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# The Experience of “Cool”: A Qualitative Exploration

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Running head: THE EXPERIENCE OF “COOL”

The Experience of “Cool”: A Qualitative Exploration

by

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DISSERTATION

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Department of Clinical Psychology

**DISSERTATION COMMITTEE PAGE**

The undersigned have examined the dissertation entitled:

**THE EXPERIENCE OF “COOL”: A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION**

presented on June 25, 2018

by

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*“Cool means being able to hang with yourself. All you have to ask yourself is ‘Is there anybody I’m afraid of? Is there anybody who if I walked into a room and saw, I’d get nervous?’ If not, then you’re cool.”*

*~ Prince*

**Dedication**

To my parents...the coolest people I know.

### **Acknowledgments**

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## Abstract

This qualitative study explored the phenomenological experience of *cool* as retrospectively reported. I proposed cool as a phenomenological concept and advocate for the consideration of cool as relevant to clinical psychology through first, a literature review of related academic research and second, by identifying the information gap around cool as it intersects with clinical psychology. I utilized Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to inform analysis and exploration of participant narrative responses collected through an online survey. Participants consisted of 25 individuals between the ages of 18 and 25 who endorsed having experienced cool at some point in their life. In sharing the findings, I first highlighted the emergent themes of the experience of cool that were most common across participant responses: *cool is a positive experience, cool exists in a social context, possession of positive attributes, and challenging adversity/oppression*. I also described individual voices that deviated or provided alternate ideas to those found in the emergent themes: (a) *difficult to describe*, (b) *physical appearance*, (c) *emotional defense*, (d) *social status/superiority*, and (e) *denial of cool*. Participants also described what makes others cool which includes *positive personal attributes, affect regulation and confidence, and apathy to cool*. I follow the reporting of findings by acknowledging my active role as researcher in the process of the research. Exploration of the findings in the context of existing literature of cool brings to light the possibility that cool describes multiple unique concepts that are often conflated and confused: cool when a first-person experience, cool as an emotional/interpersonal defense, and cool as label placed on objects in a social setting. Ongoing conflation of these cools may lead clinicians and caregivers to misinterpret adolescents' behaviors when seeking cool. Misinterpreting the cool may result in misguided responses from adults in authority positions to youth behaviors and ineffective interventions to support youth

across their development.

*Keywords:* cool, adolescence, phenomenological psychology, social constructionism

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### The Experience of “Cool” – A Qualitative Exploration

In the current study, I explored the first-person subjective experience of *cool* through participants’ own narratives as provided in response to a series of questions designed to encourage such self-reflection.

In the first part of this paper, I offer a thorough review of the literature in which I first offer a phenomenological lens through which to understand cool. I then describe the origins of cool and its various manifestations across an historical timeline. After this, I describe a number of current conceptualizations of cool drawing from research and theory from across academic fields. Following this, I describe the application of cool to clinical psychology and provide background on relevant areas of knowledge. Finally, I utilize the concept of social constructionism to differentiate cool as observed and constructed in a social setting, and cool as a unique, individual experience.

In the Method section I first discuss the use of a qualitative research design and describe the method of analysis: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). I then describe the method of data collection, participant selection and makeup, and questionnaires used for data collection. Following this, I outline the procedure followed for data collection with special attention to ethical considerations and consent. Finally, I describe the application of IPA as the process of analysis and discuss steps taken in consideration of validity.

In the Findings section, I share the primary findings in regards to the participant reported experience of cool that I extracted using IPA. I present these findings in a linear fashion, with attention to both the themes that were present across participants as a whole, as well as the exceptions, individualities, and deviations that arose with attention to individual voice.

In the Exploration and Implications section, I explore the findings in consideration of the existing research and the research question. I begin this exploration by identifying my role as an active presence in the research, through which the analysis and interpretation of the findings were filtered. I then briefly summarize the findings and offer a holistic narrative of the *essence* of cool. Following this, I describe a variety of methodological cautions as related to research design. With these cautions in mind, I explore the findings of this study in the context of existing conceptualizations of cool and discuss potential clinical implications. Finally, I discuss limitations and potential areas for future research.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Area of Inquiry: The Phenomenon of Cool**

Coolness is omnipresent in 21st-century western culture (see Pountain & Robins, 2000). From school age through adulthood, individuals pursue the elusive label of *cool*. A lingering question however has been, how does someone know when they are in the promised land of cool? What constellation of emotions and experiences form that create the ever-sought feeling of cool? Diverse disciplines have offered numerous definitions and theoretical accounts for what constitutes cool with, as of yet, no uniting consensus (Connor, 1995; Danesi, 1994; Dar-Nimrod et al., 2012; Frank, 1997; Pountain & Robins, 2000). Across these conceptualizations emerge certain features of cool that are often of interest in psychological inquiry: experience and internalization of affect and feeling; capacity for self-regulation; interpersonal relationships and communications; and the formation of groups and identity. The potential overlap of cool with psychology and the lack of attention paid to cool by psychological inquiry thus far makes cool a prime topic for exploration. At this time, what lacks across academic literature on cool is consideration of cool as a human experience. Psychology’s concern with the subjective nature of

experienced life makes the consideration of cool an ideal topic to explore in such a context.

While a variety of perspectives in academia have conceptualized cool, they have yet to explore it in the specific context of human experience. A common view of cool often portrayed in media and popular culture is the cool of teenagerhood. This conceptualization of cool describes it as an age-specific phenomenon and a central trait of adolescence (Danesi, 1994). However, cool is not limited to popular culture and teenage rebellion. From an ethnic perspective, Majors and Billson (1992) viewed cool as a crucial component of African-American masculinity. Stearns (1994) explored cool as a socially constructed emotional style, while Frank (1997), analyzed the rise of cool in consumerism during the 1960s and its influence on business in the United States. Gold (1994) even used the term to describe the bohemian artistic attitude of the 50s and 60s. All of these views of cool have a common link to parts of what constitute an individual's psychology—personality, identity, emotionality, consumerism, group membership, creativity, and expression.

The desire to be and feel cool influences individuals in many ways, from what they wear and what music they listen to, to the very formation of friendship groups and prescribed behavioral norms. Backbones of entire industries, such as music and fashion, depend on the marketing and consumption of a cool image (Kaleel, 2013; Nancarrow, Nancarrow, & Page, 2002). Because the actual manifestation of cool is inherent in people and not within an object itself, what is deemed cool varies across time, culture, and location, and is therefore a transient and dynamic concept (Pountain & Robins, 2000). It is not uncommon for people to yearn for cool and work towards attaining this enigmatic status. In light of existing literature on cool, what is clear is that how cool *looks* can vary greatly across cultural contexts (e.g., from punk aesthetic to adolescent advertisement). What is unknown is whether the *experience* of cool varies as

greatly as its appearance, or, if at its core, it even varies at all.

### **Cool: A Brief Timeline**

While a comprehensive history of cool is beyond the scope of this paper, familiarity with cool's origins and its role in society across generations will serve to enrich the reader's understanding of the results presented in this study. Additionally, due to the amorphous nature of cool, awareness of cool across its various manifestations will serve to provide the reader a context in which to consider the experience of cool. Finally, while cool (and similar phenomena) have emerged in many different countries across time, I will limit my exploration of cool to its presence in the United States of America as this study does not explicitly extend its consideration of cool beyond such a frame.

**Roots of cool.** Connor (1995) argues that the roots of cool in the United States began with the process of the internalization of emotional expression (e.g., sadness, anger, hate, and love) by male African-American slaves. For those enslaved in the United States during the era of legalized slavery and slave trading, traditional archetypes of masculinity (e.g., posturing, physical aggression and prowess, or boastful expressive behavior) were not adaptive in the subjugated position of a slave. Connor (1995) puts forth that as a result traditional expressions of masculinity underwent a dramatic shift as (primarily) male slaves grappled with survival and identity within the constraints of the violent and oppressive institution of slavery. Survival necessitated the ability to remain calm while witnessing the physical and sexual abuse, rape, sale, torture, and humiliation of loved ones by white Americans (and others) who engaged in the institution of slavery. The capacity to remain impassive throughout these tribulations emerged as an alternative form of 'acceptable' rebellion. Through this, cool emerged as an historically Black experience, that described a collective lifestyle in which manhood in Black America came to be

illustrated by this calm, affectless resistance to subjugation (Connor, 1995).

Pountain and Robins (2000) trace the origins of cool to even earlier some African cultures. From its earliest days in West Africa (and other areas of Africa as well) cool functioned “to temper and moderate the aggressive instincts of the young male warrior” (p. 105) by providing a nonchalant pose that, while it did not threaten, simultaneously did not betray signs of weakness or passivity. Additionally some African societies, such as the Yoruba, demonstrated political power through the control of their body and expressions as performed in rituals such as dance.

**Cool’s birth in jazz.** The emergence of the actual word *cool* is commonly located in the jazz era of the 1920s and 1930s, the bebop era of the 1940s, and the “cool” jazz of the late 1950s, as this burgeoning Black art form and culture began to spread across America. This spread was in large thanks to the musical stylings of musicians such as Louis Armstrong, Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Charlie Parker, and (importantly for the definition of cool) Miles Davis. The race divide and the niche of jazz culture turned *cool* into a cultural status marker that White America could neither copy nor ignore. The inaccessibility of *cool* to the American majority afforded a position of respect and admiration for those who personified the ideal of the *cool* jazzman—an exclusively Black embodiment (Pountain & Robins, 2000).

**Post world wars.** Cool only emerged as a mass phenomenon post world wars. Prior to this, it existed largely in the realm of an attitude of “ironic detachment” that was “fostered by rebels and underdogs” (Pountain & Robins, 2000, p. 23). However, in the 1950s, cool not only united “a generation of disaffected artists, writers, and intellectuals” (p. 65) but provided a new form of social commentary and criticism by the emergence of an attitude of cool motivated by war-inspired weariness, wariness, and an outright rejection of societal expectations of work and

civic duty. It was during this time, the Beat era of the 1950s, that cool became the province of dissenters from the mainstream, who embraced White bohemian culture, inspired by writers such as, William S. Burroughs, Jack Kerouac, and Allen Ginsberg. This post-war cool prioritized immediate gratification (often in the form of alcohol, drugs, and sexual liberation) while purporting to seek a ‘higher truth’ (often through eastern philosophies) all under the guise of a detached and “cool-under-fire attitude” (p. 69). Soon the Beat cool extended to other areas of daily American life, influencing artists and public figures such as Jackson Pollock, and Hollywood heroes including James Dean and Marlon Brando. These figures replaced actors such as John Wayne and the characters he exemplified (Pountain & Robins, 2000).

**Cool in activism.** By the end of the 1950s and extending into the early 1970s, the attitude of cool switched from one of passivity to an active stance with the onset of the activism and protest movement that defined this era. The dissenting nature of the Beat cool became associated around issues such as civil rights, free speech, and the Vietnam War (Pountain & Robins, 2000). During this era, White America’s co-option of cool lessened, and its origins in Black culture re-emerged through music (the hippies of this time were drawn to the sound of soul as well as rhythm and blues) and politics (Pountain & Robins, 2000). The cultural zeitgeist of the Civil Rights movement and general reaction against what many considered the oppressive ideologies of capitalist, White, Anglo-Saxon values was a primarily Black experience. It is important to recognize that the function of the cool attitude or stance was not the same for white people as it was for African-Americans in this time, and the complexities and intersectionality of such power and race dynamics played a role in what cool was for each racial group.

**Cool’s expansion.** As the late 1960s bled into the 1970s, cool’s burst onto the scene of counter-culture finally landed it as a presence in mainstream society. Cool embodied a

disillusionment in reaction to burn out and disenfranchisement with political activism (Pountain & Robins, 2000). This disillusionment was even found in Hollywood, with portrayals such as Clint Eastwood’s *Dirty Harry*. From the 1970s up through the 1990s to today, cool has emerged in all areas of life including music, art, fashion, film, dance, and even cars, computers, and phones (Pountain & Robins, 2000). Cool can even result from an intersection of these industries of expression (think 90s West Coast rap and Raiders snapbacks). Seventies punk was pivotal in introducing cool to youth fashions through its distinct stylings that communicated the cool attitude: spiked and dyed hair, body piercings, Doc Martens, and frayed and defaced fabrics. Since its inception with the punk movement, various groups and movements have applied the formula of using physical appearance to express cool and communicate group membership, from grunge to glam rock and hip-hop to EDM. For some, cool continues to link to its roots as an agent of opposition to oppression, while for others cool seems to be more concerned with group membership or self-expression.

As cool has developed across generations, it has taken on numerous forms and functions as a result of appropriation and repurposing by various cultures and sub-cultures. However, the roots of cool are still observable on the streets of urban America, where it maintains the role of an adaptive strategy when interacting with oppressive systems. Here, cool ensures the survival and provides an identity for consistently marginalized populations. The origins of cool and the forms in which it has manifested in American (and global) history has cemented its role in American counterculture and rebellion (Connor, 1995; Frank, 1997; Pountain & Robins, 2000). For a comprehensive history of cool and its presence and influence since its birth, see Pountain and Robins’ *Cool Rules: Anatomy of an Attitude*.

### **Conceptualizations of Cool**

**Lexical cool.** Pountain and Robins (2000) approach understanding cool by simply accepting cool as a phenomenon that is recognizable by its effects on human behavior and cultural artifacts (e.g., fashion). Notably, cool is not inherent in the artifacts themselves, but in the attitude people have toward them. Namely, cool derives its significance through the implicit, socially constructed consensus of those who use it (Moore, 2004). What constructs cool is how an artifact is perceived and experienced by the observer. This dependence on the subjective nature of perception for meaning as a phenomenon to occur (i.e., its mutability), further complicates any attempts to distill the phenomenon (i.e., cool) to a singular definition (Pountain & Robins, 2000).

Moore (2004) identifies a fundamental difficulty in clarifying the essential meaning of cool when he labels it as a lexical *counterword*. Moore refers to Flexner's (1975) definition of a counterword as “an expression whose meaning has expanded to a broader and more general applicability than that of the term's original referent” (Moore, 2004, p. 59). For example, when viewed through a pop culture, euro-centric western lens, cool often instills imagery of classic rebelliousness (à la James Dean), counterculture behavior and attitude (like punk rebellion), as well as affective neutrality and composure (such as the notable apathy of the ‘hipster’ or the lyrical stylings of Big Daddy Kane; Frank, 1997; Lyman & Scott, 1970; Pountain & Robins, 2000). These examples have clear roots in the origins of cool (e.g., rebellion and emotional self-control) but also emerge in a larger array of behavior, style, affect, and identity. Through this, *cool* expanded to encompass a larger realm of experience.

**Social dynamics and cool.** Sociologically, the designation of cool achieves the connotation of a sense of elitism within a social setting. Bloustien (2003) describes the resulting

social stratification that a designation of cool creates. A member of a group with the label of *cool* occupies a mobile social position where they are able to interact easily with anyone else, regardless of group membership. Membership in a group that does not have the cool label does not afford such ease of mobility. These individuals are unable to approach and interact with a cool-designated individual without risk to their already non-cool group membership and social status. Such constructed rules of socialization create a social power differential and govern social mobility, interaction, and communication.

Bloustien (2003) identifies multiple attributes that a cool-labeled group displays: (a) a degree of popularity and desirability, (b) self-possession and self-confidence, (c) an authentic inner-core, (d) social skills and being street-wise, and (e) a deliberate yet effortless style and presence in the group. These descriptors apply both to the group as a whole, as well as its individual members.

**Interpersonal cool.** Similar to the shaping effect of social capital that the designation of cool affords a group and its individuals, cool also affects more intimate, interpersonal relationships. The link between the origins of cool and cool in an interpersonal relationship is easily identifiable. For both, a central component of cool is the ability to suppress any experienced emotion from expression. This includes limiting the affect displayed on one's face, as well as the tonal fluctuation of voice, and the very words used in communication. Physicality, paraverbal, and nonverbal communication can also be a key component of maintaining a *cool* stance. In interpersonal relationships, cool can function as an adaptive defense that allows the cool individual to keep from displaying any emotional reaction or distress that may arise (Connor, 1995; Lyman & Scott, 1970). By suppressing the aforementioned relational components, the cool individual does not communicate their inner experience. This detached

relational style creates distance, impedes intimacy, and protects the cool individual from displaying social distress, and may lessen or prevent the experience of it (Connor, 1995; Dar-Nimrod et al., 2012; Frank, 1997).

*Cool is not always cold.* While an interpersonal cool is characterized by the suppression of any visible emotional reaction (distressing or positive), it is not necessarily perceived by others as being ‘cold.’ Merriam-Webster defines cold as “marked by a lack of warmth of normal human emotion, friendliness, or compassion,” as well as “not colored or affected by personal feeling or bias.” (Cold, 2018, 2: a, b). Merriam-Webster defines cool as “marked by a steady dispassionate calmness and self-control,” and “lacking ardor or friendliness” (Cool, 2018, 2: a, b). When considering jazz music, cool is “marked by restrained emotion and the frequent use of counterpoint” (Cool, 2018, 2: c). While these definitions share the idea of lacking friendliness, in its vernacular use, the connotation of cold is more severe than cool (just as it is when referring to temperature).

Seltzer (2011) described a ‘characterological coldness’ and provides a litany of terms that often serve to describe a ‘cold’ person: aloof, disengaged, detached, haughty, withdrawn, unemotional, unfeeling, angry, critical, untrusting, and excessively independent (among others). These terms align much less with the ‘cool’ that is of interest in this study. As described above (and will be further elaborated on below), cool is not marked by the lack of emotion, but rather, its containment. Strong feelings can be present in a person who is cool, but these experiences are not readily observable. Contrastingly, it is the *lack* of emotion (and not its internalization) that marks an individual with characterological coldness (Seltzer, 2011).

Of note is that while cool and cold are different interpersonal stances, they are not mutually exclusive. A cool person may also be cold, and a cold person may be cool. Just as

easily, a cold person may not be cool at all, and a cool person may be anything but cold.

**Co-opted consumption.** Over the 20th century, a distancing occurred between cool’s identifiable roots in slavery and jazz and the national zeitgeist. This occurred first through the appropriation of cool by the (notably white and male dominated) Beat generation. Here, cool retained its countercultural function but lost its roots in the Black experience. The co-option and repurposing of cool by White/mainstream America increased cool’s presence in popular culture (e.g., movies, music, and clothing). It was not long before capitalist-consumerist America had appropriated coolness as a marketing technique and redefined it as a materialistic and socially desirable construct (McGuigan, 2009). For many Americans, cool had become centrally divorced from its initial function as a response to systemic oppression and subjugation.

In the realm of consumer behavior, marketing, and consumption practices, cool is a *performance* that is based on creating impressions through verbal and physical behavior (Belk, Tian, & Paavola, 2010). The conceptualization of cool as performance necessitates an audience (i.e., a third-party observer) to witness and construct cool. Not all who engage in such a performance achieve the distinction of *cool*, and many instead risk the label of *poser* or *wannabe*. In such a setting, cool is a status marker that is often illustrated through consumption practices in numerous areas of style that are used to express identity, including fashion (Bloustein, 2003; McRobbie, 1998), music and art (Kitwana, 2005; MacAdams, 2001), and even transportation (Danesi, 1994; Hebdige, 1979).

The machine of capitalist marketing attempts to brand and sell each iteration of cool before it becomes passé and loses its appeal to the consumer (Frank, 1997; Pountain & Robins, 2000; Zukin, 2004). Some of these trends become a style staple of an era, such as the four finger rings that graced the fingers of hip-hop names like Big Daddy Kane. Other trends of cool are

consumed and then relegated to live on in the annals of fashion faux-paus (think JNCO Jeans). Those who seek cool often buy into this marketing, which influences their consumption of clothing, music, movies, and even snacks and soft drinks (Pountain & Robins, 2000).

**Multicultural cool.** Cool emerged from the annals of American history, with a presence in western culture since the time of slavery (Connor, 1995). Through the flow of culture and language, the use of cool has undergone various redefinitions throughout the 20th century. (Connor, 1995; Pountain & Robins, 2000). The manner in which a culture values specific traits or behaviors influences the manner in which individuals in the environment comport themselves to align with such values (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). As a result of socialization and globalization, coolness now permeates diverse cultures and has established itself as an enigmatic, multicultural concept that is heavily dependent on context and the interaction of environments and cultures (Maher, 2005).

When considering cool as a multicultural concept, it would be remiss to ignore the cool’s initial survival function for oppressed slaves through the internalization of emotion and suppression of rage (Connor, 1995; Majors & Billson, 1992). While cool’s roots lie as a response to oppression, since the 1950s it has been heavily incorporated into the cultural zeitgeist of affluent, White America (Pountain & Robins, 2000). Clearly, the motivation for a white, middle-class hippy to adopt cool does not come from the same life experience that led to its use by marginalized populations living in the same era.

**Cool is not dead.** Some have argued (e.g., Gioia, 2009) a preference for earnestness has replaced cool and that that cool is ‘dead.’ However, *dead* according to Gioia is better understood through his argument that the *lustre* and appeal of cool has died as a result of its commercialization. Unlike other slang terms whose use have risen and fallen over time (e.g.,

*groovy, dice, or swell*), cool has a staying power that crosses decades, from its subcultural emergence in the 1920s to its cultural currency in the 1950s and beyond (Moore, 2004; Pountain & Robins, 2000). Cool continues to be widely used as a mainstream, positive counterword and cultural presence (Moore, 2004) warranting consideration in the field of psychology.

### **Application to Clinical Psychology**

**What coolness is not.** In academic writing, the word cool has generally been used as synonymous with, or in association with, other words and concepts including, *popular, self-esteem, self-control, social status, minor delinquency, precocious romantic involvement, and pseudo-mature behavior* (Allen, Schad, Oudekerk, and Chango, 2014; Galambos, Barker, & Tilton-Weaver, 2003; Rodkin, Farmer, Pearl, & Acker, 2006). However, an appreciation of the history of cool and its dynamic use in popular culture requires the conclusions that cool is not fully synonymous with any one of the aforementioned dimensions, and instead may be better considered as a conglomeration of various behaviors and experiences. The difficulty defining such a malleable and context-dependent term may in part be why psychological literature has largely disregarded cool as a concept that merits academic consideration.

**Personality psychology.** As described above, numerous conceptualizations of cool exist and range across diverse school of thought, from sociology to business marketeering and beyond. Some see it as “a permanent state of private rebellion” (Pountain & Robins, 2000, p.19), while others view coolness as “poise under pressure” (Lyman & Scott, 1970, p.145). The Oxford English Dictionary defines cool as, “not heated by passion or emotion; unexcited, dispassionate; deliberate, not hasty; undisturbed, calm” (Murray, Bradley, Craigie, & Onions, 1989, vol. III, p. 889).

**Cool attitude.** Pountain and Robins (2000) put forth an argument that cool is an attitude

or personality type that has emerged in diverse societies across distinct historical periods, and that it serves various social functions. According to Pountain and Robins, what is recognizable in all manifestations of cool are three core personality traits: narcissism, ironic detachment, and hedonism. These traits constitute a coherent “‘syndrome’ that is transmissible via culture and that has a traceable history” (p. 28).

In this context, narcissism refers to “an exaggerated admiration for oneself, particularly for personal appearance, which gives rise to the feelings that the world revolves around you and shares your moods” (Pountain & Robins, 2000, p. 26). When manifested positively, this narcissism appears as “a healthy celebration of the self” (p. 26), while negative manifestations function more as a coping mechanism or an “effective adaptation to any oppressive circumstances that sap self-esteem” (p. 26). Ironic detachment is “a stratagem for concealing one’s feelings by suggesting their opposite” (p. 26). This is similar to the above-described internalization of expressed emotion (i.e., affect), with the additional idea that a person might display a different emotion altogether (e.g., feigning apathy when experiencing rejection or amusement when insulted). Irony in this attitude functions as a “verbal weapon equally effective in aggression or defence” (p. 27). Using irony in response to offense or oppression allows the cool individual to maintain civility in the interaction, while simultaneously protecting their cool persona. Finally, hedonism is more straightforward in the context of cool with the clarification that it tends towards “the worldly, adventurous and even orgiastic rather than the pleasant” (p. 28).

***Two types of cool.*** A more recent study of *coolness* was similarly interested in trait-like information that the label of *cool* provides when applied as a descriptor (Dar-Nimrod et al., 2012). Results reduced coolness to two distinct personality orientations that were individually

coherent and found that certain traits clustered in a way that differentiated two styles of cool. The classic James Dean *contrarian coolness*, was characterized by independence, rebelliousness, and counterculture. A newly emerging *cachet coolness*, was characterized by a more outward focus that was attuned to the external valuations of others (Dar-Nimrod et al., 2012). Contrarian coolness more closely aligns with existing scholarly literature that views coolness as a detached, defensive, opaque style (Dar-Nimrod et al., 2012; Frank, 1997; Heath & Potter, 2004). This newer cachet coolness likely captures the overlap of contrarian coolness and social desirability. It involves striving for peer approval and is a more active and expressive embodiment of cool (Dar-Nimrod et al., 2012).

**Behavioral psychology: Maslow’s hierarchy of needs.** In his 1943 paper, *A Theory of Human Motivation*, Abraham Maslow proposed a five-level, hierarchical, psychological theory of human motivation. In this paper, Maslow (1943) asserts that people are motivated by five primary needs, and achievement of such needs are prioritized in a specific order, beginning with the most basic ‘physiological’ need, that is necessary for physical survival. Maslow (1970, 1994) later extended this model to include a total of eight stages. Cognitive, aesthetic, and transcendence needs were absent from Maslow’s original 1943 five-stage model.

- Stage 1: physiological needs (e.g., air, water, food, shelter, sex, etc.)
- Stage 2: safety needs (e.g., stability, security, law, etc)
- Stage 3: love needs (e.g., affection, belonging, acceptance, affiliation, etc.)
- Stage 4: esteem needs (two categories: need for adequacy, confidence, and esteem for oneself and need for reputation or prestige from others)
- Stage 5: cognitive needs (e.g., knowledge, meaning, self-awareness)

- Stage 6: aesthetic needs (e.g., an appreciation and search for balance, beauty, form, etc.)
- Stage 7: self-actualization needs (i.e., doing what one is fitted to do, self-fulfillment)
- Stage 8: transcendence needs (i.e., motivation by values beyond the personal self)

Maslow's (1943) initial theory purported that in order to progress to meet higher levels of needs, individuals must first satisfy the need that exist at the lower level. He later acknowledged that this hierarchy is likely not as rigid as he originally implied (Maslow, 1987). Satisfaction of needs at each level is not an all-or-none concept and is flexible to circumstance and individual differences. As each level is satisfied (more or less), its salience to the individual recedes, allowing the individual to focus on the next (or other) level of need (Maslow, 1987).

**Social and developmental psychology.** Similar to the above described interpersonal understanding of cool and contrarian cool, Allen et al. (2014) refer to Greenberger and Steinberg's (1986) exploration of emerging psychopathology in adolescence when they consider cool as a description of the appearance of social maturity without a congruent level of emotional and behavioral maturity (i.e., pseudomaturity). In this lens, cool actually signifies that an adolescent may be attempting to appear older than their age by displaying (*pseudo*)mature behaviors when in fact, they may lack the capacity or the confidence in their capacity to meet the developmental challenge of managing new, and increasingly complex, peer relations (Cicchetti & Rogosch, 2002). By behaving cool, the adolescent is considered to be seeking to attain status with peers (i.e., popularity or reputation), and navigate peer relationships successfully, though in a manner which differs from how other peers may do so (Allen et al., 2014).

**A developmental lens.** Thus far, I have described several conceptualizations/theories of cool that emerge or noticeably develop during adolescence: personality, participation in

consumerism, and group socialization and identity development (Allen et al., 2014; Danesi, 1994; Frank, 1997; Pountain & Robins, 2000; Zukin, 2004).

Erikson’s (1968) stages of psychosocial development posit that adolescence is the time during which children explore their independence as they separate from their caregivers and begin to explore their identity (Fleming, 2004). During this time, group membership and peer relationships become increasingly important as adolescents ‘try on’ their developing identities and values in interpersonal situations. In light of the variety of views (or theories) of cool that have been described above, it is not difficult to connect the emergence of the phenomenon of cool during adolescence (Danesi, 1994) and its relevance to identity development. Though not explicitly explored in this study, the concept of cool may perhaps be an adolescent paragon of ideal identity. Alternatively, a cool manner of coping (i.e., affect regulation) may be utilized most in adolescence as teens try on new identities whilst managing feedback from peers about their behaviors. To avoid embarrassment or shame, cool may be a protective factor from negative feedback or castigation from peers as teenagers explore their values and identities (and try to assimilate these parts into a cohesive self).

### **Cool’s Place in Psychology - Why We Care**

The foundations of Western psychology largely grew from an interest in humankind’s inner experience (Hurlburt & Heavy, 2006). Even today, psychologists work closely with clients’ *self, identity, personality, emotionality, behaviors, cognitions, narratives, etc.*, when they complete research and/or practice clinically. Throughout this review of relevant literature, I have made explicit cool’s presence in various aspects of psychological inquiry and interest:

- personality and identity (Kitwana, 2005; MacAdams, 2001; Pountain & Robins, 2000);

- social status and group belonging (Bloustien, 2003);
- as an adaptive interpersonal defense (Connor, 1995; Lyman & Scott, 1970); and
- pseudomature behaviors and emerging psychopathology (Allen et al., 2014).

While the significance of the term *cool* may vary in response to its use, it is consistently used in reference to human experience (both internal and external), and as such, warrants psychologists' interest.

Previous to this study, psychological research had not yet directly addressed the subjective first-person experience of cool. Currently, when the word *cool* is utilized in psychological writing, it is often in reference to the idea of (a) *keeping one's cool* (i.e., emotional coolness; Szijarto, & Bereczkei, 2015), (b) physiological regulation, or (c) in reference to belonging to a social group with the label of “cool” (examples include Balick & Szymanski, 2014; Brukner, 2017; and Rudolph, Abaied, Flynn, Sugimura, & Agoston, 2011).

As illustrated above, the existing literature on cool largely focuses on what the audience observes in those who are assigned the label. Despite the numerous conceptualizations and descriptions of cool, notably absent is curiosity around cool as a first-person subjective experience. Coolness is instead viewed as an amalgam of behaviors, affects, attitudes, and styles that an individual is witnessed displaying. The label of cool is assigned by an ‘other’ (i.e., observer) without considering the internal experience of the labeled individual.

### **Differentiating “Cool” – The (Objective) Construct and the (Subjective) Experience**

The use of cool in the English language can greatly vary. For this reason, it is important to understand the difference between the internal experience of cool and the descriptor of cool that the observer assigns to an individual or group. The application of social constructionism to the understanding of cool aids in the differentiation of cool as internally experienced (subjective)

and externally assigned (objective). A detailed summary of the vast area of academic thought that social constructionism occupies is beyond the scope of this paper. For a thorough account of social constructionist theory in applicable contexts, please refer to Gergen (2001).

**Cool: the observed social construct.** Social constructionism is primarily concerned with the creation of knowledge, ideas, values, etc. (i.e., constructs) through internal and (pseudo)shared meanings between people, within the individual, and across societies (Andrews, 2012). Hacking (1999) differentiates between the social construction of *ideas* (i.e., mental representations) and the social construction of *objects* (i.e., physical properties in the world). The social construction of cool exists in both of these spaces. First, the construct of cool is in essence an idea that participants in society have created through mutual recognition of the meaning represented by the use of the word. When used as a label or adjective (and within a context), the descriptor of cool communicates a certain aesthetic and connotation regarding the object to which it is being assigned.

Second, through various forms of communication, and based on the constructed idea of cool, social groups (of various sizes) are able to create shared meaning around objects that are cool. Notably, in this context, an *object* is not limited to a material good, but may also refer to a person, an idea, a value, or anything else that exists in the social realm. The construction of an object as *cool* is dependent on the social group that creates the meaning of cool as well as the context in which the object exists. For example, a group of people with a shared interest in fashion may determine that a particular look merits the label of ‘cool.’ Simultaneously, the same object in the context of a different social group may receive the label of ‘tacky.’ This understanding of cool locates cool in the observed world, and requires that social interaction create and apply shared meaning in order for cool to exist. In this use of cool, the individual may

internally notice an initial notion of cool, but then applies this cool to a social setting in reference to a specific individual object (e.g., individual, material good, belief, etc.).

**Cool: where cool overlaps.** Of note is that the facets of life, interaction, and experiences that create the construct of cool (as it is observed and identified by others) and the subjective experience of cool (as it is internally experienced by the individual) are not mutually exclusive. It is very likely (if not certain) that how an individual has an experience which receives the label of cool is influenced by how cool manifests and is co-created in the individual’s social world (e.g., objects, attitudes, styles, interests, beliefs, etc. that receive the valuation and label of cool).

### **Research Question**

As I have now made clear, researchers and academics do not agree on a specific definition of *cool* (Connor, 1995; Danesi, 1994; Dar-Nimrod et al., 2012; Frank, 1997; Kerner & Pressman, 2007; Pountain & Robins, 2000). Warren and Campbell (2014) canvassed much of the existing literature on cool and identified four defining properties of cool on which there appears to be consensus:

1. Coolness is socially constructed.
2. Coolness is subjective and dynamic.
3. People perceive coolness as a positive quality.
4. Coolness requires more than a just the perception of being positive or desirable.

This consensus lacks an appreciation for the individual experience of cool. Academic research has fallen trap to the elusiveness of cool by ignoring the individual human’s experience upon which we place the label of cool. Ignoring cool as it is experienced has resulted in an information gap that is of particular interest to psychologists: the human experience.

This qualitative study utilized a phenomenological approach—specifically Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)—to complete an initial phenomenological exploration of cool as a first-person experience. In keeping with the aim of an IPA study, the primary aim of this study was to get as close as possible to the participant’s described experience of cool and attempt to extract its essence. I utilized IPA to allow the research findings to arise directly from participants’ own use of language as they described their experience. As I extracted the essence of cool, I aimed to explore the findings of the study in consideration of literature from a variety of disciplines in order to facilitate future exploration of the experience in multiple fields of inquiry.

## **Method**

### **Research Position: A Qualitative Approach**

The intention of this research was to better understand a previously unexplored topic: the experience of cool. Polkinghorne (2005) identified a primary purpose of qualitative research to be “to describe and clarify experience as it is lived and constituted in awareness” (p. 138). Qualitative methods are suitable for: (a) investigating a topic about which there is little to no previous research, (b) exploring variables that are not readily identifiable or have yet to be identified, (c) presenting an in-depth and detailed view of a particular phenomenon, and (d) uncovering meaning and experience that cannot be observed or gathered through more traditional quantitative methods (Morrow, 2007). As this research was exploratory and met these criteria, I determined that a qualitative approach to the research question was an appropriate method for exploring the experience of cool.

### **Philosophical Underpinnings: Cool – A Phenomenological Conceptualization**

**Phenomenological psychology.** A main characteristic of phenomenological psychology

is its reluctance to impose reductive models on human beings, instead preferring to assume intentionality in individuals as active interpreters of their world and experiences. This prevents reducing human experiences to passive reactions that occur as a result of biological and environmental forces, and acknowledges humans as having an intentionality in their experience and the meaning they construct from it (Spinelli, 2005). Shared language or cultural perspective can lead to the development of frameworks that result in people believing that those around them also share their own perceptions. Phenomenological psychology acknowledges that because of diversity even within a language and culture, the experiences that individuals perceive as shared are, at best, only *partially* shared. If given attention and space to exist, unique perceptions will also emerge alongside the shared perceptions (Spinelli, 2005).

**Description of phenomenology.** Phenomenology encompasses a theory and method to gain insight into psychological concepts related to universal human experience (Scalambrino, 2009). Founded by Edmund Husserl, modern phenomenology originated as a theoretical philosophical movement (Spinelli, 2005). Over time, other philosophers have expanded and further developed Husserl’s thoughts in numerous ways (Heidegger, 1962; Spinelli, 2005; Zahavi, 2003). This paper did not cover the scope of such philosophical development. At its core, phenomenology is primarily concerned with understanding the essence of a lived experience and the meaning that people draw from such experiences (Larsson & Holmström, 2007).

**Support for a phenomenological conceptualization of cool.** As illustrated by its complex history described previously in this paper, the experience of cool is a multifaceted concept. Research on such a concept therefore necessitated a theory that allowed for a conceptualization that captured such nuance and complexity. Exploring cool through a

phenomenological approach accomplished this by allowing for inquiry that was sensitive to the dynamic and subjective nature of the term.

In phenomenological research, interpreting an individual's understanding of an experience comes second after first exploring and understanding the essence of the experience as the primary phenomenon (Spinelli, 2005). Exploratory psychological research of this study's nature first needed to examine the essence of the experience of cool before making attributions regarding the influence of cool on personality, socialization, motivation, the human psyche, etc. Additionally, a phenomenological examination of the experience of cool allowed for an exploration of any shared experience of cool that merged across participants as well as an identification of unshared or individual aspects of the experience of cool.

### **Research Strategy: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)**

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis is a thematic analysis approach to qualitative research due to its concern for identifying and describing a central idea. It is less structured and more inferential than other thematic approaches such as content analysis or framework analysis and is explicitly concerned with the inner experience of the individual (Pistrang & Barker, 2012). Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was developed within psychology to examine the phenomenon of personal lived experience and how people make sense of such life experience (Smith, 1996; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). A view of IPA as a synthesis of phenomenological interest in human experience and hermeneutic interest in human meaning-making is a simple understanding of its overall premises (Hammond, 2010).

**Philosophical presuppositions.** The first paper describing IPA was by Jonathan Smith (1996; Smith & Shinebourne, 2012). With strong roots in philosophical theory, IPA was developed from the influences of Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer, both of whom

espoused and practiced a *hermeneutic phenomenology*, and are largely considered the founders of philosophical hermeneutics (Smith et al., 2009). Three major philosophical influences form the foundation and inform the functions of IPA: (a) ideography, (b) phenomenology, and (c) hermeneutics (Smith et al., 2009).

IPA is idiographic in nature in its attention to the detailed examination of individual cases. Its attention to exploring and analyzing the essence of experiences heavily roots IPA in phenomenology. Hermeneutics refers to the interpretative nature of human meaning-making, both in general and in the analytic process (Smith et al., 2009). IPA draws heavily on *philosophical hermeneutics*, which emphasizes the subjectivity of the interpreter (i.e., researcher) and denies the finality of any single interpretation. Instead, while not just any interpretation is necessarily possible, philosophical hermeneutics proposes that all meanings that are constructed are both *dynamic* and *intersubjective* (Hammond, 2010).

**Appropriateness of IPA.** Psychological research through a phenomenological lens is a flexible and iterative process that requires a solid grounding in both psychological research design as well as the intricacies of phenomenological theories. IPA offered an appropriate method of analysis for the topic of inquiry in this study due to its focus on the essence of an experience. Additionally, IPA’s flexible application to psychological inquiry allowed me to customize the research design in a manner that facilitated closer attention to my area of interest (Smith et al., 2009).

At the time of this study, existing literature in IPA had not prescribed a unitary method for working with data. However, Smith et al. (2009) outlined a set of common processes that commonly characterize IPA analysis. I selected to utilize these processes to serve as a framework that informed the procedure of analysis for this study.

The utilization of the IPA method for analysis was ideal for a variety of reasons. First, IPA provided scaffolding for my limited experience in conducting psychological inquiry. Second, IPA allowed me to explore in detail the objective of this research, to explore the essence of the experience of cool. Third, the phenomenological nature of IPA allowed for differences across participant to emerge organically, and thus was likely to provide a more intricate and nuanced reflection of cool, than were I to have used a more prescribed or predetermined method of data collection and analysis.

Existing literature on IPA has not prescribed a definitive method for working with collected data (Smith et al., 2009). Because of this, IPA permitted flexibility in research design and administration that allowed me to pursue direct areas of interest through deviations from general processes described by Smith et al.. This flexibility permitted me to deviate from traditional IPA by using online data collection, and electing to utilize a larger sample size than is found in more typical IPA research.

### **Online Data Collection**

I determined to utilize online data collection for this study. I made this decision in light of the exploratory nature of the research, the potential access to a diverse sample of participants, and after concluding that the benefits of online data collection outweighed the cons (e.g., I prioritized ease of access to sample over need for a specific sample of participants).

**Benefits.** Use of the internet provided an ideal method for data collection in exploratory research. Online data collection removes barriers or limitations imposed by challenges of time and space (Willig, 2013), and often speeds up the process of survey data collection (Dunn, 2002). For example, participation by an individual is not contingent on a researcher being physically present or finding multiple times and settings for survey administration. It could also

be argued that online data collection has high ecological validity because: (a) the data is generated by the participant in a familiar environment (both through their completion in their own home environment as well as the familiarity of the internet in general), (b) communication occurs in a form that participants are accustomed to, and (c) the participant may consider the internet a ‘safe space’ for them to occupy (Willig, 2013). In addition, online data collection may facilitate disclosure due to a sense of anonymity, whereas in other situations this may not occur due to the presence of a researcher or other social observers (Willig, 2013).

**Disadvantages.** Some drawbacks of online data collection include difficulty authenticating the identity of participants, difficulty establishing rapport with participants, and the loss of nonverbal communication (Willig, 2013). The loss of nonverbal communication (such as tone, gestures, etc.) can potentially result in misunderstanding or misreading what the participant is communicating. Similarly, qualitative research collected online requires a participant to type their response, which limits the researcher’s access to initial reactions to questions and may limit the amount of information provided due to the need for the participant to type their responses versus provide them verbally.

**Mechanical turk.** Online data collection occurred via the online crowdsourcing marketplace Amazon Mechanical Turk (hereafter referred to as *MTurk*). MTurk is one of the suites of Amazon.com Web Services. MTurk functions as an online space in which researchers, businesses, or other groups provide *human intelligence tasks* (HITs) for MTurk ‘workers’ to complete. A small monetary sum is often awarded to workers for the completion of a HIT.

The use of MTurk for data collection allowed me to access the desired sample age-range of participants with relative ease and without being limited geographically within the United States (or world) due to the dissemination of the study at a national (and worldwide) level.

MTurk samples of participants also tend to be more diverse in terms of age and education than college samples (Keith, Tay, & Harms, 2017). When not limited to the United States, MTurk workers are generally more ethnically diverse than the general population (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011). Bartneck, Duenser, Moltchanova, and Zawieska (2015) found no significant difference between running a study within MTurk compared to an online questionnaire service (e.g., Qualtrics) and no significant differences between results obtained from MTurk and those obtained in a campus and online forum condition. This highlighted MTurk as an economical and viable option for recruiting participants and conducting online research.

**Recruitment and online data collection.** To gain participants, I advertised this study on MTurk as an available ‘HIT.’ Any interested workers (i.e., participants) that met inclusion criteria were able to select to participate in the study by simply clicking on the HIT title and ‘accepting’ to complete the HIT.

MTurk was not designed with the purpose of recruiting human subjects for research (though it is now largely used for this). For this reason, its security measures around privacy and confidentiality are not as sophisticated as those of websites and programs that are primarily dedicated to survey-based online research (University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2015). While MTurk is an ideal arena for accessing participants, its capacity to ensure confidentiality or anonymity to participants is limited. MTurk automatically collects IP addresses, Worker IDs are automatically linked to survey responses of internally run surveys, and Amazon has access to Worker’s personal information and survey responses of internally run surveys (CPHS, 2018; Mason & Suri, 2012). For these reasons, I elected to host the survey through the HIPPA compliant SurveyMonkey survey development website. Data collected via externally hosted HITs can generally be assumed to be anonymous as long as the survey does not ask for any

personally identifying information (either explicitly or through survey responses) or WorkerIDs, the IP addresses of the participant are not collected by the external hosting site, and compensation provided does not require a unique completion code to be submitted by the participant. Rather each participant receives the same completion code at the end of the survey (CPHS, 2018).

## **Participants**

**Convenience and purposeful sampling.** In traditional qualitative analysis, participant selection often occurs purposively (as opposed to through random sampling). This is because the researcher is interested in a specific phenomenon or area of inquiry and seeks to ensure that the area of inquiry relates to participants to ensure in-depth exploration (Denovan & Macaskill, 2013; Smith et al., 2009). While considering methods of participant recruitment and selection, I assumed that most people have had the experience of cool (or would be able to think of one if prompted). This assumption lessened the need for intentional, purposive sampling around the specific experience, as an experience of cool is not limited to a specific population or environment. Because of this and the exploratory nature of the study, I chose to utilize a convenience sampling method, opting to sample from easily accessible participants on an online crowdsourcing platform. Some purposive sampling occurred when setting parameters around the sought age range of participants (discussed below) and the necessity of the participant having had an experience of cool. Also, I wrote all forms utilized in data collection and consent in English at a Flesh-Kincaid Grade Level of 9th grade or lower. Because of this, participation in this study required the ability to comprehend English at the 9th-grade level.

Cool has historically and anthropologically been located in adolescence since its appropriation and commodification by post-colonial westernized America (Danesi, 1994). Only emerging adults (participants between the ages of 18-25) qualified for participation in the study

due to my interest in exploring the experience of cool with attention to the developmental stage of adolescence and the recent experiences of adolescence that emerging adults have had (Arnett & Tanner, 2006). Additionally, this age range facilitated the process of consent and was appropriate due to the exploratory nature of the research.

**Sample size.** Guidelines around selecting sample sizes for qualitative research vary greatly (see Mason, 2010). For this study, I elected to deviate slightly from traditional IPA practice of small sample sizes (e.g., 3 participants) by increasing the target sample size to 25. This was done in light of: (a) my preference for descriptions from multiple perspectives in this exploratory study; (b) Green and Thorogood's (2009) observation that based on the experience of *most* qualitative researchers, new ideas or themes no longer seem to emerge after responses from around 20 or so participants; (c) general agreement amongst authors (Mason, 2010) that saturation is achieved at a lower level than often presumed; and (d) general guidelines on qualitative research sample sizes from Mason and Creswell (2013).

One final contributing factor played a role in the determination of sample size. Data collection through online survey prevented immediate participant-specific follow-up questions to initial responses. Because of this, I anticipated that I would likely obtain briefer and less rich narrative responses than I may have collected via a semi-structured interview. Ultimately, I elected to use a sample size of 25 in order to compensate for (anticipated) limited depth of individual responses, with an increased breadth of responses. Due to the exploratory nature of the survey, compensating with breadth also created increased potential for diverse aspects of the experience of cool to arise.

**Criteria for inclusion in analysis.** Inclusion of a participant's responses for data analysis was contingent on (a) the participant's online signature verifying informed consent, (b)

participant meeting the criteria for inclusion, and (c) the completion of the Cool Prompt with relevant qualitative responses. As I collected the data, I briefly reviewed each submitted response to determine whether the responses pertained to the questions. I did not require that the participant provide a response to every question on the Cool Prompt, but did require that participant responses pertained to the areas of inquiry.

Additionally, I did not require participants' full completion of the Demographic Questionnaire for inclusion in analysis. I made this decision because collection of demographic information served to contextualize and enrich a participant's responses, and was not essential to the consideration of the essence of cool. The design of the Demographic Questionnaire allowed the participants to select a “Prefer to not respond” option, which I added due to the supplemental nature of the data collected on the Demographic Questionnaire. Due to my view that all experiences of cool merited consideration, no areas of inquiry on the Demographic Questionnaire functioned as criteria for exclusion.

**Participant demographics.** The overall sample of participants consisted of 25 individuals. There were 17 men and 8 women with a mean age of 23.24 (SD = 1.83; range 19-25). Detailed demographic information is located in Table 1. All participants identified as cisgender (sex assigned at birth aligned with current gender identity) and reported a variety of ethnic and racial identities. Participants largely identified as heterosexual with a few respondents identifying as bisexual and one preferring to not respond. Education of participants ranged from high school graduates to a master's level degree with most participants having a Bachelor's Degree or Some College. Participants were spread across all four regions of the United States as defined by the United States Census Bureau (2017), with five more respondents from Tamil Nadu (a state in India). Participants resided in areas with populations that ranged from

10,000-24,999 up to as high as 5,000,000 +. All participants reported a primary language of English and a minority of participants endorsed speaking a variety of other languages as well.

### **Questionnaires**

The method of data collection deviated slightly from traditional IPA by using online data collection in the form of two questionnaires administered via online survey. I justified this deviation through two acknowledgements: (a) my preference for data from more participants (even if it is more shallow) over a deeper exploration from fewer participants, and (b) [due to the exploratory nature of this topic] my hope to use this research to generate hypotheses for future areas of exploration by collecting data from a broader range of participants.

**Cool prompt.** The focus of the Cool Prompt (Appendix A) was to inquire around the experience of cool. Questions chosen for inclusion on the prompt posed different ways for the participant to consider the cool experience with the goal of evoking multiple perspectives and reflections. Six total questions required participants to describe the following:

1. A recent event or situation in which the participant identified as cool *and* the experience of cool itself.
2. Additional thoughts, feelings, images, sensation, emotions, behaviors, or social interactions involved in the cool experience.
3. How they might describe the experience of cool to someone who has never had it.
4. Any differences between when they *act* cool versus a time they *experience* cool.
5. What is *not* experienced when experiencing cool and how they know they are not experiencing cool.
6. What about a person makes them cool versus a person who is not cool.

**Demographic questionnaire.** Participants also completed a brief questionnaire that

collected background demographic information (Appendix B). Demographic information aided in the recognition of potential limitations of results related to participant makeup. In addition to general research on the design of demographic questionnaire items, I consulted resources on best practices for the design of items that pertained to gender and sexual orientation (The GenIUSS Group, 2014; The Human Rights Campaign, 2016).

### **Procedure**

I advertised the HIT of the study under the name “Survey – The Experience of Cool: 18-25 year olds.” I included some of the inclusion criteria in the title of the study in order to attract the desired population. If the participant ‘accepted’ the HIT, they were taken to the HIT page. The HIT page contained the recruitment letter (Appendix C), which provided a description of the study and the criteria for inclusion, and a link to access the survey (on SurveyMonkey).

Data collection took place across eight days. As participants submitted their surveys, I completed a brief review of each submittal to evaluate the responses to ensure it met the criteria for inclusion in data analysis. I discarded responses that did not meet criteria for inclusion (i.e., responses to the Cool Prompt were not relevant) and posted additional HITs as necessary. I completed the review process until 25 survey responses were collected that met the criteria for inclusion in data analysis.

**Informed consent and confidentiality.** The first page of the survey provided a brief introduction of the study and an electronic informed consent (Appendix D). I required participants to click a box next to a statement of consent to ensure active consent. This process served as the electronic signature of each participant.

**Administration.** After providing informed consent, participants verified that they met the criteria for participation by answering three items pertaining to their age, reading comprehension

level, and having had at least one experience of cool (Appendix E). The survey directed participants who did not meet criteria for inclusion to a disqualification page that thanked them for their time, informed them that they did not meet criteria for inclusion, and requested that they return the HIT on MTurk (Appendix F). Participants who met criteria for inclusion first completed the Cool Prompt followed by the Demographic Questionnaire. I intentionally had the participants complete the Cool Prompt first because I hoped to have participants' responses emerge organically by minimizing potential influence by the administration procedure. Completing the Demographic Questionnaire first could have unintentionally primed the participant to recollect certain identities and/or experiences related to the specific demographic information requested.

I estimated the completion time of the entire survey to be around 30 minutes. To allow for unpredicted variation in response time, participants had a two-hour window after accepting the HIT on MTurk to complete the survey. If the participant did not complete the survey and submit the verification code via MTurk within this time, the HIT expired and compensation was forfeit.

**Incentive for completion.** MTurk workers (i.e., participants) who completed the study and submitted the verification code were compensated \$3.00 for their time. This amount was determined per MTurk suggested compensation rates of \$3.00 for survey duration of 30 minutes and based on a six dollar an hour compensation rate (Navarro & Siegel, 2016). In order to receive compensation, the participant was required to provide informed consent, endorse meeting criteria for participation, and submit a standard verification code that was located on the last page of the survey (Appendix G). Whether a participant completed the Cool Prompt or Demographic Questionnaire did not affect the fulfillment of compensation. I made this decision because

financial need could discourage a client from withdrawing from the study for any reason (e.g., if experiencing distress) and lack of compensation could be an additional risk of participation. In addition to monetary compensation as an incentive, completion of the survey contributed positively to the participant’s overall worker statistics on MTurk. Worker statistics (e.g., approval rating) affect what HITs workers can access.

### **Ethical Considerations and Consent**

A priority of ethical practice within qualitative research is avoidance of harm (Smith et al., 2009). This study recruited participants voluntarily to avoid any sense of coercion. The anonymity of recruitment also minimized any perceived coercion (e.g., peer pressure). In order for a worker to participate in the study, I required that they submitted an electronic signature (through checking a box) to verify informed consent. I also encouraged participants to familiarize themselves with the procedures in the study through the recruitment letter and information provided in the informed consent. The informed consent also notified participants of their right to discontinue participation at any point in the process. So as to remove any pressure to complete the study due to financial need, discontinuation of the study and submittal of incomplete surveys did not result in forfeit of compensation. The informed consent communicated to participants that to receive compensation for their participation and time, they only needed to submit the code found at the end of the study to the space provided on the MTurk HIT page.

I did not collect any identifying information during data collection. This meant that participants provided their responses anonymously. To ensure that participant responses did not link back to their MTurk Worker ID, I only retained this information until I had awarded compensation to the participant. MTurk Worker IDs did not link to responses provided during

the process of data collection (on SurveyMonkey), which further ensured anonymity. I then assigned surveys completed on SurveyMonkey a participant number (e.g., P1) that did not correspond to survey response number on the SurveyMonkey website. I stored all relevant information and data in a safe, secure environment, which further ensured confidentiality of the already anonymous participant responses.

### **The Process of Analysis**

**Overview.** Once data collection was completed, I extracted participant responses from the online survey, assigned participant responses a participant number, and transferred participant responses to an Excel spreadsheet where the data was analyzed using the IPA process. In total, SurveyMonkey collected 39 responses from participants. Of these responses, I deemed that 14 did not meet criteria for inclusion for data analysis (see Table 2). The remaining 25 responses collected on SurveyMonkey were used in the below described IPA analysis.

**IPA analysis.** In IPA, an iterative and inductive stance is the basis of data analysis (Smith, 2007; Smith et al., 2009). This means that throughout the process of qualitative analysis, I often repeated and returned to past steps (such as by reading and then re-reading data text) with a focus on distilling factors of the participant responses that related to the essence of the experience of cool. My exact actions in doing this occurred organically and my reactions, thoughts, and experience of reading the participant responses largely dictated my interaction with the data. Described below is a general uni-directional outline of the process of analysis that occurred and the steps involved in each phases of analysis. The linear sequence of these steps served only as a general outline, as the typical process of analysis is a multi-directional, iterative, and fluid process. The reader is encouraged to consider these steps as a general description within which flexible thinking, reduction, creativity, curiosity, revision, and expansion occurred.

Identification of components of the essence of cool occurred inductively (i.e., from a bottom-up approach) by gathering details already present in the data. With this information, I developed an overall gestalt (i.e., frame) that illustrated thematic relationships between details and created an organized, whole essence narrative. Throughout analysis, I aimed to attend to the idiographic nature of the individual voice (i.e., the subjective nature of each response) while simultaneously recognizing claims that pertained to the larger group responses (i.e., commonalities across responses). I valued the presence of both voices (individual and group) as integral to interpretation of data and as valid reflections of varying aspects of the essence of cool.

**Step 1: Data immersion.** In correspondence with the analytical processes suggested by Smith et al. (2009), I first read participant responses several times in order to fully immerse myself in the original data. During this stage of analysis, I maintained notes of observations and reactions (e.g., what was surprising to me) while reading participant responses. This allowed me to continue bracketing my thoughts at the outset of analysis while also keeping myself from reducing or analyzing the participant’s responses prematurely. Immersing myself in each participant’s response also allowed me to hone my focus on the individual’s responses and separate out lingering influences from data from participants that I had already analyzed.

**Step 2: Initial noting.** Once familiarized with the data, I completed the “initial level of analysis,” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 83) referred to as *initial noting*. In this phase of analysis, I explored semantic content and use of language with an open mind and noted points of interest in the transcripts, always as I kept the imagined participant in my mind. The goal of this step was to produce a comprehensive set of notes and details on the qualitative data. I completed the initial noting in a manner similar to that of free textual analysis, with no rules dictating to what I attended. This meant that I was not required to identify specific meaning units or organize data

into categories as often occurs in qualitative analysis. Instead, I focused on commenting and noting parts of the data that appeared key to the essence of cool and their descriptions (e.g., relationships, events, processes, values, etc.). I took notes on the process of engaging with the text (to inform the next steps of analysis) and recorded comments relevant to the respondents' explicit experience (i.e., the phenomenological focus). I slowly began to extract patterns from the data that pertained to the essence of cool, while also considering the participants' use of language and the context of response (Smith et al., 2009).

**Step 3: Emergent themes.**

*Individual responses.* After I completed data immersion and initial noting for a participant's responses, I identified emergent themes for each respondent. I reduced the total volume of notes through combing or chunking data into themes while carefully retaining the complexity of the patterns and interrelationships that I identified in the initial noting process (Smith et al., 2009).

*Full data set.* Once I had completed initial noting and identification of emergent themes across all individual participant responses, I shifted the focus of analysis towards looking across all participant responses for emergent themes. I accomplished this through identifying commonalities in emergent themes across respondents while still attending to unique or complicating responses and notes that highlighted any complexities of participant responses. At this point of analysis, it was especially important to pay attention to individual voice as it deviated from the common themes that grouped together.

**Step 4: Comparison with secondary rater.** At this point of analysis, I compared my results with that of the second coder, who had also followed the same process of analysis. The second coder that I recruited to assist in my research was a 25-year-old Caucasian, female who

was a 5th-year PsyD graduate student in my program. She also utilized IPA in her dissertation research and as such, had a working familiarity with both the process of analysis as well as the theory from which IPA emerged. Because both of our dissertations utilized IPA and required a second coder, we agreed to perform this role in research for each other.

Comparison of my coding with that of the second coder resulted in the reconciliation and integration of themes identified by both coders. In this process of analysis, the use of a second coder functioned to improve the quality and rigor of methodological analysis and interpretation by allowing for the incorporation of different perspectives and decreasing bias (Liggett, Glesne, Johnston, Hasazi, & Schattman, 1994). The comparison of coding functioned to raise the analysis to a higher level of subjectivity and allowed for the identification of intersubjective assumptions and biases of both coders (Barry, Britten, Barber, Bradley, & Stevenson, 1999; Olesen, Droes, Hatton, Chico, & Schatzman, 1994). Themes that emerged common to both coders demonstrated validity through coherence and strengthened the dependability of findings. Divergent or independent themes that emerged from both my coding and that of the second coder allowed for further identification of individual voices that deviated from group themes.

**Step 5: Mapping of themes.** After I compared my coding with that of the second coder, I utilized mapping to further organize themes and distill superordinate themes under which were couched subordinate themes. This process produced a structure that organized and presented the most interesting aspects and important ideas across participant responses in a cohesive and accessible manner, which is the main goal of this step (Smith et al., 2009). While mapping themes, I also noted exceptions to or departures from the identified themes that deviated from commonalities across participants. I did this in an effort to give voice to individual experience within the context of an overall group voice.

**Step 6: Extracting the essence.** In the final step of analysis, I constructed a table of super-ordinate themes that emerged across the qualitative data, with subordinate themes nested beneath. This charting created a gestalt of the experience of cool through which to organize and extract the essence of the experience of cool. For the final distillation of the essence of cool, I turned the results of the analytic process into a narrative account and supported this narrative with verbatim extracts from participant responses.

### **Validity in IPA**

**Homogeneity of sample.** Homogeneity of a sample of participants allows for the examination of convergence and divergence within the sample (Smith et al., 2009). In this study, I demonstrated homogeneity of sample by the age selected for participants and requisite of having experienced cool in order to participate. I intentionally selected the age range for participation in order to allow for the comparison of responses across participants' relative developmental age. Participants were likely to have gone through adolescence during a similar cultural zeitgeist. Similarly, by limiting the age range of participants, responses were provided from participants who were navigating similar issues of developmental milestones in emerging adulthood, which may have influenced their retrospective accounts and understanding of cool.

**Yardley's four principles.** Smith et al. (2009) apply Yardley's (2000, 2007) four principles for assessing quality of qualitative research to evaluate validity of an IPA research method: (a) sensitivity to context, (b) commitment and rigor, (c) transparency and coherence, and (d) impact and importance.

**Sensitivity to context.** In this research, I demonstrated sensitivity to context through the very choice of IPA as a methodology to allow for close engagement with an unexplored experience. Additionally, purposive sampling of young adult participants served to locate the

research in the developmental age range in which cool is most salient. I also sought out existing literature outside of the field of psychology to inform the research objectives and research design from a greater context. Finally, the brevity of the survey was designed intentionally with sensitivity to the context of online data collection in order to encourage engagement without alienating participants and increasing dropout (Navarro & Siegel, 2016).

***Commitment and rigor.*** I demonstrated commitment and rigor to the research process through immersion in both the existing literature on cool as well as by seeking to understand the theoretical underpinnings of IPA. Additionally, I demonstrated commitment and rigor through some elements that encompassed sensitivity to context, including purposive sampling, and survey design. Demonstration of commitment and rigor also served to enhance the *trustworthiness* of the research. Bracketing (described below) created an audit trail that described decision-making and changes that occurred throughout the study (Thomas, Nelson, & Silverman, 2015).

***Transparency and coherence.*** Throughout the research, I demonstrated transparency through the depth of detail in the description of method as well as through the practice of bracketing and the inclusion of bracketing notations in Appendix H. The thorough description of the setting and context of the research in the Method section also strengthened the *trustworthiness* and *credibility* of the research. Trustworthiness and credibility help the reader evaluate and understand the findings of the research (Thomas et al., 2015). Similarly, I maintained transparency and clarity through the clear identification of the area of research interest and by the use of IPA as a methodology. Striving for transparency and coherence also served to promote *dependability* (Thomas et al., 2015). I demonstrated dependability through a thorough description of how data was elicited and interpreted, and how the findings were

extracted from the data.

***Impact and importance.*** Finally, by including research from multiple academic fields in the comprehensive literature review, I demonstrated the importance and relevance of cool across not only academic inquiry but also its temporal relevance. In the Literature Review, I described the impact of cool on society and the subsequent lack of attention to cool within psychological inquiry, which highlighted the importance of this exploratory research. Incorporating research from multiple academic fields also increased the *transferability* of this research by considering the perspectives of other theorists/academics beyond that of psychology so that they may also benefit from the findings of the study and transfer this knowledge to other research or academic endeavors (Thomas et al., 2015). Finally, I directly justified the impact, importance, and relevance of cool to psychology and made direct connections between the findings of this study and the field of psychology in both the Literature Review and the Discussion sections of this paper.

### **Bracketing.**

***Theory base of bracketing.*** In IPA, the research follows the data rather than aiming to fit experience into predetermined categories (Smith et al., 2009). There is some space for controversy in the IPA’s utilization of philosophical hermeneutics with phenomenology in that these approaches differ in the position of the role of the researcher (i.e., the interpreter) to the research data.

In *phenomenological research*, it is common for the interpreter to take steps to remove him or herself fully from the analysis. This is often done through the *epoché*. Coined by Husserl (1931), the epoché refers to the process by which the researcher attempts to abstain from any preconceived ideas they might have with the subject of investigation while interacting with the

collected research. The epoché is also sometimes accomplished through a process referred to as *bracketing* in which the researcher-interpreter describes and identifies the assumptions and prior knowledge they consciously bring to the work (Carpenter, 2007). The aim of bracketing is to enable the researcher to describe the data in its most natural state by bringing to consciousness as much awareness as possible of one’s own presuppositions, assumptions, and prejudices (Landridge, 2007). This is commonly done through note taking and/or journaling throughout the analytic process.

Alternatively, *philosophical hermeneutics* fully immerses the interpreter into the analysis itself through the acknowledgment of the interpreter’s projection of their own assumptions into the construction of intersubjective meaning (Hammond, 2010). IPA accounts for these contrasting viewpoints by aligning with the existential phenomenologist view that one cannot truly bracket off all of one’s presuppositions (Landridge, 2007), and by giving priority to any new object that emerges during analysis over existing-known preconceptions, while acknowledging the unavoidable influence of the researcher’s projected assumptions (Smith et al., 2009). This means that while the researcher may attempt to remove themselves from the interpretation, this is never fully possible. As such, it is important to value any new information or themes that emerge during analysis with as much weight as previously identified ones.

***Bracketing in IPA.*** In IPA analysis, the researcher has a dual role through their engagement in a double hermeneutic process—the process of making sense of both the participant and their meaning (Smith, 2011; Smith et al., 2009) Bracketing allowed for acknowledgement and ongoing awareness of the two positions of double hermeneutics, *emic* and *etic*. Emic refers to the phenomenological/experiential position of the ‘insider’ (i.e., the participant), while etic refers to the interpretative stance of the ‘outsider’ (Reid, Flowers, &

Larkin, 2005; Smith, 2011). Any sense making of participants' experiences (emic) that occurs at the level of the researcher (etic) is second order as it has been filtered through the researcher's own preconceptions, beliefs, and interpretations. The process of bracketing serves to give light to the researcher's subjective experience (at least the parts that are consciously accessible) while acknowledging that these subjectivities cannot be divorced from the process of analysis and interpretation. It is important to note that the utilization of bracketing does not mean the 'taken for granted' world is made to disappear (Smith et al., 2009). Bracketing aims to make the potential influences of the researcher's subjective presence more transparent to the reader. Bracketing can occur through a variety of means such as note taking, journaling, stream-of-conscious writing, and/or a reflexive diary.

***Bracketing applied to current study.*** Throughout the analytic process, I made an effort to bracket preexisting assumptions and emergent themes of previously analyzed responses. This occurred through noting, the utilization of the secondary coder, and the iterative approach in which I often re-read and returned to responses in order to ensure that themes were describing each participants' views as accurately as possible. Inevitably, the emergent themes identified in the above described analysis are a "joint product" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 80) of the participant, the author, and the secondary coder. By bracketing throughout the analytic process, I aimed to note and acknowledge any preconceptions and assumptions that arose to consciousness (e.g., personal reactions to participant responses) during the process of coding and thematic extraction. By acknowledging my own conscious individual interaction, relationships, and inherent influence on the research materials and data analysis, I aimed to illuminate how the data was analyzed and interpreted as an account of how I understood the thoughts of the participant. This allowed for a recursive process of examining and clarifying my own goals, beliefs, and

subjective influences that existed within the research process (Russell & Kelly, 2002).

Bracketing occurred continuously throughout the research process. However, I took specific intentional steps to ensure that bracketing occurred. As I completed the literature review, I took notes on my thoughts, ideas, preconceptions, and reactions to the information I was compiling. Before beginning analysis, I completed the Cool Questionnaire and recorded subsequent musings and thoughts in writing in an effort to continue the process of bracketing. Additionally, bracketing occurred while completing coding in the form of initial noting. Bracketing also occurred through the use of a journal, in which I recorded thoughts and wonderings as they arose throughout this project, from its conception to its completion. Journaling of my thoughts, processes, and decision-making occurred more specifically at junctures of decision-making throughout research design and analysis.

**Accounting for theoretical weaknesses of IPA.** When considering philosophical hermeneutics, Hammond (2010) identified two elements of Gadamer’s hermeneutic circle to which (he asserts) IPA does not sufficiently attend, and considered them as potential shortcomings in IPA’s process of interpretation construction: (a) the dialogic nature of meaning-making and, (b) the trialogue of time. Because this study did not extend specifically to meaning-making around cool, I focused on strengthening only the second shortcoming of IPA, the trialogue of time.

***The trialogue of time.*** Hammond (2010) identified the third element of Gadamer’s hermeneutics as one not fully encompassed in IPA—the trialogue between one’s past, present, and future in the process of meaning-making. There is a three-way interaction of how one relies on previous experience to make sense of new (present) and anticipated experiences (future). One’s assumptions are altered as new experiences and interpretations occur, and expectations

subsequently change. Notably, though constantly in flux, presuppositions never cease to be brought into one’s own interpretations. Hammond asserts that IPA fails to concretely employ Gadamer’s third element into the process of analysis, though the authors (Smith et al., 2009) indicate a general support of the concept.

***Researcher’s response: The triad of time.*** In an effort to more explicitly acknowledge and incorporate Gadamer’s third element, I took steps in the process of analysis to make my assumptions and presuppositions transparent and through noting and bracketing. In *Exploration and Implications*, I included a brief exposition of my own life context and culture that I brought to the study. In this reflection, I share the *context* in which I conceived and first considered this research topic. This reflection served to account for the IPA’s weakness by locating the reader in my own language, life history, and cultural-historical background, which inevitably influenced my interaction and interpretation of the data.

**Accounting for weaknesses of IPA when used by novice researchers.** Smith et al. (2009) utilize the dialogic *part to whole* element of the hermeneutic circle when describing the process of constructing an interpretation (similar to the inductive process described above). A *part to whole* process involves interpreting each individual datum (in this situation, each note I made while reading and coding) within the context of the whole set of data (i.e., all participant responses) and vice versa. One weakness of IPA, is that when utilized by novice researchers, results often yield analyses that are too descriptive, and do not pay enough attention to additional levels of interpretation, such as exceptions, contradictions, etc. (Smith et al., 2009). In an effort to counter this common issue during the process of analysis, I moved from initial exploration and interpretation of the *whole* (i.e., of the essence of cool) that resulted from the hermeneutic (interpretive) process of IPA analysis, to pursue other intriguing themes, resonant passages, and

exceptions to the whole (e.g., participant responses that deviated greatly from the majority). This extra step allowed a deeper, more detailed reading of the data and ensured attention to the complexity of responses. These exceptions are specifically identified in *Findings* and explored in *Exploration and Implications*.

## Findings

### Overview

I extracted four main themes from participants' responses to the Cool Prompt:

- a positive experience,
- cool exists in a social context,
- possession of positive attributes, and
- challenging adversity/oppression.

These themes were largely reflective of overall group consensus. Individual voices that deviated from the group and warranted consideration also arose from the data: (a) cool is difficult to describe, (b) physical appearance, (c) emotional defense, (d) social/status and superiority, and (e) denial of cool.

Length of narrative responses to items on the Cool Prompt varied across participants. For this reason, multiple examples from the text are provided throughout the presentation of the findings. Quotations from respondents are labeled with a 'P' (for 'Participant') followed by a number 1-25 (e.g., P4) in order identify to which participant the quoted sample belongs.

### Theme 1: A Positive Experience

As participants described their experiences of cool, they identified a multitude of positive factors that were present. Feeling cool was associated with happiness, pride, confidence, and positivity. Overall, cool was generally described as being a positive experience: “Feeling cool

could just mean feeling good about yourself” (P24) or “at the top of the world” (P15). It included “a deep feeling of satisfaction and contentment” (P3), and “happiness that I am the person that I am” (P3). The experience of cool was largely associated with a sense of ease that flowed naturally and felt effortless: “I felt comfortable with others and I felt comfortable with myself” (P11). Cool was an experience that was natural and authentic: “...when you are really cool, everything looks natural and feels real” (P9). As one participant stated, “You definitely can’t force coolness...Coolness relies more on confidence and subtleness, being almost without effort” (P21).

Also present across multiple responses was the idea of experiencing growth or improved view of the self. This was present in a variety of descriptions from improved self-acceptance, self-respect, and to a degree, self-actualization: “I would describe it as having the most self-esteem possible. Your ego grows quite a bit...experiencing cool genuinely changes how you see yourself” (P23).

Finally, participants described cool as related to achievement, often unexpected: “At my college life i thought i will fail in my exam but i got passed and i felt cool [sic]” (P8). For Participant 15, not giving into nerves was such an achievement: “When I am on stage, I was thinking I should run from stage, but on the other hand I think that I should go for it and when my sister said ‘one more please.’ I feel really proud [sic]” (P15). Participant 10 shared a moment of success when describing his cool experience: “I felt like I was on top of the world for pulling the play off and being responsible for winning the game” (P10).

**Absence of negative.** Just as illustrative as what *was* experienced was also what was *not* experienced when experiencing cool. Participants shared generally not “[experiencing] negative emotions” (P10) when feeling cool: “I am not experiencing cool when I am upset or sad or

disappointed” (P10). This was further illustrated as not experiencing “loneliness or rejection” (P25): “You don’t feel disliked when you feel cool. You know you’re not experiencing cool when people laugh at your, or make fun of you, or criticize you. They don’t give you attention” (P22). In addition to not feeling rejection, was a lack of anxiety, shame, or embarrassment: “It’s just kind of a feeling you have deep down inside. You don’t experience embarrassment or shame or anxiety when you experience cool” (P3); “You don’t feel like you are anxious or afraid of basic things. I know I am not experiencing cool when I am worried about small things” (P23); “If you are ashamed or if someone is shaming you, you definitely don’t feel cool” (P1).

## **Theme 2: Cool Exists in a Social Context**

This theme largely concerns how participants consistently located the experience of cool within a social context or interpersonal situation. While participants did reflect on the individual experience of cool (further discussed below), social engagement and the social nature of the experience was a strong and consistent presence in participant responses. Social contribution, social validation, and expanded social circle constitute key aspects of the social nature of the experience of cool.

**Social contribution.** Participants related their contribution to social situations as a relevant factor to experiencing cool. This could look to an observer like “someone who is really good at something entertaining or useful” (P24). For example, one participant identified increasing social enjoyment of others when she described a time she experienced cool: “I felt like my peers respected me and enjoyed my company” (P2). Another participant shared his contribution to the success of his videogame team when describing a time he experienced cool: “I was playing league of legends and made a play that was difficult but helped us win the game” (P10). Social capital such as a skill or talent that contributed to the overall positive experience of

others helped construct the experience of cool: “It is when you do something that makes you stand out in a positive way, and recognition of this positive trait/activity/event happens” (P3).

Kids from the lower grades would crowd around me and sometimes makes requests...people loved listening to my piano playing...It was also nice because those who wanted to learn how to play the piano would also ask me how to play, so I would teach them whenever they were around. (P21)

**Social validation.** Many participants experienced cool in relation to being valued and validated by those around them: “[A cool person is] different than an uncool person because society values them” (P1). For many, receiving positive feedback or praise from others in a social situation was a central part of the cool experience. For one participant, the feedback of laughter provided this validation: “I felt cool when I told a joke and everybody laughed” (P2). For another participant, a positive response provided the social validation to facilitate feeling cool: “I approached a guy and he responded positively. This made me feel really cool” (P6). For Participant 13, “getting congratulations [and] respect” provided this positive feedback. Social validation and value through acceptance also played a role in experiencing cool: “I felt like I was accepted by people and it was a happy feeling” (P12).

Being the center of attention or having an audience also related to social validation and experiencing cool. For example, one participant described “the feeling of being on stage, being the focus of over a thousand people” (P9) as contributing to their cool experience. In addition to this individual recognition was the experience of being considered a role model: “I was the lead actor in the school musical and people looked up to me” (P11), or being admired: “You’re someone others would look at and admire in some way” (P24). Of importance is the observation that being the center of attention did not result in social estrangement or rejection from a social

group. One participant directly described the tension of standing out while still belonging: “It is just a feeling of being the center of attention or one with other people” (P12).

**Expanded social circle.** Experiencing cool was also associated with expanded social circles, social inclusion, and increased social desirability. This was illustrated in such responses as “when you really are cool you can just feel everyone gravitating towards you” (P25) and “a lot of people wanted to hang out with me” (P12). Often, this expansion of the social circle related to interaction with people outside of existing friendships, increased social mobility across groups, and being sought out by others: “I felt like everybody wanted to hang around me....It’s when like everybody wants to talk to you and know you and be your friend and be around you and just associate with you in any possible way” (P25). Participants described being sought out or recognized by others who were initially mere acquaintances or strangers and overall increased attention and inclusion from others:

People who normally didn’t talk to me spoke to me more. They included me at lunch, invited me to parties, and I was more well known afterwards. I felt accepted and popular and was genuinely liked for something I did. (P13)

I was cool in college when I went on a game show and was picked as the winner. Lots of people know about it and it increased my popularity...I got a lot of attention and congratulations. People seemed to like me more...Cool is when you are liked and admired by others. They want to pay attention to you. They like you and want to get to know you better. They want to be like you or copy you. (P22)

### **Theme 3: Possession of Positive Attributes**

Another key part of the experience of cool that participants shared were positive attributes that they viewed themselves as possessing. These attributes were observable to the

outside world (their social circles) and contributed to their internal feeling of cool.

Many participants described possessing a skill or talent that played a role in their experience of cool. For example, for one participant, being able to “draw well enough to sell [her] work” (P1) and receiving recognition for this was enough to contribute to a cool experience. For another, playing “a lot of sports” (P4) contributed to experiencing cool.

Other participants described positive attributes they identified themselves as having, such as “charisma” (P16), “swag” (P16), and social prowess: “...and I felt like I was interacting well with everyone” (P2). “Making a judgment in a critical situation” (P14) was another positive attribute identified as related to the experience of cool.

One participant described a situation in which his uniqueness was a positive attribute that contributed to experiencing cool:

I felt especially cool a month or so ago when we went out of town for a basketball tournament for the younger kids, and there was a water bottle on top of a ledge in front of a doorway that nobody could reach. Me, being the tall person I am, jumped up and reached it and all the kids clapped when I did. It doesn't seem like much, but I did something nobody else could and it made me feel pretty cool. (P3)

#### **Theme 4: Challenging Adversity/Oppression**

Some participants related experiencing cool to a time in which they overcame or challenged some sort of adversity or oppression, or helped others do so. For example, one participant shared an experience of cool that related to a shift in relationship with people who used to bully her:

A time I felt cool was after I ran into my old high school bullies a couple years back. I had lost a lot of weight and they had gained a lot of weight. I felt good and cool. I also

felt better knowing how different we were. (P7)

Participant 13 shared a story that more directly related to standing up to oppression as it occurred:

At school I got into a fight with a known bully who’s been picking on weaker kids. I confronted him and when he threw a punch I blocked it and countered with one of my own. I knocked him to the ground and his nose started to bleed as well. He soon backed off and walked away. People around me spread the word of what I did and I gained the respect of my peers. At that moment I felt cool for doing something that was morally righteous. (P13)

For others, experiencing cool related to “helping the oldage people [sic]” (P15) as well as “trying to help [the] needy persons [sic]” (P15). One participant explicitly described an experience of empowerment: “Surreal, feeling light on my feet, like you have the power to be more than who you are” (P9).

### **Individual Voices: Highlights and Exceptions**

**Difficult to describe.** Though not present across the majority of participant responses, a few participants acknowledged or demonstrated (by limited elaboration) the difficult nature of describing the experience of cool. One participant identified this difficulty outright: “Feeling cool is something you feel inside, which makes it hard to describe sometimes” (P3), while another shared: “You are just cool, and you know it by how you are feeling” (P12).

**Physical appearance.** Only one participant explicitly referenced her physical appearance as related to her experience of cool: “I was in a group with a mix of friends and acquaintances. I was feeling confident about my outfit and how I looked...” (P2).

**Emotional defense.** For Participant 4, cool was also associated with survival,

“Sometimes you act cool to get through a situation.” Of note is that Participant 4 used the word ‘act,’ which I understood to imply a lack of the actual experience of cool.

**Social status/superiority.** Only a few participants who described expanded social circles/increased social mobility did so with a larger focus on attainment of higher social status as a means to differentiate themselves from others via social superiority, “You feel like your the best [sic]” (P10).

This would be the time I started going to parties and hanging out with the more popular people in my school. I remember feeling and being thought of as cool towards others because of the popularited I gained and the way I carried myself during those times [sic]. (P18)

This upward mobility was still associated with positive validation from peers, but this validation came from lower on the social hierarchy than the individual located theirselves: “I remember feeling hip, accepted, superior, and looked up to by others. It gave me a sense of superiority towards those who were not as cool and popular” (P18). While these few participants shared experiences of superiority and popularity, ongoing group membership remained relevant to ultimately experiencing cool, such as by “hanging out with the more popular people” (P18). These descriptions of superiority and popularity did not include examples of exclusion or distancing from others

**Denial of cool.** Finally, one participant denied the concept cool outright: “It’s an illusion. No one is cool or uncool. There is no universal definition” (P17). Participant 17 first described a prompted experience of cool by sharing an event in which others placed the label onto him, “When I was at my friend’s house and his little brother’s friends were there. Were were kind of cool people just by default [sic]” (P17). He then reported that his experiencing of cool does not

consist of anything: “I don’t experience anything. It is what it is.” This introduced some ambiguity around Participant 17’s view of cool as either not existing or potentially indescribable (“It is what it is.”). Finally, Participant 17 denied viewing others as cool as well: “I don’t consider anyone cool, only people” (P17).

### **What Makes Others Cool**

One item of the Cool Prompt directly asked participants to describe what they think makes others cool. Of the 13 participants who explicitly identified a person they view as cool, 10 of these people had relationships with the participants that could be considered ‘intimate.’ Participants identified a father four times, a romantic partner three times, a sibling once, and a best friend twice. Other individuals identified as cool included one cousin, one coworker, and Rocky (from the movie series).

**Positive personal attributes.** Cool people are “popular, fashionable, attractive, but still also kind. They are very intelligent. Essentially they have all the qualities people judge positively” (P1). They are “usually above average in looks and sexually attractive. They have an air of confidence and self-assurance. They don’t act awkward or second-guess themselves” (P22). Cool people “are relaxed and confident in all situations” (P2) and are “just outgoing and friendly and [have] a quick wit” (P7).

**Affect regulation and confidence.** Participants described a variety of situations in which those they viewed as cool displayed affect regulation in their behavior and exuded confidence. Participant 8’s cousin “will handle everything with a supercool attitude, he won’t get tensed even if he got a fail mark [sic].” Participant 10 described his father as “handling all the problems in a cool minded and successfully facing the situation and finally making a good judgement [sic].” Participant 10 further described (more generally) the cool person’s “ability to always have the

right solution for a situation and exceed expectations. A cool person is always ahead of the game and knows what they are doing. They always stay cool.” A cool person is also “always confident in what he is doing, never doubting himself. That makes him look cool to me” (P9).

**Apathy to cool.** Finally, when describing others who are cool, participants identified a lack of investment in coolness that did not require effort embodied by the cool individual: “They are cool because they don’t try, and they don’t care” (P7). This natural attitude also encompassed a disregard for social feedback or expectation and alignment with self-actualization: “This person just does what they want and doesn’t listen to anybody and is true to their self” (P25), and “That person is just liked by everyone and always acts like it doesn’t even matter because they are cool” (P12).

### **Exploration and Implications**

In keeping with the spirit of IPA and qualitative research more broadly, I wish to begin the discussion and exploration of the findings by acknowledging my inherent influence on and relationship with the data as I occupied the role of the researcher. Though I aimed to make explicit many of my preconceptions, beliefs, reactions, and assumptions throughout the process of the analysis through the use of bracketing, I must still acknowledge the double hermeneutic nature of completing phenomenological research. Namely, any sense making and identification of participants’ experiences that occurred was first filtered through my own preconceptions, beliefs, and interpretations. For this reason, I begin the discussion with a brief reflection of my own engagement with the concept of cool by making explicit aspects of my identity and life that likely influenced my engagement with the data.

#### **The Researcher as Participant**

I encourage you, the reader, to hold the information I share with you (below) in mind, as

you engage with the following exploration and discussion of the findings, being mindful of how your preconceptions, experiences, and beliefs filter your understanding of the results, much as how the discussion that follows was filtered through mine.

**Context of conception for the area of inquiry.** I first conceived the idea for this research project while sitting in the office of my dissertation chair, Dr. Ellenhorn, managing frustration and self-judgment as I struggled with the hurdle of committing to a dissertation topic. During a pause in our conversation, I gazed up at the image of Miles Davis that was hung the wall and mused something along the lines of, “He is so cool... I wonder what it is like to be so cool.” In this moment, the seed of this research question took root. On reflection, I noted that this wonderment about Mr. Davis and cool emerged in a time when I was experiencing much self-doubt, a budding hopelessness around picking a dissertation topic (let alone completing the dissertation), and a general sense of confusion and lack of direction.

**My life context (in brief).** As I began to think about cool, I had no previous exposure to any academic thought on it. All I knew (or rather assumed) about cool I drew from my life context. At the time this study was conceived, I was a 26-year-old, third-year PsyD student in a clinical psychology program. I am a Caucasian female who was raised in a small New England town but had spent much of my late adolescence and young adulthood traveling, working, and living in other places as varied as Peru to Chicago. I was raised by two self employed architects who stressed a frugal mentality and emphasized independence, academic achievement, and a general well-roundedness across my development. Given my history of extreme shyness contrasted with later developed confidence and self-acceptance, I could easily bring to mind both the experience of cool as well as the many times I did not experience cool in the least.

**Life context during this research.** While my identity, style, interests, and values have

grown and shifted across my life, I believe that some of my experiences and values align more with what might be considered ‘counterculture’ than ‘conventional.’ This is worth noting in that this research was filtered through such values. I tend to value individual voice and have often been told that I ‘march to the beat of my own drum.’ In addition to psychology, I am involved in numerous interests and cultures including jazz, folk/bluegrass, ska, and punk music, advocacy, film, politics, feminism, and travel (though these terms do not much describe fully the intersections of such experiences). My personal aesthetic and style fluctuates with my mood and setting, though I tend to upcycle or wear second-hand/hand-me downs, and do not place much value on labels. I value and participate in academia but also pursue conversations with people outside of such a realm. With a partner who skateboards (and my late attempts to learn), it is impossible to escape its presence in my daily life and the strong, cohesive culture that comes with it. I tend to use critical thought around what is considered conventional and often doubt social norms as they have been constructed. Depending on the context, I have at times been considered ‘cool’ by others, but also quite definitely have been the ‘square’ in the room as well. Undoubtedly, I have had experiences of cool as well as total and utter embarrassment, and these experiences are likely why I found this topic so appealing.

### **The Findings in Brief: Pre-Essence**

**Four themes.** In the process of analysis, four major themes arose as related to the experience of cool: (A) Participants largely described cool as a positive experience, both by the explicit inclusion of positive descriptors by participants as well as by the identification of negative experiences that did not occur while experiencing cool. (B) Cool exists in a social context in which interactions related to social contribution, social validation, and an expanded social circle all influence the experience of cool. (C) Participants identify positive personal

attributes when describing experiencing cool, suggesting a positive view of self is present in the experience of cool. (D) Overcoming or challenging oppression/adversity (either personally or by helping others) was a repeated narrative in participant responses as they described cool.

**Individual voices.** Some individual voices arose in the results that did not reflected across most (if any other) responses. Just as important to an IPA analysis as the major themes, are those that deviate from the norm and provide alternate understanding and opportunity for insight (Smith et al., 2009). For fewer participants, cool emerged as an experience that was difficult to describe. Experiencing cool as related to physical appearance, the use of cool as an emotional defense, the social marker of cool were notable deviations from the emergent themes across the data. One participant went so far as to deny cool in any experiential form.

**When others are cool.** Finally, participants described what the view in others when they consider them cool. This description allowed for exploration of where cool diverges and converges when viewed in others versus the first-person experience. Participants described the presence of social status, physical attractiveness, kindness, and an air of confidence/capability. Additionally, cool people display affect regulation and do not seem to care about being cool or try to be cool.

### **The “Essence” Extracted**

As demonstrated by the variation across participant responses and subsequent emergent themes, the experience of cool is multifaceted and complex. Though I initially sought to explore the internal experience of cool, while analyzing the data, it became abundantly clear that to only consider the individual nature of cool would mean erasing an essential factor of cool—that it manifests in a social context. Consistent across participants was a description of cool that largely existed in a social sphere:

When you are in a state of cool, you rarely feel shyness or fear. It's as if there are not worries in life at all. It feels like you can achieve anything as long as you put some effort into it. You are very open to people. You are not afraid of making mistakes even if you're imperfect. You become friendly, which naturally attracts people towards you. You are not in a state of coolness if you feel very conscious of your every move, if you feel afraid of something that doesn't exist, if you keep on worrying that people won't like you. You are not in a state of coolness if you are not feeling confident. You can say confidence and being cool are directly related. (P21)

However, as can be seen in Participant 21's description, the description of cool was not limited to the context of social relationships. The presence of positive internal experiences also related to the experience of cool.

It is the feeling of increased self-respect. This is also an increase in confidence. You feel more positive, as if you can do anything in the world. You feel like it's easy to make friends. You forget about your troubles, you throw away your inhibitions. You feel like you've become the person you've always wanted to be. It's a very relaxed and happy feeling. (P21)

At its essence, cool is a multifaceted and dynamic experience that exists internally as well as externally. Experiencing cool is associated with an increased self-acceptance that occurs naturally. This increase may also relate to overcoming adversity or anticipated failure. In other situations, this positive experience of the self is experienced in conjunction with positive social feedback and/or increased social connections that occur without having to sacrifice aspects of one's individuality (or self). At cool's core is the experience of when you are accepted by yourself and by others for who you authentically are. Experiencing cool may be highlighted

when this acceptance occurs in situations when it is a unique part of yourself that is accepted. You are different, but not too different so as to lose group membership. In fact, this difference may be highlighted and praised by others, thus facilitating cool. Experiencing cool only exists when you do not have experiences commonly related to self-consciousness, anxiety, shame, embarrassment, etc. The experience of cool is not contingent on a specific situation or relationship, but rather seems to be contingent on the processes involved in living and accepting yourself wholly as you are while experiencing whole acceptance by others as well.

### **Methodological Cautions**

When considering data through an IPA lens, any interpretation and analysis of responses should occur in light of the context in which the responses were provided (Smith et al., 2009). My primary interest in this research was to explore the lived experience of cool. Due to the method of data collection, the descriptions of the experience of cool were collected retrospectively. Hurlbert and Heavy (2006) assert that self-accounts that are gathered retrospectively are often quite inaccurate when compared to self-accounts taken at the time of the event. Participants who engage in retrospective self-reflection may systematically neglect aspects of their experiences that are less salient upon recall though they may have been aware of such aspects at the time of the experience itself. However, this does not indicate that the findings of this study are not applicable. Rather, participant report of the experience was a reflective process during which they shared a remembered experience as it had been filtered through their own life contexts. What likely arose in the retrospective accounts of the participants were the most salient aspects of the experience of cool that are a synthesized whole for the participant, while what may be missing are possibly the smaller nuances or contradictions that either did not fit the synthesized whole or were not a primary experience. In light of this, results should be considered

in conjunction with this methodological limitation.

The use of online data collection through a survey potentially limits the transferability of the findings of this research. While I intentionally sacrificed depth for breadth of participants in this exploratory study, the use of a survey in place of a semi-structured interview prevented any follow-up questioning that could have promoted greater depth and exploration. When considering the results, it was important to consider that participant responses were limited to what the questions on the Cool Prompt elicited from the participant. For this reason, one must consider that other areas of the experience of cool may exist that were not pulled for during data collection.

### **Exploration**

Whereas I presented the findings of the research in a linear fashion in *Findings*, in this section I elected to discuss cool in a more holistic nature while attempting to synthesize the research findings with existing research and views of cool. In this exploration, I paid specific attention to particular attributes of the cool experience as it relates to existing conceptualizations of cool and related academic research. Research that utilizes IPA is a dialectic process of moving back and forth between the idiomatic and the whole. While this discussion focused around the predominant emergent themes identified above, I allowed myself an increase in latitude to explore exceptions and highlights of individual voices in relation to existing theories of cool as well.

**Cool: Internal and external.** My initial intent with this research was to focus primarily on the *internal* experience of cool. As the process of analysis progressed, it became clear that the inner experience of cool is inextricable from the context in which it occurs. For this reason, the following discussion of the findings considered both the internal experience and the context in

which the experience occurred.

**Cool: A moment of self-actualization?** Abraham Maslow’s (1943) original hierarchy of needs included basic needs (physiological and safety), psychological needs (love and esteem), and self-fulfillment needs (self-actualization). Operating under the assumption that the basic needs of the participants were generally met, participant narratives describe the experience of cool in a manner that corresponds to the psychological and self-fulfillment needs that Maslow initially described. When experiencing cool, participants described (a) an expanded social circle and social validation (i.e., the need for love and belongingness); (b) an increase in confidence and self-esteem (i.e., the first category of the need for esteem); and (c) an increase in reputation, respect, and status from others (i.e., the second category of the need for esteem). An additional theme that arose in participant’s responses was the association of the experience of cool with realization of their full self or full potential (i.e., self-actualization): “You feel like you’ve become the person you’ve always wanted to be” (P21). In the experience of cool, participants experience the capacity to be able to accomplish whatever they put their mind to: “It feels like you can achieve anything as long as you put some effort into it” (P21); “You feel more positive, as if you can do anything in the world” (P21).

**Cool in response to oppression.** Cool was born out of a need for an alternative response to oppressive powers that was adaptive and allowed for survival (Connor, 1995; Pountain & Robins; 2000). Over its decades of existence, cool has continued to carry with it the connotation of going against sources of oppression (be it in the form of a teenager rebelling against a parent or Black Lives Matter activists challenging existing oppressive social structures). Various participants described experiencing cool in relation to standing up against others (i.e., sources of oppression). Most explicit was Participant 13’s description of getting into a fight with a “known

bully who [had] been picking on weaker kids.” Participant 15 shared about overcoming her nerves to sing at her brother’s wedding and a friend’s feedback: “One of my friend start taunting me while I was singing. It’s really irritate me. After wedding I told him that I don’t like your behavior on wedding. He apologize for his mistake [sic].” Of note is that unlike the *internalization* of emotional expression from which cool was born, for Participants 13 and 15, their experience of cool involved the *externalization* of expression against such sources of oppression (for Participant 13 physical intimidation and for Participant 15 emotional shame). One potential explanation for this divergence from the original function of cool lies in the adaptive nature of the response to oppression. Originally, the internalization of affect was an adaptive response to slavery that was essential for survival, while in this study the adaptive response may have been to push back against the sources of oppression, as they logistically posed no considerable threat to survival.

**Cool as an attitude.** Pountain and Robins (2000) argue that cool is “an attitude or personality type” (p. 26) with three personality traits at its core: (a) narcissism, (b) ironic detachment, and (c) hedonism. These traits constitute a coherent syndrome that is observable manifestations of cool across cultures and history. While participants in this study did not complete measures of these traits, the qualitative descriptions of the experience of cool provided by participants do not suggest that the individuals who experienced cool all embody such traits. For example, while participants described experiencing an increase in self-esteem and self-acceptance, their celebrations of themselves did not seem to rise to the level of narcissism. Also absent from participants narratives was an ironic detachment or emotional distancing from others. To the contrary, the experience of cool was associated with expanded social circles and social validation. Finally, participants did not describe hedonistic behaviors or events when

describing the experience of cool. For most, cool was based in successful navigation of daily experiences from passing a test, to being in a school musical, to helping others. Given this comparison, the *experience* of cool appears to be discrete from the personality style put forth by Pountain and Robins, though the same word is used to describe these greatly differing concepts.

**Acting cool: Contrarian cool as an adaptive defense.** Academic research has espoused the idea that cool functions as an adaptive defense that keeps an individual from displaying any emotional reaction or distress (Connor, 1995; Lyman & Scott, 1970). This defense is one that results in emotional distancing and impedes social connection (Connor, 1995; Dar-Nimrod et al., 2012; Frank, 1997). Cool’s function as an interpersonal defense has similarities to the style of cool described by Dar-Nimrod et al. as *contrarian coolness*. A preference for independence over social connection and a rebellious nature characterize this defensive type of cool.

Such aspects of *contrarian coolness* were largely absent from participant reflections on their experiences of cool. Only one participant referred to cool in a manner that brought to mind the affect regulation that underscored cool’s origins: “Sometimes you act cool to get through a situation” (P4). Participant 4 used the word “act” which suggests something different from experience, a self-conscious adoption of inauthentic behavior. In this situation, a stance of acting cool is actively adopted in response to a stressor. The distress implied and the conscious nature of acting suggests that when a cool stance is adopted as an adaptive defense to social distress or oppressive systems, the resulting experience is one of distress and is altogether separate from the positive experience of cool that participants in this study described. It is possible that cool as an adaptive defense and contrarian more aligns with Pountain and Robins (2000) core personality traits of cool described above.

**Actual cool: When the external and internal align.** Bloustien (2003) identified

attributes displayed by a cool-labeled group and its individual members: (a) a degree of popularity and desirability, (b) self-possession and self-confidence, (c) an authentic inner-core, (d) social skills and being street-wise, and (e) a deliberate yet effortless style and presence in the group. These attributes are visible to the external observer and as they coalesce in the public view, create the image of cool.

Of all the academic literature of cool that I have discussed so far, Bloustien's (2003) attributes of cool align most closely with the experiences described by participants. Participants endorsed experiencing an increase in their social circles, some were approached by people who were previously just acquaintances and others directly experienced themselves as more popular. Participants also reported an increase in their perceived self-confidence and capabilities. Participants experienced social situations as requiring less effort and as less anxiety provoking. Participants also described not feeling shame, embarrassment, self-consciousness when they experience cool (all experiences that, when present, contrast with an authentic inner core and its acceptance by the self and by others). Bloustien's attributes were also present in the qualities that participants viewed others they consider cool as having. Perhaps it is this alignment of cool (simultaneously experienced and observed) that is the fulfillment of cool in its truest form.

### **Consideration of Results in Light of Demographic Information**

While the consideration of cool was an area of direct inquiry or focus in this study, I believe it is still relevant to consider the findings of the research as couched within the cultural experiences (or in this case, demographic labels) of the respondents. As I described previously in this paper, cool has gone through various redefinitions throughout the 20th century, since its emergence into mainstream society (Connor, 1995; Pountain & Robins, 2000). However, it would be remiss to ignore the fact that at its core, cool's birth stemmed from the experiences of

extreme oppression and marginalization that was limited to a specific cultural group. Given this, it is possible that the experience of cool varies across cultural groups. Additionally, cool’s birth has been conceptualized as the internalization of traits that have historically been associated with masculinity more so than with femininity. Though the line between ‘traditional’ masculine and feminine behaviors has begun to shift over the previous few decades and society’s understanding of gender as binary has lessened, it is possible that residual influences from the birth of cool impact how it is experienced by different genders. At this time, no research exists that explores either of these areas.

As illustrated in Table 1, a higher proportion of participants that identify as male (68%) than female (32%) took part in this study, and all participants identified as cisgender. Roughly half (48%) of participants were Caucasian, while the remainder of participants represented other racial/ethnic minorities (28% Asian, 8% Black/African-American, 8% Hispanic/Latino, and 8% Hispanic/Latino & White/Caucasian). Eighty-four percent of participants identified as straight/heterosexual, 12% as bisexual, and 4% preferred to not respond.

While holding in mind that demographic information is not a full description of the story of a person’s life, most participants endorsed being members of majority groups that historically have less exposure to individual and systemic oppression. Given this, the findings I described above may more fully describe the experience of cool when experienced by an individual who is a member of a cultural majority. Underrepresented or potentially absent from these narratives are experiences as shared by individuals who identify with groups that have historically been or are currently experiencing oppression in some form. Given this, the above findings and exploration of the participants’ responses should be considered in light of their source—individuals who may have experienced a higher level of privilege in their lives. This level of privilege may have

influenced their view of cool, the function of cool, and their experience of cool.

### **Clinical Implications**

After considering the findings of this qualitative study in light of the existing conceptualizations of cool, I have proposed the idea that the word cool is currently being used to describe differing concepts: *cool* as a first person experience, cool as an emotional/interpersonal defense, and *cool* as label placed on objects in a social setting. These concepts overlap in various areas, but diverge in significant ways that likely send contrasting messages to adolescents (and people of all ages) about what cool is. Similarly, clinical psychology may unwittingly collude in this conflation of concepts when we apply the term ‘cool’ to concepts with which it does not fully align, or when we use the term to describe discrete concepts.

Ongoing conflation of these cools may lead clinicians and caregivers to misinterpret adolescents’ behaviors when seeking cool. Misinterpreting cool may result in misguided responses from adults in authority positions to youth behaviors and ineffective interventions to support youth across their development. For example, an adolescent may ‘try on’ a variety of identities and behaviors as they seek cool. How they do this is likely influenced by the social messages that they receive about cool (inaccurate as they may be). An adolescent’s apathetic stance (perhaps inspired by the jaded cool of the Brooklyn hipster) or drastic change in appearance (think of the ‘emo’ phase of the early 2000s) may at first glance may be understood as manifestations of depressive symptoms (emotional withdrawal/defense) or an adjustment reaction. At a second glance, such behaviors may actually be the much less concerning expression of a teen seeking cool. Similarly, these behaviors may indeed indicate distress associated with mental illness but may risk being explained away by parents and (woefully misguided) clinicians as a ‘phase’ or a teen ‘just trying to be cool.’ While each individual case

differs, therapeutic interventions are guided by how presenting concerns are understood. In cases where ‘cool’ enters the therapy, special attention to how cool arises in the therapeutic space is indicated in order to avoid potential clinical missteps.

Though they may deny such a fact, adolescents are greatly impacted by the barrage of social pressures and messages they receive every day, be it on social media, from friends, or in the lyrics of their favorite musician. Such messages and images often communicate the behaviors and looks that will create cool. I recall a number acquaintances and friends from high school who dressed and acted in a way to emulate their adolescent icons, the paragons of cool. Such emulation of cool even affected their interests, values, and opinions as they sought to *be*, in as many ways as possible, their icons. Given the findings of this study, clinicians may have the unique role of guiding clients (of any age), in such a manner to facilitate the *internal experience* of cool while the client labors through adopting, discarding, and morphing their external image.

**Cool as a defense.** It has long been hypothesized that cool functions as a self-defense from a variety of stressors, especially those that are often social (Connor, 1995; Majors & Billson, 1992). Just as Dar-Nimrod et al. (2012) distinguished between cachet and contrarian coolness, the experience of cool as reported through retrospective self-reflection further distinguishes the experience as widely divorced from how cool has often been long understood. While cool is reported as an overall positive experience, its use when referring to a defense brings to light coping qualities that are largely considered maladaptive (though they can be effective in the short term) such as rebelliousness, emotional distancing, isolation, and muted emotional expression. For reasons beyond any one person’s control, society has largely constructed a maladaptive map that purports to lead to cool. I will leave it to you, the reader, to make your own determination regarding the success of the map, but I must say I have a difficult

time imagining those qualities arriving at positive experiences described by the participants in this study.

Similarly, this defensive nature of contrarian cool might be the kind that frustrates educators, bewilders parents, and disrupts entire family systems. Given this, I understand why cool likely has a bad reputation from authority figures in youths' lives. In fact, I can recall multiple instances in which I have heard adults shame adolescents for *wanting to be cool* or *thinking they are so cool*. Considering the positive qualities experienced with cool, should not we be praising youths for aiming so high if cool is really experienced as reported in this study? I have yet to hear a caregiver or counselor say, *Ellie's self-esteem is just too important to her* or, *I really wish Bryan would have fewer friends and be less admired*. Perhaps instead of denying cool to youths, the trusted adults in their lives should focus on developing avenues that facilitate such experiences. Part of this may involve putting voice to the differences between how cool is experienced and the many falsities that society has constructed as markers of achieving cool.

**Cool as a goal or barrier.** Majors and Billson (1992) describe cool as a *pose*, adopted by young African American males (specifically those who reside in an inner-city setting) as a strategy to deny, suppress, and mask, deep emotional experience. The function of such a pose aligns well with the above discussed contrarian cool or cool as a defense. This pose, characterized by swagger, aloofness, and other mannerisms and aspects of language serves to help the individual appear in control and strong (Majors & Billson, 1992). However, Majors and Billson propose that this pose can ultimately be problematic as it may function as a mechanism that propels resentment and anger towards others due to the inherent suppression of emotion. Additionally, it may make it difficult for an individual to back down from a fight or show vulnerability and emotionality, such as what would be shown when apologizing to a loved one

for doing something hurtful. This mask and pose of cool, while initially a façade runs the risk of becoming a psychological reality, in which emotionality is repressed and not shared, even with the closest people in the individual’s life.

While this experience of cool did not arise in the findings of this study, such a function of cool likely exists within specific populations with similar experiences of marginalization and persecution. This study did not consider cool in such a context and as such, therapists should not generalize the findings to all clients who walk into the therapy office. Instead, the clinician must consider the function of cool and if it is a potential area of strength, or an undoing relational style that, while once an adaptive response to social subjugation, is a potential barrier to emotional processing and the development of healthy and supportive relationships.

## **Conclusion**

**Limitations.** Certain limitations are likely present as a result of participant demographics. As identified above, the experiences described in this study were provided mostly by members of majority groups who have likely experienced less exposure to oppression (both in their own lives and intergenerationally). Because cool’s birth stems from a largely Black experience and was born in the context of oppression, it may have a different experience for members of such communities in which cool was born and used for survival. I would caution the reader from extending these findings to represent the experience of all cultural groups and identities.

## **Future directions.**

***Cool experiences of oppressed groups.*** Based from the above described limitation of cultural sensitivity, beneficial future research may include exploring the experience of cool as reported by members of groups that have historically experienced oppression and adversity. This

avenue of inquiry may highlight how cool exists as a concept and experience within cultures that have differing histories of access to power. Also of interest may be differences in the experience of cool in relation to gender, as cool's roots involve the internalization of masculinity.

*Cross-cultural cool.* While most of the participants in this study were located in the continental United States, five participants resided in the state of Tamil-Nadu, in India. This study did not directly explore the cross-cultural experiences of cool. This means that potential differences in responses that may be attributable to the role of culture/country of origin were not examined. In a brief overview of the participants' responses from India, I observed that some of the experiences of cool that were shared aligned more with personal achievement than with social affiliation, such as doing well on an exam (P8) or performing well in the office (P5). This led me to be curious how the experience of cool might have emerged if I had collected responses from participants that were only from India. Given this minor musing and the cultural context in which cool's development has been embedded over time, I was led to wonder about potential differences that might emerge in the experience of cool cross-culturally.

*Cool's development.* Similar to a cross-cultural consideration of cool, future research may also explore how cool has developed over time (e.g., within an individual and across generations). In the Literature Review of this paper, I described how what is cool, when viewed externally, has changed over time as a result of social construction. One may draw the hypothesis from this that the inner experience of cool may have shifted as well. Future research aligned with this could explore topics such as a *temporal cool*—how an individual's concept of cool changes over time; how different generations hold different concepts of cool (or not); how cool is spread or transmitted intergenerationally, within a culture, or cross-culturally; or even how the cultural images and stories that are associated with cool transmit the idea of cool both at the time such

images are created, and also as time passes.

***Cool as a defense.*** The function of cool and its associated characteristics appear to diverge quite significantly from the descriptions of the experience of cool shared in this research. Future inquiry may look to parse out the difference in cool when used as a defense, and how individuals experience cool in this context. It may be possible that cool has multiple manifestations, that while are all described by the same word, vary in their function, how they are experienced, and their intentionality [e.g., *acting* cool versus *experiencing* cool versus *being* (labeled) cool].

***Cool in clinical practice.*** Future research may also consider how the construct of cool emerges in a specifically therapeutic setting. I can recall a few adolescent clients with whom I have worked where *cool* was clearly present in the therapeutic process. While the word cool was not always made explicit for these teens, many of the external indicators of cool were present in how they acted, spoke, or emoted (both generally or about specific topics). In my own experiences with these clients, cool seems to have been linked to a search for simultaneous authenticity, uniqueness, and belonging (i.e., finding their ‘group’ while also finding their ‘self’). A more direct exploration of how adolescent clients communicate about cool or a colloquial equivalent (e.g., *tight* or *rad*) may provide a resource for understanding the values, experiences, and associations that the teen has with not only the construct of cool, but its related behaviors, motivations, and goals.

***Professional competency.*** Finally, in consideration of the concepts of ‘competency’ in the training and education of mental health practitioners, it may be informative to explore how these practitioners understand ‘cool’ and its related attributes when working with clients. The implications on the process of therapy are quite different if cool is viewed as a goal than if cool

is viewed as a barrier.

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## Appendix A

**Cool Prompt**

1. Think of a situation, event, or time in which you remember experiencing yourself as someone who is cool. This means that during this time, you identified yourself with the label of cool and had a corresponding experience. This could be a recent experience or one that is further in the past. Please describe **both** the situation **and** the experience of cool itself. Be as specific and detailed as possible.
  
2. Continue to hold the memory you described above in your mind. Below, dig deeper into the experience of cool. Include any thoughts, feelings, images, sensations, emotions, behaviors, or social interactions that relate to your cool experience.
  
3. Now, imagine that you are meeting someone who has never had the experience of cool before, how might you describe it to the individual?
  
4. Next, describe any differences you may experience between times when you *act* cool and times when you experience cool.
  
5. What **don't** you experience when you feel cool? How do you know you are **not** experiencing cool?
  
6. Finally, think of someone who you consider to be a cool person. This may be a person in your life, or it may be a person in your imagination. What about this person makes them cool? How is this person different than someone is who is not cool? How are they the same?

Appendix B

**Demographic Questionnaire**

Please fill in the following areas or select “Prefer to not respond”

**Q1. Age – How old are you?**

- 18   19   20   21   22   23   24   25    Prefer to not respond

**Q2. Assigned Sex – What sex were you assigned at birth, on your original birth certificate?**

- Male                      Female                       Prefer to not respond

**Q3. Current gender identity – How do you describe yourself? (Check all that apply)**

- Male
- Female
- Trans male/Trans man
- Trans female/Trans woman
- Genderqueer/Gender non-conforming
- Other/Prefer to self-describe: \_\_\_\_\_
- Prefer to not respond

**Q4. Race and Ethnicity – Please indicate your racial/ethnic background (Mark all that apply):**

- Hispanic/Latino
- Native American/American Indian/Alaska Native
- Asian
- Black/African American
- Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander
- White/Caucasian

- Multiracial
- Not Listed (please fill in): \_\_\_\_\_
- Prefer to not respond

**Q5.** : Location – In what state do you live?

- (Pull down list of all 50 states)
- If not in the United States, in what city and country do you live?
- Country: \_\_\_\_\_
- City: \_\_\_\_\_
- Prefer to not respond

**Q6.** Sexual Orientation – Do you think of yourself as (check all that apply):

- Straight/Heterosexual
- Gay or lesbian
- Bisexual
- Queer
- Questioning
- Other/Prefer to self-describe: \_\_\_\_\_
- Prefer to not respond

**Q7.** Education – What is the highest level of education you have completed?

- Did not attend school
- 1<sup>st</sup> grade
- 2<sup>nd</sup> grade
- 3<sup>rd</sup> grade
- 4<sup>th</sup> grade
- 5<sup>th</sup> grade

- 6<sup>th</sup> grade
- 7<sup>th</sup> grade
- 8<sup>th</sup> grade
- 9<sup>th</sup> grade
- 10<sup>th</sup> grade
- 11<sup>th</sup> grade
- Graduate High School/GED
- Some College
- Vocational Degree
- Associates Year Degree
- Bachelor’s Degree
- Master’s Degree
- Doctoral Degree
- Other: (please fill in): \_\_\_\_\_
- Prefer to not respond

**Q8.** Languages – Please specify any language(s) with which you communicate at an advanced level or higher.

- Primary Language: \_\_\_\_\_
- Secondary Language: \_\_\_\_\_
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_
- Prefer to not respond

## Appendix C

**Recruitment Letter**

Dear participant,

My name is Kristen Lauer. I am a doctoral student in the Psy.D. Program in Clinical Psychology at Antioch University New England. I am currently working on my dissertation for conferral of my degree. I am hoping to gain your participation. My research studies **the experience of cool** as reported by participant’s self-reflection. In my studies, I have found a lack of attention to the concept of *cool* in academic psychological research and am hoping to remedy this. I believe that *cool* is an experience that is largely not understood by researchers, adults, and society alike. Completion of this questionnaire should take about 30 minutes. This study is supervised by Dr. Theodore Ellenhorn, Ph.D., ABPP. It has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Antioch University New England. I am seeking 25 individuals to participate in my research study. For your participation, you will be compensated \$3.00 to your MechanicalTurk account. Compensation is dependent on submittal of the code available at the end of the survey to the MTurk hit. You may withdraw from the study at any point. Withdrawal from this study without submitting the provided code to MTurk will result in forfeit of compensation. No negative consequences will occur from withdrawal besides loss of time and potential loss of compensation should the participant fail to submit the provided code to MTurk.

There are **three conditions required** for participation.

1. You must be between the ages of 18 and 25.
2. You have experienced cool at least once.
3. You must be able to read and understand English written at the 9<sup>th</sup> grade level.

If you have **questions**:

Questions regarding your rights as a participant:

Kevin Lyness, Chair of the Antioch University New England IRB  
603-283-2149  
klyness@antioch.edu.

All other inquiries:

Kristen Lauer, M.S.

Sincerely,

Kristen Lauer, M.S.  
Doctoral Candidate, Department of Clinical Psychology  
Antioch University New England

## Appendix D

**Informed Consent**Cool: An Experience

**Researcher:** Kristen Lauer, M.S., Doctoral Candidate

**Supervisor of Research:** Theodore Ellenhorn, Ph.D., ABPP

In this research project, you will be asked to respond to a short survey about personal experiences. You will also complete a short demographic questionnaire. The study should take about 30 minutes. Participation is voluntary. You will not be penalized in any manner should you choose to not participate. You may withdraw at any time during the task. A total of 25 participants are being sought for this study. Once this number has been collected, the online survey will be deactivated.

Marking the checkbox below indicates that you understand the following:

- 1) Participation is voluntary. I am freely participating in this study. I can stop at any time without any negative consequences.
- 2) I will respond to a brief survey. I will also complete a demographic questionnaire.
- 3) This study will take around 30 minutes to complete.
- 4) Risk associated with my participation in this study is minimal. I will be asked to reflect on a personal life experience. The topic of this prompt is not sensitive and will likely not be upsetting to think about. If I feel intolerable discomfort at any time, I can stop. If I feel that I would benefit from the support of a mental health counselor, I will seek out such support.
- 5) There is no guarantee that I will benefit from participating in this research. I may enjoy responding to the questions and reflecting on my experiences.
- 6) Payment of \$3.00 is dependent on submittal of code provided at end of survey to the accepted MTurk HIT.
- 7) I understand that if I return the HIT without submitting the code, I forfeit any monetary compensation.
- 8) The researcher will not identify me by name at any time. I understand that the researcher has taken steps to ensure my responses remain anonymous.
- 9) I understand the risks of providing personal information online. I understand that the researcher cannot guarantee privacy in the event of a data breach of either MTurk or the host survey website.
- 10) This research has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Antioch University New England.

In lieu of a written signature, please check the box below to provide consent. By clicking the box, you acknowledge that you have read and understand the instructions and limitations of participation described above. Moreover, you are indicating that you would like to participate in this study as a volunteer. If you do not wish to take the survey or are hesitant about participating

in this study, cancel out of the survey now.

**I have read the above and consent to participate in this study.**

**For questions or concerns about the study:**

Kristen Lauer, M.S.

Antioch University New England

**For questions about your rights as a research participant:**

Kevin Lyness, Chair of the Antioch University New England IRB

603-283-2149

klyness@antioch.edu

Barbara Andrews, Ph.D., Provost of Antioch University New England

bandrews@antioch.edu.

Appendix E

**Criteria for Inclusion**

I am between the ages of 18-25.

Yes

No

I can read and understand English written at the 9<sup>th</sup> grade level.

Yes

No

I can think of at least one instance in my life in which I experienced ‘cool.’

Yes

No

Appendix F

**Disqualification Page**

Thank you for your interest in this research. Unfortunately, your responses do not meet requirements for participation in the current study. Please exit out of this window and return the HIT now.

Appendix G

**Thank You and Feedback**

Thank you for your participation! Please submit this code on the MTurk HIT page:

**XT67F9021HGPW.**

Should you have any feedback you wish to provide, please do so in the space below.

Table 1

*Participant Demographic Information*

<b>Age</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Dev.</b>	<b>Range</b>
	23.24	1.83212	19-25
<hr/>			
		<b>N</b>	<b>% (of total N)</b>
<b>Sex</b>	Male	17	68
	Female	8	32
<b>Gender</b>	Cisgender	25	100
<b>Race &amp; Ethnicity</b>	White/Caucasian	12	48
	Asian	7	28
	Black/African American	2	8
	Hispanic/Latino	2	8
	Hispanic/Latino & White/Caucasian	2	8
<b>Sexual Orientation</b>	Straight/Heterosexual	21	84
	Bisexual	3	12
	Prefer to Not Respond	1	4

(table continues)

Table 1 (continued)

<b>Education</b>	Graduate High School/GED	3	12
	Some College	7	28
	Vocational Degree	1	4
	Associate’s Degree	1	4
	Bachelor’s Degree	10	40
	Master’s Degree	2	8
	No Response	1	4
	<b>Geographic Location</b>	USA	19
	USA: South Region	6	24
	USA: Pacific Region	4	16
	USA: Midwest Region	4	16
	USA: Northeast Region	4	16
	USA: unspecified	1	4
	India: Tamil Nadu state	5	20
	No Response	1	4
<b>Population of Geographic Location</b>	5,000,000+	4	16
	1,000,000 – 4,999,999	3	12
	500,000 – 999,999	3	12

(table continues)

Table 1 (continued)

	250,000 – 499,999	4	16
	100,000 – 249,999	2	8
	50,000 – 99,999	1	4
	25,000 – 49,999	2	8
	10,000 – 24,999	4	16
	Not determinable	2	8
<b>Primary Language</b>	English	25	100
	Tamil	4	16
<b>Secondary Language</b>	Hindi	3	12
	Spanish	2	8
	Greek	1	4
	Tamil	1	4
	English	1	4
<b>Other Language</b>	Mayalam	2	8
	Telugu	2	8
	Hindi	1	4

Table 2

*Rationale for Exclusion of Survey Response in Analysis*

---

N	Reason for Exclusion
6	Survey left blank / discontinued
2	Cool misunderstood to be related to weather
6	Responses consist of irrelevant sentence fragments, random numbers, and/or incoherent

---

*Note.* N = number of participants excluded from analysis.