

The Anatomy of Coolness

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Abstract

In this paper I will describe how I designed and which are my findings of the research I undertook for my dissertation project during my Master in Fashion at Goldsmiths, University of London in late 2017. I dealt with the meaning of coolness, unpicking its definition and problematizing its role in contemporary culture. The aim of the whole research project was to shape my own definition of coolness, within the realm of everyday life, using it as a tool to explore my interests; at the same time, it triggered enticing conversations with people about their personal response to fashion-led practices. In order to decode coolness, I crossed my theory-based framed research with research on the field. The former is mainly based on sociologist Joanne Entwistle's take on the theory of the "social body," explained in her book *The Fashioned Body*; sociologist Joanne Finkelstein's adaptation of Baldassarre Castiglione's term *sprezzatura* to nowadays popular culture in her book *The art of self-invention*; and journalist Dick Pountain and sociologist David Robins' book *Cool Rules: Anatomy of an attitude*. The latter is constituted by a visual survey, in which I asked people to draw a response to the question 'What is cool for you?'; observation on the streets taking pictures that I then elaborated and transformed in an illustrated handbook entitled *The Anatomy of Coolness* and a workshop, that I organized at Goldsmiths, focused on the female body, entitled *I didn't want the body missing*. Firstly, I will give a theoretical framework of the project, and I will analyse the agency and meaning of coolness in relation to the wider and more established definition of style. In the second part of this paper I will address more directly on three activity of the research path I designed. I will explain my methodology and the analysis of the findings I gathered through my field research.

Keywords: Cool Attitude; Body; Realm of Everyday Life; Field Research.

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1●●● Words on Coolness

Building (Cool) Identities

Sociologist Joanne Finkelstein proved how, in the European context, it is possible to go back to Baldassarre Castiglione's observation of the Italian court in the 16th century and apply his concept of *sprezzatura* to the contemporary. Castiglione was the chronicler of the Florentine court society, he observed courtesans' manners while interacting in the court. He coined the word *sprezzatura*, an attitude that involves qualities such as social sagacity, sense of competence, nonchalant and literally effortless superiority. A civilized courtesan appears "spontaneous and guileless but also alert and watchful."¹ Castiglione suggests that the body is a social instrument; that is why the concept of *sprezzatura* is "a way of being in the world, a nonchalance that is deeply self-conscious."²

Dick Pountain and David Robbins, in their book *Cool Rules*, also state that the modern concept of cool has been shaped starting from the twentieth century in Western society. However, they account for other expressions of coolness: according to them, the cool or *ititu* attitude can be found in the animist religion of the Yoruba and Ibo citizens, West Africa. Here the metaphor of coolness is a positive and sacred connotation that is related to temper, self-control and nonchalance.³

The key features of cool are detachment, mute and circumstantial expressions and can be related to the origins of coolness, identified by Pountain and Robbins in the African-American slaves.⁴ They defined the cool attitude of slaves as a "survival mentality" towards others' opinion, judgment and oppressions with ironic detachment and emotional impassivity.⁵

During the jazz era, the word *cool* was used as a slang, related with the action of opening the window to "cool down" the air in the jazz clubs.⁶ In this context, coolness was a way to challenge the hegemonic establishment of white people using the cool visual sensibility that derives from the African notion of personal display.⁷

The concept of Coolness, as it is mostly understood these days, reached popularity mainly during the 90s, with *cool hunters*, hired by big brands in order to do researches on the market, with the aim to ultimately raise the sales.⁸ The journalist Naomi Klein, in her book *No-Logo*, describes this as a "borrowing" mechanism:

By now the big brands know that profits from logowear do not just flow from the purchase of the garment but also from people seeing your logo on "the right people," ... Just as the history of cool in America is really (as many have argued) a history of African-American culture — from jazz and blues to rock and roll to rap — for many of the superbrands, cool hunting simply means black-culture hunting. ... So focused is Nike on borrowing style, attitude and imagery from black urban youth ... has turned the harnessing of ghetto cool into a mass-marketing science.⁹

And also "Like so much of cool hunting, Hilfiger's marketing journey feeds off the alienation at the heart of America's race relations: selling white youth on their fetishization of black style, and black youth on

1. Joanne Finkelstein, *The Art of Self invention: Image and Identity in Popular Visual Culture* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 45, 90–2.
2. Finkelstein, *The Art of Self invention*, 91.
3. Dick Pountain and David Robbins, *Cool Rules: Anatomy of an Attitude* (London: Reaktion, 2000), 35.
4. Pountain and Robbins, *Cool Rules*, 114.
5. Pountain and Robbins, *Cool Rules*, 146–47.
6. Pountain and Robbins, *Cool Rules*, 45.
7. Pountain and Robbins, *Cool Rules*, 115.
8. Naomi Klein, "Alt.Everything: The Youth Market and the Marketing of Cool," in *No Logo: No Space, No Choice, No Jobs* (London: Fourth Estate, 2010), 63–85.
9. Klein, "Alt.Everything," 90–1.

their fetishization of white wealth.”¹⁰

Identity construction can be defined as one of the core points underlying the concept of coolness. Indeed, the concept of self-fashioning, described by historian Stephen Greenblatt through the Renaissance culture, confirms that it “is the process of constructing one’s identity in accordance with existing social norms [...] presenting an ideal state rather than a reality.”¹¹ I would argue that self-fashioning can be seen as the encounter between the body and the object, such as items of clothing and accessories, within society rules; while styling is the performative act of becoming. I draw these ideas from the way in which historian Carol Tulloch defines the concept of “style narratives.” She writes:

These representations through style allow individuals to combine, or move across, their subject positions with a sense of self-awareness and self-expression: processes of subjectivity — the ongoing, changing sense of exploring “who I am” and “who I am becoming.”¹²

From this quote, it seems that expressing oneself is a continuous tension, a game between society codes and judgement and the free expression that might imply breaking these limitations. However, according to philosopher Roger Scruton, “style is one of the features of everyday aesthetic judgment ... it secures our part in everyday social existence ... and it involves a conscious exploration of socially engendered norms.”¹³ I would argue that its strength is that, besides society, through details and observer’s captivity, style alludes to a specific meaning. Coolness has, anyway, a strong concern with appearance.¹⁴ I would convey that usually clothes are styled with an added “accessory”: a strong body language, that emphasises self-invented codes of dress, hairstyle, ritual, attitude and slang: what psychologist Richard Majors and sociologist Janet Mancini Billison call “expressive styling.”¹⁵

In their book *Cool Rules*, Pountain and Robbins look specifically at the psychological functions of cool for urban black-American in the 90s. They define the resulting behavior as “cool mask.” They articulate this detached behavior as follows:

... the cool mask belies the rage held in check beneath the surface. ... Black males have learned to use posing and posturing to communicate power, toughness, detachment, and style-self. They have cultivated a keen sense of what to say, and how and when to say it, in order to avoid punishment and pain¹⁶

The display and public performativity of cool style might be revealing of its dialectical nature. According to Pountain and Robbins, if it is in one hand seeking for attention, it is detached in the other.

Subcultures might be identified as a fertile territory for coolness, because their core manifestation and performativity sits in the construction of style through assemblage of objects, gestures and shared meanings.¹⁷ However, sociologist Dick Hebdige, in his *Subculture: the meaning of style*, charges objects or, better, their assemblage, with a central role in the construction of subcultural style. To explain this, he uses John Clarke’s concept of *bricolage*:

In particular the concept of bricolage can be used to explain how subcultural styles are constructed ... (John Clarke). Together, object and meaning constitute a sign, and, within any one culture, such signs are assembled, repeatedly, into characteristic forms of discourse. However, when the bricoleur re-locates the significant object in a different position within

10. Klein, “Alt.Everything,” 76.

11. Alice Tallman, “SELF-FASHIONING AS RESISTANCE. The Becoming of a Third Gender in Edo Japan,” *Vestoj*, <http://vestoj.com/self-fashioning-as-resistance/> (accessed: April 10, 2017).

12. Carol Tulloch, “Style-Fashion-Dress: From Black to Post-black,” *Fashion Theory* 14/3 (2010): 361–86, quoted in Susan B. Kaiser, *Fashion and Cultural Studies* (London-New York: Berg, 2012), 21.

13. Roger Scruton, *Beauty: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 93.

14. Pountain and Robbins, *Cool Rules*, 114.

15. Pountain and Robbins, *Cool Rules*, 114, 153.

16. Pountain and Robbins, *Cool Rules*, 147.

17. Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge, 1988), 3.

that discourse, using the same overall repertoire sign, or when that object is placed within a different total ensemble, a new discourse is constructed, a different message conveyed.¹⁸

The performativity of the object happens when the agency of the subject that arranges them, charges objects with meaning. It is part of the mechanism of self-construction. This allows me to introduce the idea of style as a shield towards others, and attitude as the behavior that comes out by the contact of the individual with society.

Body + Object + Audience = Coolness

The relationship between the body and objects — clothes and accessories — is influenced by who is going to look at them in the places where and when they are going to be performed, that is their audience. Sociologist Joanne Entwistle, in her book *The Fashioned Body*, applies the theory of the social body to the fashion field, stating that “the social world is a world of dressed bodies.”¹⁹ In order to define it, she quotes anthropologist Mary Douglas: “the social body contains the way the physical body is perceived. The physical experience of the body, always modified by the social categories through which it is known, sustain a particular view of society.”²⁰ Douglas also suggests that it is natural for all societies to translate, through culture, the psychological properties of the body in meaningful symbols; the body becomes the “symbol of the situation.”²¹ The way our body is present within society is shaped and restrained by society itself.

Entwistle declares that the act of getting dressed is the moment in which we prepare our body for society.²² This is the reason why, within society, we are required to perform those objects, garments and accessories, through our own body and our self, through gesture, pose, behaviors and attitudes. Philosopher Roger Scruton in his *Beauty: A very short introduction*, describes the pressure of the performance in society as follows: “aesthetic judgement can be exercised in two contrasting ways: to fit in and to stand out.”²³ He adds that social order and conventions influence individual styles, and society is there to judge us and we all desire its consensus.²⁴ Against this social pressure, coolness developed its strength with its recognizable effortless “I don’t care” attitude.²⁵

I would convey that Coolness is a behaviour developed by the self to protect itself from the outside. Indeed, according to Pountain and Robbins “the psychological essence of Cool is self-invention, coupled to a hyper-acute awareness of such self-invention in other people; it amounts to the creation of a calm psychic mask to hide inner disturbance.”²⁶ As stated by Majors and Mancini Billison, the essence of coolness lies in a deep awareness and mechanisms of self-invention. This explains why who is addressed as cool person often has profound distrust of authority and declared independence from social responsibility and norms.²⁷ Indeed, as Hebdige observes how people in subcultures find in them an alternative space where to develop and express a different identity and perform it away from the society conventional spaces.²⁸

18. Hebdige, *Subculture*, 104.

19. Joanne Entwistle, “Addressing the Body,” in *The Fashioned Body, Fashion, Dress & Modern Social Theory*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015), 6.

20. Entwistle, “Addressing the Body,” 14.

21. Entwistle, “Addressing the Body,” 15.

22. Entwistle, “Addressing the Body,” 14.

23. Scruton, *Beauty*, 94.

24. Scruton, *Beauty*, 95, 134.

25. This quality is described both by Pountain and Robbins and Finkelstein.

26. Pountain and Robbins, *Cool Rules*, 152.

27. See Pountain and Robbins, *Cool Rules*, 155.

28. Hebdige, *Subculture*, 84, 88.

All these examples prove that it is not only through objects that coolness is enacted, and coolness cannot be considered a characteristic of objects alone. Coolness comes out of the combination of objects — as clothing and accessories — the body and the way these two elements are performed within society. Society itself plays a role in the emergence of what is cool, since the audience heavily influences our perception of our self and its image and role in the world.

Coolness and the Female Sex

During the research on and development of this theoretical framework, I noticed the nearly total absence of the link between the female sex and coolness. This, was initially disappointing to me but then gave me the chance to investigate, through the media of the body, what could be considered “cool” from a female perspective. I organized a workshop, with the title *I didn't want the body missing* in order to investigate further this issue, which I will analyse in the next paragraph.

Journalist Dick Pountain and sociologist David Robbins, in their book *Cool Rules*, suggested that in pop culture, women are not considered as cool as men, unless they use the most hedonistic behaviours that make their pals cool.²⁹ As examples, the authors pick singers Billy Holiday and Janis Joplin, known in pop culture for their stereotypically masculine behaviours, such as drinking, drug abuse and promiscuity.³⁰ The chapter of the book dedicated to the relationship between coolness and gender, developed four plausible hypotheses to investigate why coolness is not suitable for the feminine gender. The first claims that coolness, as an attitude, has been equally developed by both sexes, but it just does not work well for women. The second suggests that it is a purely male stratagem, characterized by a low grade of commitment but a high grade of personal freedom and sexual conquest. The third says that in a young age men and women can equally express coolness, but then women grow up, become mothers and this condition clashes with the “cool attitude.” The last one affirms that the coolness stratagem is now appealing for women too, because women of the 20th century have more personal freedom, education and above all contraceptives.³¹

I will further the correlation between coolness and the female gender in the paragraph *I didn't want the body missing*. I will unpick more specifically the dialectical tension between the public and the private aspect of coolness, using the female body as a tool.

Field Research and its Post-production

Visual Survey: what is Cool for You?

As it emerged from the theories I have been looking at, what in my opinion is important to underline about coolness is its strong relation with our perception of being in the world and facing society everyday.

In order to collect visual data and to start better understanding what people see as cool in their everyday life, I decided to prepare a visual questionnaire and propose it to samples of people differing in provenance, age and interests. In the questionnaire, I asked people to sketch on a A5 cards the answer to the question ‘What is cool for you?’.

I divided the responses according to the groups I presented the questionnaire to: Goldsmiths Friends + Friends of Friends (Fig. 1), SE8 SE15³² (Fig. 2), Teens (Fig. 3), Kids (4–6 years old) (Fig. 04) and Italy Friends + Friends of Friends (Fig. 05). Each of the groups is further divided into categories as to allow me to start drawing pattern by affinity, but I will analyse better this aspect later on. My aim was to

29. Pountain and Robbins, *Cool Rules*, 136.

30. Pountain and Robbins, *Cool Rules*, 137.

31. Pountain and Robbins, *Cool Rules*, 138.

32. SE8 and SE15 stand for the post-codes of two areas in London, as Deptford and Peckham. I chose these areas because they are commonly known as the new “cool places” after East London became quite mainstream.

direct the subjects to certain categories of answers, such as object, person, behaviour, gesture, attitude and place.



Figure 1: Questionnaire responses by Goldsmiths Friends + Friends of Friends

In doing this survey, explaining the project, engaging and talking to people, I observed that, the older the participants were, the more anxious they got about how to answer. The first reactions were, for example: 'I'm not cool, so I can't give an accurate answer', 'Wrong person', 'Tricky/difficult question', 'Give me time'. I think that people needed time to measure their judgment as compared to others and make it fit in the mindset they felt was required by society. The reason why kids were more straightforward than adults, might lie in the lower level of awareness of the judgmental power of society. This reflection took shape during the workshop at London College of Fashion with fashion critic Johannes Reponen and the students of MA Fashion Cultures (LCF) and MA Fashion Media Practice and Criticism (LCF).

After being assigned to a group, I reflected with my team members on how it is crucial to understand the importance of the mutual judgement influence between the individual and society, in order to define the self.³³ I would convey that the responses I collected, although very personal, are mediated by society and culture.

In the following section of this paper I am going to describe and analyse the responses of the visual survey and my findings, firstly dividing them by the groups I identified and then, comparing them through key examples.

Looking at the data I collected, the main observation I can make is that, even if some aspect are perceived differently from each group, the underlying assumptions on coolness are quite similar. The idea of "being yourself" and the aspects linked to that, such as behaviours and attitudes, are perceived across all the categories as cool.

33. Fabienne Gassmann on personal space measuring (Goldsmiths) and Adam Gefen on national identity (LCF).

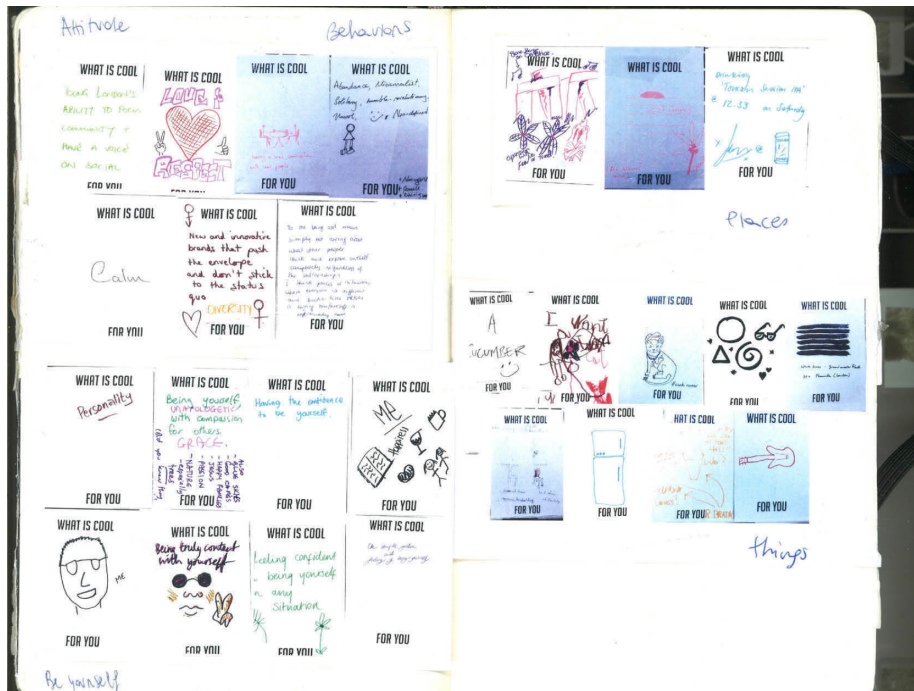


Figure 2: Questionnaire responses by SE8 SE15



Figure 3: Questionnaire responses by Teens



Figure 4: Questionnaire responses by Kids (4–6 years old)

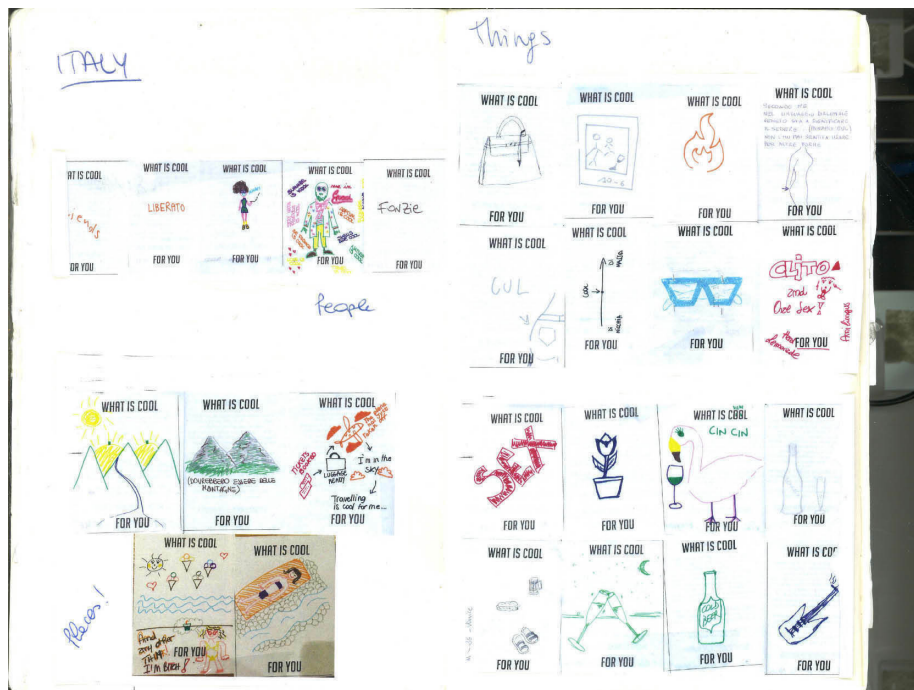


Figure 5: Questionnaire responses by Italy Friends + Friends of Friends

To what concern objects, it seems that sunglasses, that I would define as performative of attitude, and desire/aspirational objects can be found through most of participant's answers. Lastly, escapism, new experiences or other things out of the ordinary are defined cool by most of the groups as well. However, I would argue that the way in which they are depicted is slightly different depending on the group because of the different specific features, i.e. age, location and context. In order to be more specific I will compare the groups: Goldsmiths + SE8 SE15 vs Italy and Kids vs Teens.

As for the former comparison, I believe it is important to clarify that the main difference between those places is the context: the people of the first two groups were located in London areas while the test was undertaken; the others, belonging to the other group, were in a small town in the Italian countryside. I think that these two different contexts influence the mindset, and consequently this difference might have influenced the answer.

I think that, in the London context, the answers that emerge are more intellectual and linked to the values and symbols that define a person's "cultural capital"³⁴ (position towards the arts, perception and acceptance of the self and of others, politics, activism). In contrast, the answers I collected in Italy are more related to pop culture and materialism (luxury, people linked with pop culture). However, while Londoners are more focused on personal values, it is clear how the responses given by people living in Italy describe a lifestyle based on shared pleasure and hedonism. Good examples of this might be the recurrent pattern of drinking wine or beer with someone (toast, cin cin), the recurrence of the word "friends" or the reference to sex.

Travelling appears in both places as cool, probably because it increases cultural capital and it is a pleasure-linked activity.

In the second juxtaposition, Kids vs Teens, it is visible how more visual kids are compared to teenagers. It might be because of their communication habits: kids tend to communicate more with drawings, while teens use their cellphones and communicate through text messages and emojis. However, both ways of expression are colorful and vivid. Another important aspect might be the level of fantasy involved or not involved in the answers. It seems that teenagers are aware of the aspirational value of brands, people and experiences, or the power of objects to define the personality and status of the owner. This might symbolise their being willing not to be recognised as kids anymore, who have a more imaginative way of expression. For kids, the description of fantastic scenarios and episodes is addressed as cool maybe because they consider it as linked to a feeling of surprise and fascination. For teens, this feeling is well connected with reality, objects of desire and exciting experiences, maybe mitigated by what peers identify as cool.

From the experience of doing the survey, I learned that many people have something to say or anyway an opinion on coolness, maybe because they can feel it, perform it or perceive it in their everyday and link it to their own experience.

The Anatomy of Coolness, an Instruction Manual

This project has been developed starting from my interest on decoding the gestures and performativity of coolness. This handbook is a personal overview on the subject: the poses I selected come from a personal photographic journey of stolen snapshots. I feel that the unawareness of the subjects helped me bring coolness on an everyday level. The making process of "The Anatomy of Coolness" has been informed by my whole research, both theoretical and in the field, and above all, coolness as attitude toward the society, formed by body + object + audience and style as a tool to build one's identity, maybe to be used as a weapon against society.

The drawings have been assembled together in collaboration with my friend and graphic designer Zi Mu, with whom I shared the interest in producing a publication. She followed and shared my path of the Master in Fashion at Goldsmiths, so she understood immediately how I imagined the publication should have been.

34. See Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital.

The idea behind this publication is to visually collect and describe the cool pose. To do so, I started to take pictures with my phone, trying to understand the criteria to label one image as cool. I have been collecting them for a couple of months both in London and in my hometown in Italy, Treviso. Since my aim was to bring coolness on a “human” and “normal” level, I searched for coolness in my daily life: strangers on public transport and on the streets, friends and family. The process of archiving started very slowly, because I did not feel comfortable taking pictures of strangers. The reasons why I chose those people and those specific poses are still unexplainable; I can only say that I was recognising what I needed to visualize in order to describe coolness. Consequently, I turned those snapshots into drawings using Illustrator’s pencil tool, which allowed me to hand-draw quite freely and select the aspects of the picture I wanted to emphasise. Originally, all the drawings had different colours, then with Zi, we decided to make them b/w because we chose to use the Risograph print system to print out the handbook. Then, looking at the collection of drawings some patterns started to emerge: sunglasses, cuffs, position of hands, sneers and postures, no matter the age or gender.

In order to analyse them, I started thinking about design instructions: I needed something clear and easy, like Ikea’s instructions. It made me question how actually ephemeral the definition of coolness is: you can recognise it visually but it is hard to define with words. Zi and I added arrows and dotted lines to suggest movements, gesture, behaviours, attitudes and style details. Finally, I added some handwritten notes, trying to describe what catches my attention, with an instructional and imperative way of writing. I also added titles to each figure, to resemble the code of the objects on real instruction books even more (Fig. 06; 07; 08; 09).

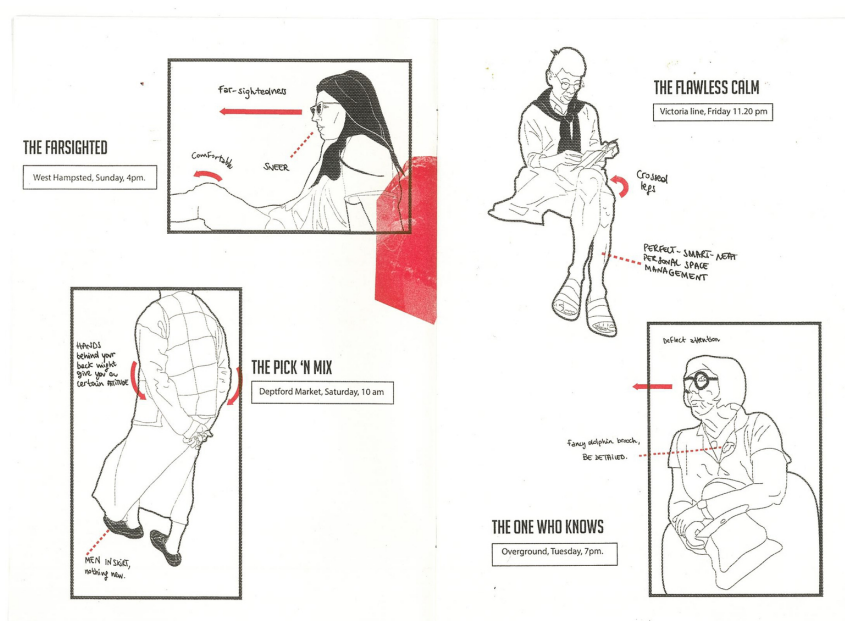


Figure 6: Images from “The Anatomy of Coolness” fanzine by Eleonora Corbanese and Zi Mu. Self published, London, 2017. Pag: 2–3

While working on the publication some questions came up to my mind, but I don’t have an answer for all of them yet: if a handbook provides information on the right way to complete an action, what happens if everyone follows its instructions? Are we going to be all cool or is no one going to be cool anymore?

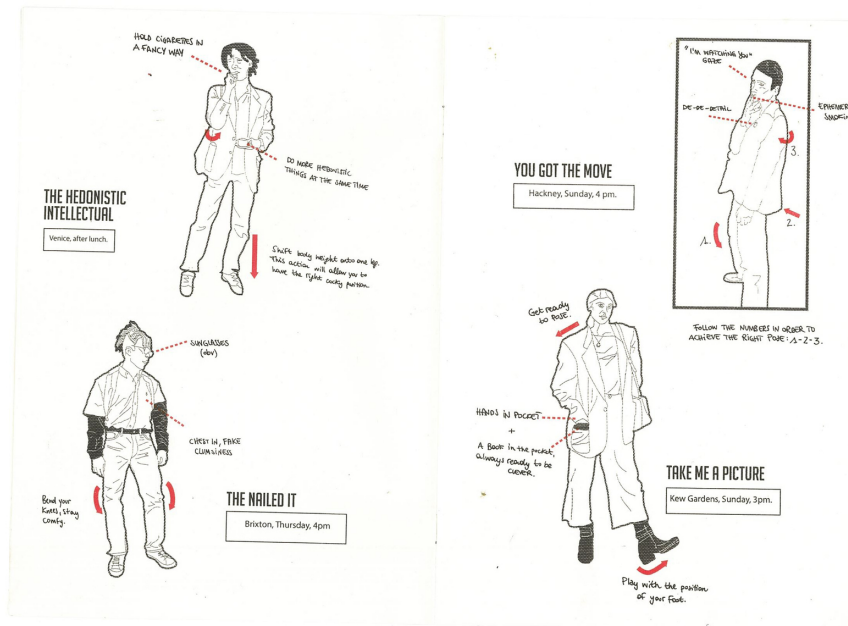


Figure 7: Images from “The Anatomy of Coolness” fanzine by Eleonora Corbanese and Zi Mu. Self published, London, 2017. Pag: 4-5

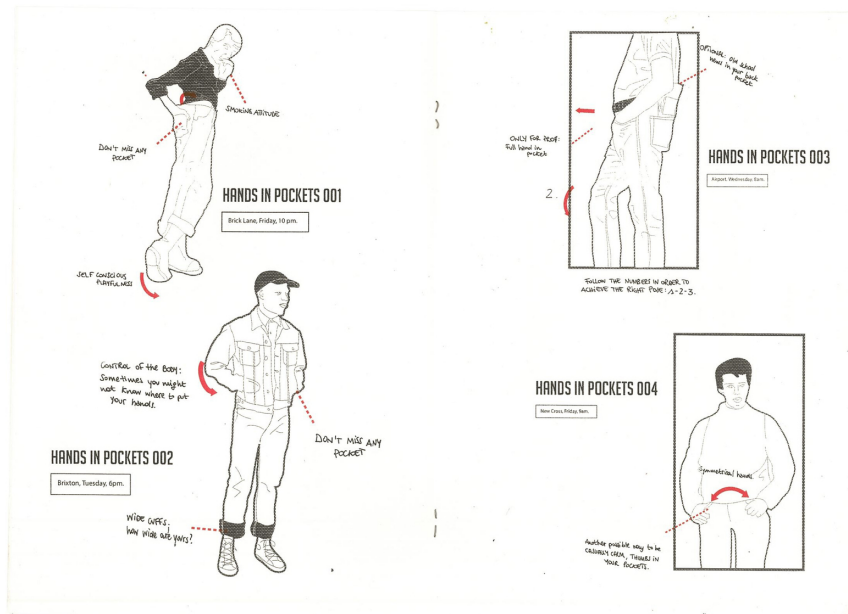


Figure 8: Images from “The Anatomy of Coolness” fanzine by Eleonora Corbanese and Zi Mu. Self published, London, 2017. Pag: 8-9

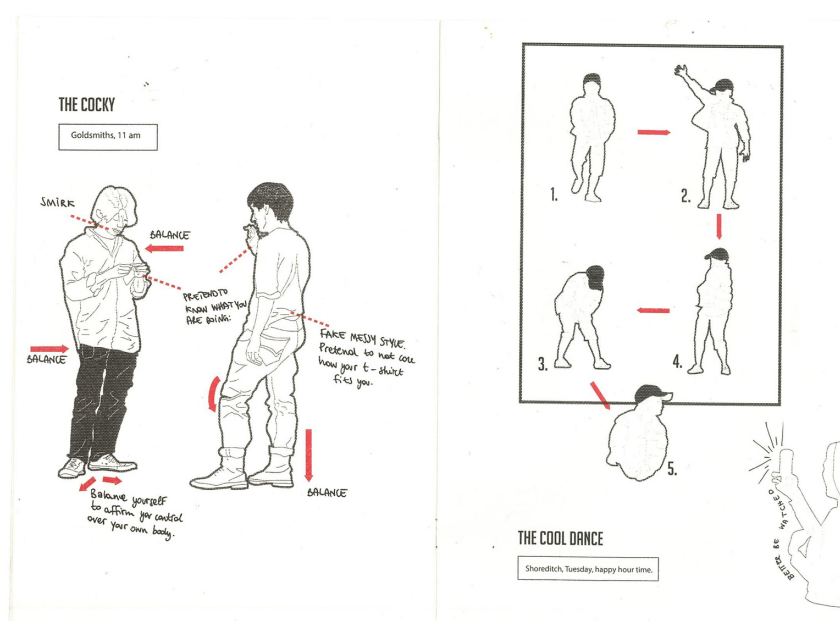


Figure 9: Images from “The Anatomy of Coolness” fanzine by Eleonora Corbanese and Zi Mu. Self published, London, 2017. Pag: 12–13

Lastly, regarding the method of printing, Zi and I agreed on the use of risograph print because it has an aesthetics which is close to the both of us. The possibility to play with the texture of the ink allowed us to keep a very clean setting for the instruction, but with some elements of disturbance given by the print that became the trace of the origin of the pictures. To do this, the help and knowledge on the subject of designer Stuart Bannock was essential. In the choice of paper, binding, size and colours we tried to keep in mind the aesthetics of a proper instruction book.

Designing this handbook helped me to analyse and unravel the “cool gestures.” I feel that in this project I used the making of the publication as a true and proper method of analysis, not the other way round. Since to me it was an analysing tool, I am curious to see how the handbook and the poster can be applied in public, in a way while reintroducing the instructions into the society. I feel that people should understand that coolness is an everyday practice that has more to do with one’s self-awareness within an inevitable social environment.

I Didn’t Want the Body Missing: an Afterthought on Body Awareness

The workshop *I didn’t want the body missing* represents a drift from my research on coolness and refers to the previous paragraph on coolness and the female sex. This is an exercise with the aim of exploring the relationship between coolness and the self’s body awareness, using temporary tattoos as a tool. In this part of my field research, I shifted the focus from the perception of the “social body”³⁵ related to coolness to a more straightforward translation on the surface of the “real” body, in particular of the female body. In order to do so, I asked participants of my workshop, who were all volunteers, to choose a part of their body they identified as cool, to then frame it with a temporary tattoo.

35. Entwistle, “Addressing the Body,” 14.

As previously stated, I came to the conclusion that my own definition of coolness comes from the combination of body + object + audience, which is why I have now decided to focus on what is missing: the corporeal, flashy and physical bodily presence. In addition, I found a lack or denial of the female presence in the discourse surrounding coolness while I was developing my theoretical framework, as stated before. I decided to edit “I didn’t want the body missing” in the form of a little booklet, trying to give back a physical item to this flashy but intimate investigation (Fig. 10).

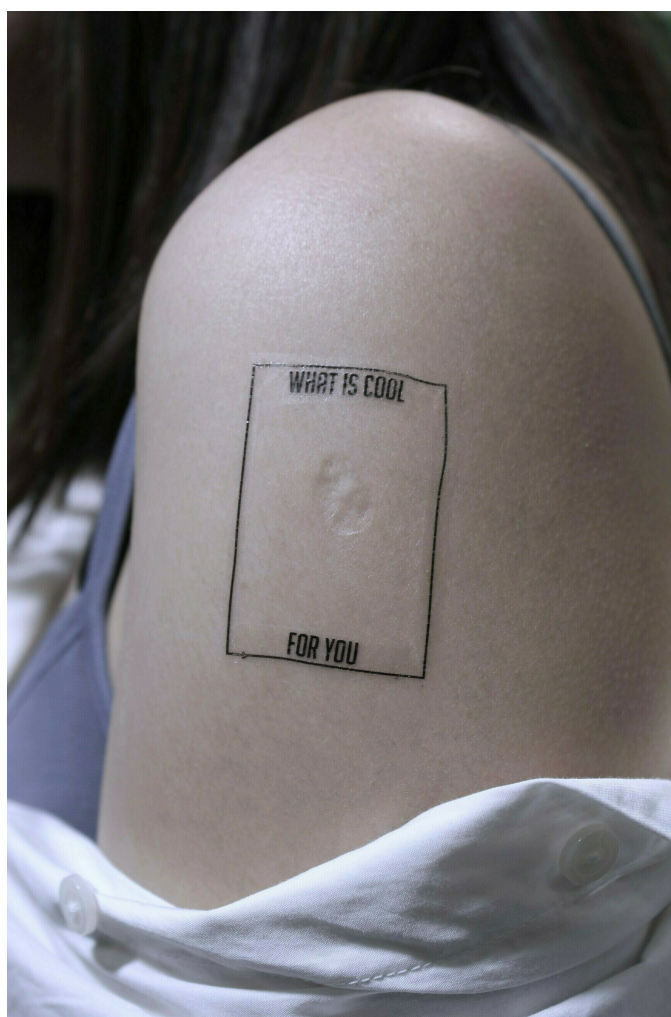


Figure 10: Image from the project “I didn’t want the body missing”. London, 2017

In this part I will describe the process, tools and persons involved in the project. I decided to use temporary tattoos as tools to explore the body and people’s perception of it. Specifically, asking people what they consider as cool in their own bodies. I developed this fake tattoos practice from a previous project, which explored the marks, or better the embossing that jeans leave on bodies, taking as a case study my own body and my wardrobe.

To develop the graphics for this experiment I used the frame of the visual survey ‘What is cool for you?’ I tried to shift the question from objects, people, places, behaviours and attitude more specifically to the body. To do so, I have been asking people what they perceived as cool in their own body and then I took pictures of those framed parts. I recruited participants, posting on my social media the flyer with the request of volunteers. I also attached them into the door of the ladies’ room all over Goldsmiths’ University.

I noticed a common pattern between the volunteers: at the beginning they struggled a little bit in deciding which part to choose, because they understood that it was not a matter of what they liked, but more a matter of placing their bodies within society and give them meaning. While I was tattooing them, I had the chance to discuss their motivations and their feelings with them. I can say that the outcome is strongly influenced by this exchange of opinions. The set for the pictures was quite simple, in order not to scare them: I tried to make them comfortable, in a cosy setting with only a light source and a simple background.

Then, at the end of the exercise, I asked the participants to ponder if this exercise helped them to raise their awareness on that specific part of their body or if they felt that that part was already cool, and if so, if this was just a good occasion to frame it. I filmed or registered their considerations, in order to keep a record. I then selected the images in order to bring them together and compare them visually.

I also had boys participating to the photoshoot; I added them in the first printed draft, but then I deleted them in order to focus on the female point of view that interested me more.

Indeed, looking back to my visual survey ‘What is cool for you?’ a number of women recognized a certain level of self-acceptance and the possibility to express freely themselves as cool. Pountain and Robbins stated that:

Cool serves as defence against depression induced by subjugation, embarrassment and competition, and in particular by the threat of self-esteem posed by “maladaptive comparison” with perfect media stereotypes.³⁶

This statement digs in all the aspects concerning female body exposition and the vulnerability felt by women in its exposure. Defining love for the self as cool might be considered as an aspirational desire because, for women it is more difficult to accept themselves, and especially their bodies, in a social context, than for men.³⁷ While asking women to identify a part of their body as cool, I feel that I might have unconsciously developed a language that might represent a more effective female perception of coolness, one where women can be recognized in, or at least one suitable for the majority of them.

The idea of asking what is cool for a specific individual might be something that cannot fit with the idea of coolness, which needs to be contextualised within an audience. It means that it is not something personal but more a social agreement. I had the chance to ask most of the participants if they thought about society while deciding the part of their body to frame and the answer was mainly positive. They said that for them feeling the pressure of society was inevitable, even in a cosy setting, because it is something that is very settled in the way human beings live and have social interactions.

As I observed before, society plays similar roles in the concept of coolness and taste. Even if we think that it is something personal, it is anyway influenced by society rules, which make us seek for agreement. Moreover, as Entwistle states, society shapes and charges with meanings our body.³⁸ According to Caitlin Starr Cohn, in her book review for “Fashion Practice on Luca Vercelloni’s book *Viaggio Intorno al Gusto*,” the boundaries that define if taste and beauty are objective, subjective or socially influenced are blurred. They might be more or less blurred based on the historical moment and culture.³⁹ However, for this exercise I played with the tricky relationship between coolness and society: when the influence of the society in the subject’s opinion ends. Asking participants what was cool for them, might look like I excluded society from the discourse. Instead, it is still present in the answer, because it influences opinions and, specifically, body awareness; as the participants confessed during the chat we had after the tutorial.

36. Pountain and Robbins, *Cool Rules*, 141.

37. Pountain and Robbins, *Cool Rules*, 141.

38. Entwistle, “Addressing the Body,” 6.

39. Caitlin Starr Cohn, “Review of *Viaggio Intorno al Gusto: L’Odissea della Sensibilità Occidentale dalla Società di Corte all’Edonismo di Massa*, by Luca Vercelloni,” *Fashion Practice*, vol. 3, n. 1 (2011): 131–6.

Conclusions

With this research, I feel I have carved a very personal research path into a very broad and ungraspable topic as coolness. From the start, I decided that coolness was supposed to be a tool to explore my method and process, my practices and my interests as fashion designer, such as body politics, image making, printed fashion and DIY aesthetics. The path has been strongly shaped by the research I did, both theoretical and in the field. For the former, I drew the theoretical framework around the main aspects of the expression of coolness and to performativity, style and attitude.

For the latter, I engaged with people that belong to different ethnographic groups, asking them to draw what was cool for them; I asked women to let me tattoo-frame the parts of their body that they indicated as cool, to rise their body self-confidence. Lastly, I put together a handbook that possibly can be reintroduced in the society from which it comes from, to be the platform to discuss whenever one can be cool, how many people can be cool, and if it is not, what it can be their definition.

By doing these activities, I almost felt like the project did not belong to me anymore: maybe I have been just the medium for the thoughts of the people I dealt with. This is why I decided to develop the smaller project, *I didn't want the body missing*, which is directly linked to my personal interests. Through the various steps of the research, I have been able to trigger reactions and start conversations with the people I have encountered in my path. Interestingly, I found that fashion can be a subject that makes people feel part of the conversation, because it is something that people engage with every day of their life.

I believe that coolness represents the everyday awareness of our presence in society. More than a shield, I think it can be turned into a weapon to counteract the negative power of judgment, making us stronger in facing the world. If coolness can push us to rebel against the stigma of others' judgment, dogmatic boredom and appreciation of our everyday true self, long live coolness.

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