



## LESSON PLAN

**Level:** Grades 4-7  
**About the Author:** MediaSmarts

# The Anatomy of Cool

## Overview

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This lesson helps students become more aware of the media's role in determining what, and who, are perceived as being *cool*. Through class discussion and activities, students explore the differences between superficial and real "coolness," how marketers use cool to sell products, and how their own attitudes and perceptions are affected by media messages that reinforce specific messages about what coolness is.

Students will:

- understand the media literacy key concepts that *Media Have Social and Political Implications* and *Media Have Commercial Implications*
- understand the influences of the media in defining society's standards regarding who is successful and what is desirable
- understand the transience and superficiality of media images and messages regarding who and what is *cool*
- understand how they themselves are influenced by these media images and messages

## Preparation and Materials

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- a large roll of paper, markers, paints.
- photocopy *Anatomy of Cool Questionnaire* and *It's Lit: A Guide to what Teens think is Cool*.
- review the teacher backgrounder *The Anatomy of Cool*.
- students collect pictures of their favourite celebrities— musicians, influencers, streamers, YouTubers, movie stars, athletes, models, etc. These can be either cut out or printed, or collected in an online folder.
- students bring in photographs of themselves.

## The Lesson

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### Guided Discussion

Ask students to brainstorm definitions of the word 'cool' as it might apply to things such as clothing or toys. Write their suggestions on the board.

Next, ask students to identify what makes a person 'cool.'

- Is it external - the way they look, or the way they dress; or is it internal - the way they act?



- As a class, come up with a list of traits that define 'cool,' making sure to include personality traits like independence, strength of character, being a good friend, along with the more obvious external traits such as 'wears the latest fashions' or 'looks good.'

**Reinforce** the idea that we tend to think of cool as an external thing, but the best kind of cool comes from inside.

- Ask students to think of their friends.
- Without naming their friend, have students write a description of their coolest friend, explaining what makes them cool.
- Remind students that they are looking for 'internal' cool, not just how a person looks.
- Have students share what they have written with the rest of the class.
- Collect descriptions.

**Explain** to your students that there can be two different types of cool people - those who are cool because they are famous or fashionable, and those who are cool because of how they act.

The truth is that very few people look like those you see in the media. In fact, some of the people we see in the media don't look anything like their media images in real life, because their photographs are touched up to make them look more attractive, or they are filmed using lots of make-up and special lighting. There are even software programs that can take a picture of someone and give them longer legs, or make them thinner! Yet despite knowing this, many of us are still influenced by images we see in magazines, on television, and on social media sites like *Instagram*.

### Cool Hunters

How important is "coolness" to marketers? Marketing companies who want to attract kids and teens will hire people to act as "cool hunters." These cool hunters go to places where young people hang out (school yards, basketball courts, skateboard parks, clubs etc.) in order to identify and interview "trend setters" - those really cool kids and teens who are more avant-garde than their peers, but whose tastes might eventually be adopted by the general population. Other versions of cool hunting include:

- Online communities that have been created by marketers for kids and teens on the Internet, where they can determine the hottest trends by asking kids who visit the site to fill out online questionnaires and surveys. Marketers closely watch trends and hashtags on social media too.
- Reverse cool hunting, where instead of looking for kids who are setting trends, marketers target popular kids (such as would-be influencers) and give them free merchandise in order to influence their peers. For instance, young people who become famous for making "unboxing" videos are often given free products because advertisers know it's a good way of promoting their brand.

Ask students:

- If you were a cool hunter, what personality traits would you look for in a trend setter?
- Just because you are "ordinary" and not a trend setter, does that make you any less cool as an individual?



### Activity 1

To help students understand how their perceptions about coolness are affected by the media, have them complete their *Anatomy of Cool Questionnaire*. Once they have completed the questionnaires, review their answers and tally class results.

- Who do students consider to have the greatest influence on their perceptions of coolness?
- Compare the brands they chose to the actual survey results from Google's study "*It's Lit: A guide to what teens think is cool*". This survey was conducted in 2016. Which brands are still considered to be cool? Which brands are no longer cool? What new brands emerged in the class results? Why are these brands considered to be cool?
- Review Gene Del Vecchio's comments about what makes a product cool (it's what the psyche wants; it's what you aspire to; it's exclusive; it's "forbidden;" it's to-the-minute) and ask students how these elements apply to the products or brands that they consider to be cool.

### Activity 2

- Ask students to brainstorm media images of cool. Most of these images will be connected to having something: the right sneakers, the right look, the right music.
- Who are the most influential people in determining what is cool? (E.g., television/movie celebrities, hip hop artists, models in magazines, athletes, influencers on social media sites or YouTube.)
- Do we make any assumptions about the lives of people who are cool? What assumptions do we make?
- Ask students how many of them think that they are influenced by media images of what's cool. Explain that almost everyone thinks that they are less influenced by media than other people (this is called the *third-person effect*.)
- Tell them to look at what they are wearing and the way that they look. (Did they buy those sneakers because they are considered cool? Are they wearing their hair a certain way because they saw the style on someone they consider to be cool?)
- What do advertisers say we must have in order to be cool?
- Sometimes people are seen as being cool because they are *individual* or *different* from other people. Ask students for some examples of people who are cool for this reason. What do they have in common? Are there standard ways of being "quirky" or "unique"?

Divide students into groups.

- Have each group elect one member to lie on the floor and let them be traced onto paper.
- Tell groups that they are going to create a "Media Kid," a kid who is totally influenced by what the media says you have to have in order to be cool.
- Have students "dress" their media kid in the latest fashions with hand drawn clothing and accessories, or with real items pinned on. Have them create a cartoon character's "sound bubble" or make a tape demonstrating how this cool person would talk.
- When students have finished, they can present their "cool kids" to the rest of the class and display them around the classroom.



### Activity 3

- Have students look at the celebrity/influencer pictures that they have brought in.
- How are these people different from themselves, their friends, and their families?
- Remind students of the two definitions of cool. Which of these celebrities are cool because of their looks or what they own, and which are cool because of what they do?

### Evaluation

Tell students to take out their photos and, on a bulletin board, post the categories: **Real Cool** and **Media Cool**. (This can be done as an online activity if you prefer.)

- On the **Real Cool** side of the board, have students create a collage out of the photos of themselves and their 'Cool Friend' descriptions. This section can also include celebrity images if students have agreed that they are more than just externally cool.
- On the **Media Cool** side of the board, have students create a collage of media images of “cool” .
- Have students write a paragraph about how they feel about media representations of being “cool.”



## The Anatomy of Cool: Questionnaire

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How do your attitudes about what is cool measure up against those of other kids? Answer the following questions and find out! (And be honest - this quiz is intended to help you learn about yourself.)

1. **Do you think that it is important to have cool clothes and accessories? Circle one answer.**

Very Important    Somewhat Important    Not Important

2. **Think carefully. Which of these groups has the most influence on what you consider to be cool? Why?**

- your friends
- kids you know who are a little older than you
- kids who are really popular
- Celebrities/influencers on social media

3. **Name the first five brand names that come to mind for stuff like clothing, food, sports items and games. (Don't think about it, just write down the first five brand names that come to mind!)**



## It's Lit: A Guide to what Teens think is Cool

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*Google* conducted a survey in 2016 to discover what Generation Z (ages 13-17) think is cool. The argument for the study is that “cool is an indication of what people pay attention to.” For this generation, what they deem as cool is a representation of “their values, their expectations of themselves, their peers, and the brands they hold in the highest regard.” With over 60 million teens in the US, they hold 44 billion dollars annually of purchasing power, which means they have a large influence on if a brand is going to survive or not.

*Google* discovered that girls and boys will respond differently to what they buy and ultimately deem “cool”. With boys being more likely to be influenced by what their friends are wearing or fads, and girls by how it makes them feel. There was an understanding, however, that shoes are the coolest accessory for Gen Z members at the moment.

As the world becomes more and more based in technology, teens view brands like *YouTube*, *Netflix*, and *Whatsapp* as larger influencers on what makes someone ‘cool’ more so than if they have a lot of material possessions. The bar is rising for companies as expectations increase in the teen market, with one 17 year old stating “When I think “cool” I imagine companies that do great things for customers/employees or beautiful/unusual products.”

Source: It's Lit: A Guide to What Teens think is Cool. *Google*. 2016.

### Top 10 Brands Overall

1. YouTube
2. Netflix
3. Google
4. Xbox
5. Oreo
6. Gopro
7. Playstation
8. Doritos
9. Nike
10. Chrome

### Top Shoe Brands

1. Jordans
2. Vans
3. Converse

### Top Video Games

1. The Legend of Zelda
2. COD Black Ops
3. Grand Theft Auto



## Teacher Backgrounder: The Anatomy of Cool

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Both boys and girls need to recognize that popular concepts of what is *cool* can be artificial - that in many cases they are determined by advertisers, who use 'coolness' as a way of marketing goods. They also need to understand that not everyone can, or needs to, look or act like people in the media. In this lesson, students will explore the relationship between coolness, marketing, and the media and how they respond to media messages about what is - and isn't - cool. They will be encouraged to discuss how these images have influenced their lives, from their perception of what defines *cool*, to their feelings about their own bodies.

Marketers are well aware of a child's need to be cool. Gene Del Vecchio, in his book *Creating Ever-Cool: A Marketer's Guide to a Kid's Heart*, identifies a child's reference group as a major influence on his or her perceptions of what is cool. This group includes:

- friends, who are a child's closest point of reference (but who may come and go)
- kids who are slightly older (age reference)
- and those kids who are considered to be more popular (popularity reference)

Del Vecchio notes that one thing each of these reference groups share, is the desire to be cool. He states the simple fact that "cool is whatever a kid likes and wants. If he does not like or want something, it is not cool." Yet, despite its elusiveness, Del Vecchio sees coolness as sharing common elements: it's what the psyche wants (i.e. beauty, strength, fame, popularity); it's what you aspire towards (to be older, more independent, etc.); it's exclusive (you have it, while others don't); it's "forbidden" (this is especially significant to teens); and it's to-the-minute. In other words, in order for marketers to create "cool" products, they must "brilliantly address the child's psyche" - which they often do. By helping young people understand how marketers play on these desires, we can better help them think critically about the manufactured nature of *cool*.

It is impossible to ignore the media's influence on how we view ourselves. Though big-name athletes, musicians, film stars, models, celebrities, and social media influencers represent only a small percentage of the population, their images are so consistent and pervasive that they define the standards by which the rest of us measure ourselves and others. Children, who are just beginning to form their own identities, are particularly susceptible to the often unrealistic standards of *cool* as dictated by the media.

