

U.S. NEWS

The New Cool: Can Coolness Be Studied Like a Science?

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The concept of coolness is evolving toward something more friendly and less detached. Jesse Singal talks to a scientist who's analyzing what it means to be cool today.

Marge: Am I cool, kids?

Bart and Lisa: No.

Marge: Good. I'm glad. And that's what makes me cool: not caring, right?

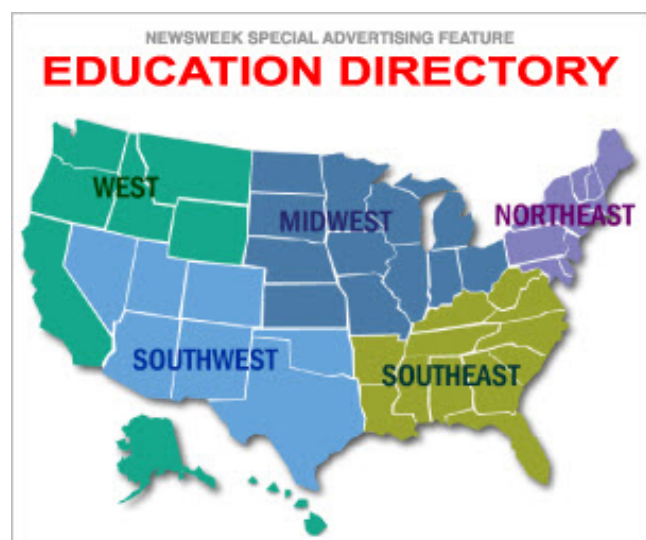
Bart and Lisa: No.

Marge: Well, how the hell do you be cool? I feel like we've tried everything here.

Homer: Wait, Marge. Maybe if you're truly cool, you don't need to be told you're cool.

Bart: Well, sure you do.

Lisa: How else would you know?



What does it mean to be cool? Is it about popularity? Detachment? Cultural savvy? Some combination of all of these?

It's no wonder that we are so preoccupied with the idea. We are social organisms, and the currency of coolness often determines who wins big in the marketplace, who gets to surround themselves with powerful and attractive people, and who is forced to go it alone. Coolness cuts to the core of who we

are as a species.

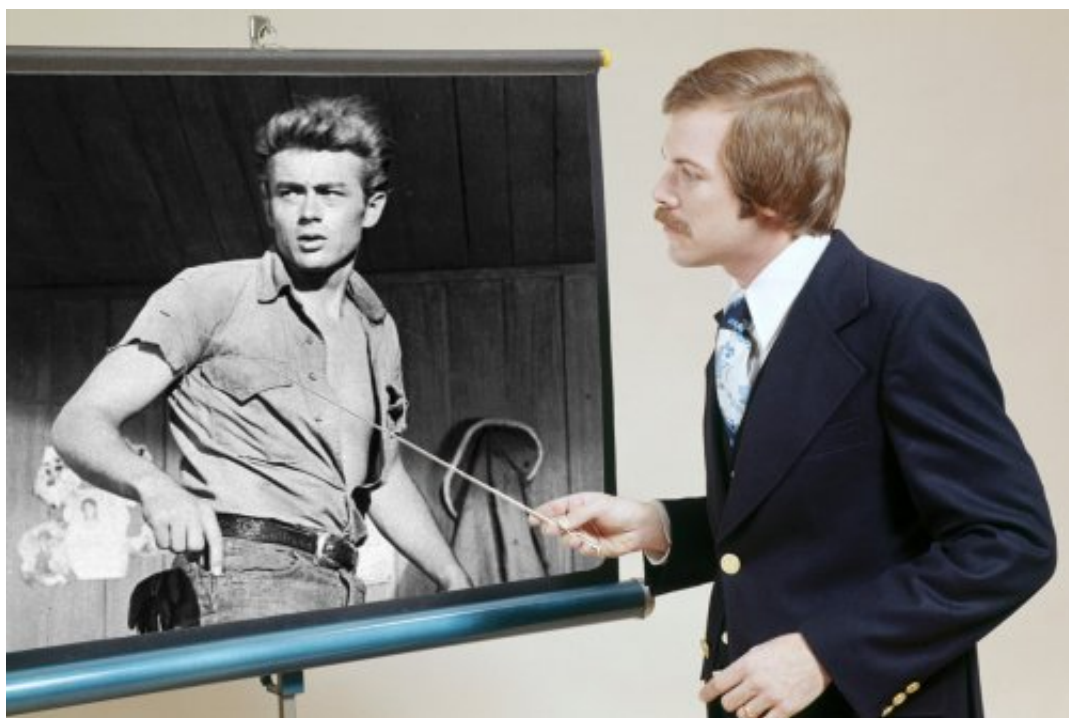
But as Homer Simpson suggests, coolness is generally considered one of those slippery "I know it when I see it" concepts. It seems to evade any one description, and gets applied differently by different people at different times and in different settings.

This, of course, raises the question: Could coolness in fact be measurable? A few brave social scientists think so, and have begun subjecting the stuff of rock'n'roll and

Ray-Bans to regression analyses and statistical significance levels.

Ilan Dar-Nimrod, a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Rochester Medical Center who is spearheading the effort, believes we're long overdue for a better understanding of what it means to be cool. At the moment, "[t]here is no field of coolness research, unfortunately," he told The Daily Beast. "We are trying to establish some kind of momentum to create such a field."

The Israeli-born Dar-Nimrod was drawn to the subject about 10 years ago after a conversation with a colleague, Ian Hansen, during which they realized they couldn't agree on what coolness was. "So, being social psychologists," Dar-Nimrod said, "we thought 'Oh, that might be an interesting thing to study.'"



AP Photo (Dean); Corbis; Illustration by The Daily Beast

Dar-Nimrod's interest appears to go beyond the purely academic. In [one unorthodox faculty photo](#), he is captured lounging in a sleeveless T-shirt in the Sinai desert. Tan and unshaven, he gazes smolderingly at the camera (at least, that's what I imagine he's doing behind his wraparound shades.) In [another](#), he's stretched out in a hammock in Honduras.

But when Dar-Nimrod isn't being photographed in sultry poses, he's been busy finishing up a paper with some colleagues—it's soon appearing in the *Journal of Individual Differences* (not so cool)—titled "[Coolness: An Empirical Investigation](#)." It's the

first-ever quantitative evaluation of what constitutes coolness, they say, and they're hoping it kicks off a broader conversation about the concept.

The paper is a combination of three studies: In the first, the researchers asked participants to come up with characteristics that they saw as cool. They generated adjectives such as "friendly," "trendy," and "unconventional." In the second, the participants were presented with these characteristics and asked to rate how cool and how desirable each was; here, Dar-Nimrod said, the researchers were trying "to tease out coolness from desirability—how much they overlap and how much they do not." In the third study, participants rated their friends on both coolness and a number of other personal characteristics the researchers deemed relevant from the previous studies—again, things like friendliness and confidence.

"The coolness concept has made some strides toward gentrification, toward kind of smoothing out the edges."

Granted, it isn't very hard to poke some fun at this whole venture, which may partly explain why Dar-Nimrod and his colleagues are being so rigorous about it. "We conclude that coolness is reducible to two conceptually coherent and distinct personality orientations," they write in a distinctly uncool introduction. "One outward-focused and attuned to external valuations, the other more independent, rebellious, and countercultural."

But Dar-Nimrod makes a pretty convincing case that pinning down the precise meaning of cool is actually important.

"If you look at how much coolness is desired as a status symbol by very large cohorts of our society," he said, "[and] if you look at how many references both in popular culture and in the scientific literature there are to coolness, it seems that coolness is playing an important role. And unless we know what coolness actually means, it's kind of hard to judge what is the role that coolness plays."

So what is the current state of cool? Dar-Nimrod said he was surprised to find that what might be called "classical coolness"—a Don Draperesque air of detachment and even rebellion—is still important, but less so than characteristics such as friendliness, attractiveness, and humor.

"What I was expecting to find, which is kind of the more James Dean, Marlon Bran-

do, *Rebel-Without-a-Cause*-kind of coolness, is still in existence, but is certainly not the dominant way that” the people in the study perceived coolness. (It is worth noting that the respondents consisted of only a small subset of North Americans.)

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Dar-Nimrod was hesitant to speculate too much about coolness’s recent trajectory given the nascency of his field—“there are no data available from 20 years ago,” he said—but he has some ideas. “Coolness started off as a very countercultural, rebellious, ironic stance that may have had some kind of advantages for people who were on the edges of society,” he says. “It allowed them to take the critical stance of the society toward them in strides. It didn’t affect them much because they were emotionally detached from that.” In other words, “Society doesn’t accept me? So what. I don’t accept society!”

What’s interesting is that with both Don Draper and other classically cool cultural figures, there tends to be a warm beating heart somewhere under the layers of cool, and art often seems preoccupied with finding it. In Draper’s case, he would be a far less compelling character without his backstory, which is rife with emotional neglect and dislocation.

As Dar-Nimrod said, it’s “very hard to find complete aloofness and detachment as attractive.”

Still, the scientist himself prefers the old-school version. “I’m very much kind of an old, traditional-cool kind of guy,” he said. “That’s what I believe to be cool, and I won’t let the evidence dissuade me.”

Sure, but would Don Draper be caught dead in a sleeveless T-shirt?