporting the price premiums  
23 for cool brands.  
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42 Subcultural and popular coolness are not the only cool attributes with which to manage  
43 consumers' perceptions of coolness in their brand. However, they are especially helpful ones to  
44 take into account as they each have a unique relationship to other attributes of brand coolness in  
45 the cool brand life cycle developed by Warren *et al.* (2019). According to the life cycle of  
46 coolness, brands become cool by appealing to a subculture as a way of standing out from the  
47 masses. In addition to being subcultural, these niche cool brands are associated with autonomy  
48 (i.e., originality and authenticity) and rebelliousness (Warren *et al.*, 2019). Managers can use all  
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3 these attributes to signal standing-out. If these niche cool brands become cool outside of the  
4 subculture and are mass-marketed, they lose some of the standing-out perceptions of cool, but  
5 gain fitting-in perceptions like popular, iconic, energetic, and high status (Warren *et al.*, 2019).  
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10 The second take-away for managers is that they can use several of the other attributes of cool  
11 brands to signal standing out and fitting in, depending on their positioning strategy.  
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15 The third important take-away for managers is that popular and subcultural coolness in a  
16 brand do not represent two ends of a spectrum, but distinct attributes that consumers perceive in  
17 brands. These two dimensions result in four possible combinations of cool, as summarized in  
18 Figure 2. The findings from this research suggest that being perceived as subcultural, which is  
19 associated strongly with niche cool brands, allows for price premiums. However, being a niche  
20 brand with a narrow target market does not allow brands to tap into the revenue available from  
21 being mass cool. Therefore, the most coveted combination of a cool brand is one that is widely  
22 known (i.e., popular) and yet has retained the ability to make its consumers feel unique (i.e.,  
23 subcultural). This is reflected in the *ideal cool* cell of Figure 2. While it may seem contradictory  
24 for a brand to be able to help consumers stand out and fit in at the same time, it can be  
25 accomplished in a number of ways. To retain their coveted positioning, brand managers of *ideal*  
26 *cool* brands could focus on creating new product lines that appeal to niche groups or adopt a co-  
27 branding strategy with highly niche brands. Brands may offer products in unique shapes or  
28 colors that consumers may use to stand out (Berger and Heath, 2007), or take advantage of  
29 limited editions or product drops to create perceptions of scarcity. Finally, marketing  
30 communication could be targeted such that consumers feel like they will fit in with their in-  
31 group, but stand out from undesired out-groups (Escalas and Bettman, 2005). These tactics will  
32 also apply to *mass cool* brands, to help them achieve the coveted positioning of *ideal cool*. *Mass*  
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3 *cool* brands are popular brands that do not excel in helping consumers stand out. Brand managers  
4 may use differentiation tactics to increase brand coolness and tap into the ability to charge more  
5 for their brands that being unique affords. For both *ideal cool* and *mass cool* brands, brand  
6 managers should focus on building emotional attachments to the brand as this is a vital avenue of  
7 price premiums for highly popular brands.  
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17 ----- Insert Figure 2 Here -----  
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21 Brands falling into *subcultural cool* and *other cool* cells, are lower on the popularity  
22 dimension. This could be due to not being as well-liked as other brands, but it may simply be that  
23 these brands have low familiarity with a wide audience. Demonita and Ed Hardy are two brands  
24 mentioned in the present research in the *niche cool* category that are highly subcultural, but not  
25 widely popular. These brands help consumers stand out and be unique, and in return, inspire  
26 consumers to form strong emotional attachments and pay price premiums. If the positioning  
27 strategy is to stay a *niche cool* brand, then these companies should continue to target their  
28 subculture by being edgy and autonomous. If brand managers are looking to expand the brand's  
29 reach and move into the *ideal cool* cell, they need to focus on the cool levers that are more  
30 associated with mass cool brands (e.g., energetic and high status) while maintaining the brand's  
31 ability to help its consumers stand out. Brands that fall into the *other cool* cell are low on both  
32 popular and subculture perceptions of cool. In the present research, brands nominated in this  
33 category tended to be ones that were functional, like Dawn dish soap, Costco, and Lipton iced  
34 tea. Surprisingly, a few luxury brands also showed up in this category, including Gucci and  
35 Michael Kors. Both these functional and luxury brands are perceived as cool for reasons outside  
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3 of being popular or subcultural (e.g., extraordinary or high status). To increase the popularity of  
4 cool functional brands, brand managers may consider expanding into new markets or investing in  
5 a wide-reaching communication strategy that focuses on the attributes that are signaling  
6 coolness. Niche luxury brands that are not easily recognizable or known to the larger population  
7 can still communicate perceptions of uniqueness to other luxury consumers. Niche luxury brand  
8 managers could focus on the ability to communicate uniqueness through subtle distinctions that  
9 only other luxury consumers will notice.

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19 These insights can be leveraged in brand communications, market segmentation, and  
20 resource allocation for both branding and pricing strategies. The degree to which managers  
21 choose to emphasize the coolness of their brand creates a paradoxical tension between fitting in  
22 to consumers' self-concept while simultaneously featuring how the brand reinforces their  
23 individual distinctiveness. To do so, managers must consider the market parameters of the cool  
24 brand lifecycle, potential target market segments, customer sensitivity to various brand cues, the  
25 ability to customize brand features, and the issue of scarcity in the marketplace.

### 36 37 38 **Limitations and suggestions for future research**

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40 Our findings should be interpreted with the limitations of the study in mind. These limitations  
41 may prove fruitful for future research. First, the relationships in this study are found in a U.S.  
42 context. The relationship between susceptibility to influence and desire for unique consumption  
43 may be different in cultures focused on interdependence and maintaining group harmony. These  
44 cultures may also perceive coolness in brands differently. Additionally, this study is based on  
45 cross-sectional survey data—however, brand coolness is often transitory. Longitudinal research  
46 on fads and trends focusing on the different elements of brand coolness might shed light on the  
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3 cool brand lifecycle. Another approach, experimental research, could test the causality of the  
4 relationships found in the model presented here. Finally, the current study explores perceptions  
5 of brands from two brand coolness dimensions: subcultural and popular. The other eight  
6 dimensions of brand coolness are ripe with possibility.  
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## 14 **Conclusion**

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17 Despite these limitations, we believe this study aids previous efforts to crack the code of brand  
18 coolness. Findings from this research highlight the importance consumers place on cool brands  
19 as they seek to stand out and fit in with others. With increasing avenues of mass communication  
20 today (e.g., social media), consumers have the opportunity to “invent” themselves by choosing  
21 brands that reflect their personal identity. By either joining in or separating themselves from  
22 others, consumers may use cool brands with popular and subcultural attributes to contribute to  
23 their own identity. Understanding the ability of *cool* to meet the basic human need to be oneself  
24 arms marketers with new insights into the person-brand connection that has the power to increase  
25 profits. The idea of *cool* provides a metaphor from which to explore the usefulness of the various  
26 dimensions of cool branding. For decades, marketers have been chasing the elusive and alluring  
27 concept of cool. This research adds to a growing body of literature helping to demystify the  
28 elusiveness of *cool* so brands can tap into its power and provide greater value, through coolness,  
29 to brand consumers.  
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## 49 **Notes**

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51 I. <https://www.fastcompany.com/>. The headlines listed are a result of a search for the word  
52 “cool”.  
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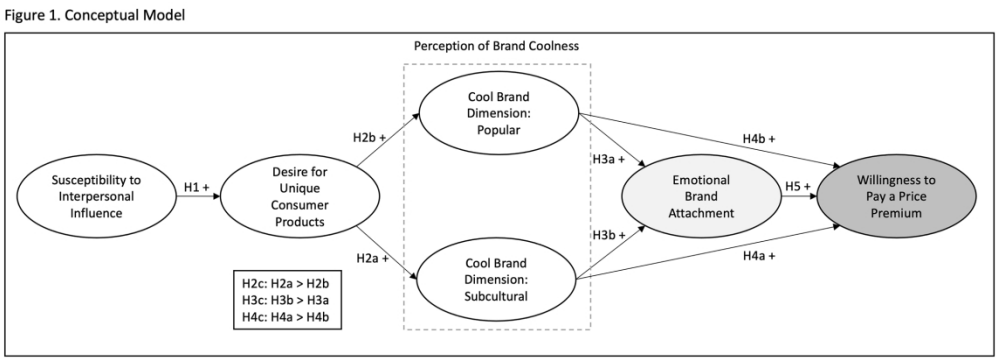


Figure 1. Conceptual Model

190x68mm (300 x 300 DPI)



Table I. Measurement

Measure	Items	Factor Loadings	CR	AVE
Susceptibility to Social Influence – Normative (Bearden <i>et al.</i> , 1989)	I rarely purchase the latest styles until I am sure my friends approve of them.	.71	.96	.73
	It is important that others like the products and brands I buy.	.89		
	When buying products, I generally purchase those brands that I think others will approve of.	.93		
	If other people can see me using a product, I often purchase the brand they expect me to buy.	.92		
	I like to know what brands and products make good impressions on others	.87		
	I achieve a sense of belonging by purchasing the same products and brands that others purchase.	.91		
	If I want to be like someone, I often try to buy the same brands that they buy	.74		
Desire for Unique Consumption (Lynn and Harris, 1997)	I often identify with other people by purchasing the same products and brands they purchase.	.86	.80	.50
	I tend to be a fashion leader rather than a fashion follower.	.64		
	I would prefer to have things custom-made than to have them ready-made.	.71		
	I rarely pass up the opportunity to order custom features on the products I buy.	.76		
Subcultural Brand Coolness (Warren <i>et al.</i> , 2019)	I like to try new goods and services before others do.	.73	.89	.67
	Makes people who use it different from other people	.77		
	If I were to use it, it would make me stand apart from others	.87		
	Helps people who use it stand apart from the crowd	.87		
Popular Brand Coolness (Warren <i>et al.</i> , 2019)	People who use this brand are unique	.76	.86	.60
	Is liked by most people	.77		
	Is in style	.77		
	Is popular	.82		
Emotional Brand Attachment (Thomson <i>et al.</i> , 2005)	Is widely accepted	.73	.91	.77
	Affection: My feelings toward the brand can be characterized by: Affection, Friendliness, Love, Peace	.87		
	Connection: My feelings toward the brand can be characterized by: Connection, Attachment, Bond	.89		
Willingness to Pay a Price Premium (Netemeyer <i>et al.</i> , 2004)	Passion: My feelings toward the brand can be characterized by: Passion, Delight, Captivation	.87	.82	.61
	I am willing to pay a higher price for (brand name) than for other brands of the same product.	.79		
	I am willing to pay ___% more for (brand name) over other brands of the same product: 0%, 5%, 10%, 15%, 20%, 25%, 30%, or more.	.66		
	I am willing to pay a lot more for (brand name) than other brands of the same product.	.88		

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Table II. Interconstruct correlation matrix and descriptive statistics

	Mean	SD	MSV < AVE	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Subcultural Cool	4.89	1.47	0.31 < .67	<b>0.82</b>					
2. Popular Cool	6.05	0.86	0.16 < .60	0.22***	<b>0.77</b>				
3. Emotional Brand Attachment	5.44	1.11	.31 < .77	0.55***	0.40***	<b>0.88</b>			
4. Desire for Unique Consumption	4.87	1.16	.27 < .50	0.49***	0.21**	0.41***	<b>0.71</b>		
5. Normative Susceptibility to Influence	3.43	1.81	.28 < .73	0.53***	0.03	0.35***	0.52***	<b>0.86</b>	
6. Willingness to Pay a Price Premium	5.44	1.51	.24 < .61	0.48***	0.16*	0.49***	0.47***	0.44***	<b>0.78</b>

The numbers in diagonal line are the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) by each construct. SD – Standard deviation. MSV – Maximum shared variance. The numbers below the diagonal are the intercorrelation coefficients between the constructs. \*\*\* correlation is significant at p < 0.001; \*\* correlation is significant at p < .01; \* correlation is significant at p < .05.

Table III. Hypotheses results

Hypotheses	Standardized Beta	<i>p</i>
H1: Susceptibility to Normative Influence – Desire for Unique Consumption (DUC)	.57	<.001
H2a: Desire for Unique Consumption – Subcultural Dimension of Brand Coolness	.57	<.001
H2b: Desire for Unique Consumption – Popular Dimension of Brand Coolness	.22	<.001
H2c: Desire for Unique Consumption – Subcultural Dimension of Brand Coolness > Popular	$\Delta X^2 = 34.9, \Delta df = 1$	<.001
H3a: Popular Dimension of Brand Coolness – Emotional Brand Attachment	.30	<.001
H3b: Subcultural Dimension of Brand Coolness – Emotional Brand Attachment	.51	<.001
H3c: Subcultural Dimension of Brand Coolness > Popular – Emotional Brand Attachment	$\Delta X^2 = .3, \Delta df = 1$	n.s.
H4a: Subcultural Dimension of Brand Coolness – Willingness to Pay a Price Premium	.31	<.001
H4b: Popular Dimension of Brand Coolness – Willingness to Pay a Price Premium	-.03	n.s.
H4c: Subcultural Dimension of Brand Coolness > Popular – Willingness to Pay a Price Premium	$\Delta X^2 = 9.7, \Delta df = 1$	<.01
H5: Emotional Brand Attachment – Willingness to Pay a Price Premium	.33	<.001

Figure 2. Popular/Subcultural Combinations

**POPULAR - FITTING IN**

<b>SUBCULTURAL - STANDING OUT</b>	<b>1</b> High Subcultural Cool Low Popular Cool <i>NICHE COOL</i>	<b>2</b> High Subcultural Cool High Popular Cool <i>IDEAL COOL</i>
	<b>3</b> Low Subcultural Cool Low Popular Cool <i>OTHER COOL</i>	<b>4</b> Low Subcultural Cool High Popular Cool <i>MASS COOL</i>

Figure 2. Popular/Subcultural Combinations

81x73mm (300 x 300 DPI)