Abstract

Consumers develop beliefs about the kinds of people who use certain products (e.g., caregivers wear aprons, athletes wear athletic shoes, and cool people wear sunglasses). Beliefs about symbolic products are incorporated into consumers’ cognitive schemas for the respective social identity. Consequently, when consumers use a product that is strongly linked to a particular social identity schema, they will exhibit other schema-linked behaviors as well. This view does not imply that consumers deliberately and strategically modify their behavior to enact a social identity. Rather, using a symbolic product can activate an identity schema automatically; people behave in a schema-consistent manner without consciously intending to or realizing it.

The present research relies on this framework to address product usage as an antecedent to “cool” behavior. Specifically, we ask whether consumer behave “cooler” when they wear a symbolically cool product – here, sunglasses – and, if so, does this occur because wearing sunglasses automatically activates a “cool” identity schema. Survey and experimental research demonstrates that (1) sunglasses are part of young adults’ schema for a cool identity, and (2) young adults who wear sunglasses exhibit hallmarks of a ‘cool kid.’ That is, they perform worse and persist less on academic tasks (consistent with their belief that cool kids are ‘slackers’) and they report weaker emotions in response to either positive or negative performance feedback (consistent with their belief that cool kids ‘keep their cool’ emotionally). Consumers wearing sunglasses also pay more attention to cool people and brands (e.g., Johnny Depp and Harley-Davidson) compared to people and brands that are neutral with respect to coolness. These effects derive from, and thus depend on, sunglasses’ symbolic association to coolness. Accordingly, consumers wearing sunglasses no longer act cool if other associations to sunglasses become salient (i.e., if advertising makes salient sun protection). Moreover, these effects occur because consumers wearing sunglasses automatically attribute cool traits (e.g., independent, carefree) to the self. Situations that prevent these automatic self-attributions from occurring (e.g., prompting consumers to consider explicit self-views) thus attenuate the tendency to act cool. Lastly, these effects are more likely to arise when consumers physically wear sunglasses compared to when they either view an image of sunglasses or imagine wearing sunglasses, as they might when browsing retail shelves or shopping online. In sum, this research speaks to the conditions under which, and the process by which, symbolic products influence consumers, and to the role of consumer behavior as an everyday catalyst of cool.

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All interested are welcome.