Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to reveal how “cool” as a concept is constructed by urban tweens in the post-socialist country Estonia.

Design/methodology/approach – The data consist of 42 essays written by 12-year-old schoolchildren of a secondary school in Tallinn in 2007. Discourse analysis was used to discover interpretative repertoires, subject positions and ideological dilemmas in the essays.

Findings – “Cool” is primarily constructed within three interpretative repertoires: cool as appearance, cool as leisure and cool as sports and hobbies. The main subject positions are young expert consumer, fun-lover/pleasure-seeker, achiever and creator. The main ideological dilemma is between individual distinction and fitting and merging into the group.

Research limitations/implications – The essays are rather brief and normative statements of what qualifies as “cool”. However, a certain degree of social desirability constitutes the value of these texts, revealing what Estonian tweens consider to be norms and shared beliefs.

Practical implications – The paper addresses the prominent place consumerism occupies in tweens’ everyday life. It opens up the world of meaning-making of “cool” by tweens, offering an insight into which repertoires responsible marketers could use to empower young consumers.

Originality/value – The paper sheds light on tweens’ complicated symbolic and material worlds in a post-socialist context, providing a continuum of meanings of “cool” and its relationships with the consumer and peer culture.

Keywords Children (age groups), Consumerism, Estonia, Social behaviour, Social norms

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to reveal how “cool” as a concept is constructed by urban tweens (pre-teens) in the small post-socialist country of Estonia. The study is informed by theories of children and consumer culture, as well as by the notion of “cool”. The paper draws on 42 essays written by 12-year-old Estonian schoolchildren. Our methodological inspiration is discursive psychology (Potter and Wetherell, 1987; see also Edley, 2001). We focus on tweens’ interpretative repertoires, with the aim of shedding light on how “cool” is used to construct self and peer culture and to solve potential ideological dilemmas by a rather stressed group of in-betweens: kids who are striving to leave childhood behind and become teens.

Estonia is an interesting place to study due to the rapid changes the country has undergone in the last 20 years. Western consumer culture started to develop in Estonia at the end of the 1980s. The early 1990s was a time of influx of such new cultural forms as advertising, branding and recreational shopping (see Keller, 2004). The period 1998-2004 can be seen as one of “maturation” of the Estonian consumer culture, characterized by aestheticization and the spread of post-materialism, the increasing importance of consumption aimed at lifestyles and identity creation, and the emergence of shopping as a new form of leisure.
Today’s consumer culture in Estonia can be characterized by its relative lack of eagerness to emulate the West and its turning away from branded goods as primary signs of status; also, new public discourses concerning the role and meaning of consumption have arisen recently, for instance in debates over sustainable consumption (Keller and Kiisel, 2009).

Previous research on children’s and youngsters’ consumption habits in Estonia (see, e.g. Kalmus et al., 2009; Keller and Kalmus, 2009; Raamat et al., 2008) has shown that independence and a market economy have given rise to symbolic consumption, which forms an important part of young people’s everyday lives. Estonian youngsters view consumer culture in both expressive and oppressive terms: though different commodities and brands are perceived as cultural resources and a way of constructing the self, they equally cause stress by referring to material welfare, social status, lifestyle, and individual and group identity.

The tweens in our sample were born in the mid-1990s; thus, their consumer socialization started in the period of “maturation” of the Estonian consumer culture. In interpreting the construction of “cool” in the kids’ essays, we seek to find out how these young people constitute themselves as subjects when encountering the symbols and discourses of a consumer culture taking shape. Do they accept, negotiate or reject the options made most easily available by consumer capitalism? What type of ideological dilemmas do they express?

Youth consumer culture and “cool”

Contemporary accounts of consumer culture often use the notion of “cool” to determine the mechanisms of how consumerism functions, not least in the context of the everyday lives of children and youth. The debate about the meaning and function of “cool” has revolved around two main lines of argumentation. In some studies, the concept of “cool” is defined as an opposition to consumer capitalism and mainstream life-styles (see, e.g. Klein, 1999; Schor, 2004), while other studies see it as a corporate construction, created by the capitalist system (Frank, 1997; Heath and Potter, 2003). However, more situated and empirical questions need to be asked besides the theoretical ones, because “cool” is inevitably a lived phenomenon, which arises out of the complex interplay between innumerable marketing messages and consumers’ everyday cultures.

The notion of “cool” is often associated with youth, and youth subcultures in particular (Hebdige, 1979). Many studies have identified the central pillars of the youth consumer culture in which “cool” matters most, i.e. the most relevant categories for peer acceptance and the construction of self in adolescent groups. Teens are susceptible to peer and media influence, and they distance themselves from parents and create their own distinct lifestyles, in which musical tastes, clothing and appearance, as well as hobbies, play a major role (Kim et al., 2003; Kjeldgaard, 2003; Miles et al., 1998; Rysst, 2008).

In the case of adolescents, there is constant negotiation between conforming and rebelling, between fitting in and sticking out. As Georg Simmel (1997 [1911]) wrote in his essays about fashion: the conflict between being a unique individual who seeks distinction, particularly as expressed in looks (clothing, hairstyle and accessories), and simultaneously conforming to the reference group’s norms is a classic issue in Western consumer culture. In this struggle, the interplay between more or less original and authentic subcultural ideas and patterns, and marketing influences is important. In addition to this battle between “pure” youth culture and commercial co-option and seduction, there are numerous other factors, such as school, parents, relatives, neighbors, media and policy-makers, whose interaction with commercial culture is always contextual and complex. Thus, the circle in which “cool” moves back and forth between youth culture and marketing is a complicated one.

Tweens between childhood and youth

Our study looks at young people who exist in a tension-ridden and rather awkward place between childhood and youth. Twelve-year-olds are in a somewhat anticipatory stage, striving to become part of the youth group, part of the teen group, but not yet fully “there”
To distinguish this pre-adolescent age group, the category of “tween” has been created. Although the age demarcations of the tween segment vary in different studies from 8 to 14, the more widely accepted upper age is 12, referring to 11-12-year-olds as older tweens (Tuft, 2007).

The either/or debate of children’s consumer culture studies, between those for whom children are manipulable and often exploited beings and those who take children to be empowered subjects, has taken tweens as one of the primary foci of attention (Cook, 2004; Lindström and Seybold, 2003; Schor, 2004). The liberal position is vividly represented by the well-known study about tweens The BrandChild by Lindström and Seybold (2003). According to these authors, pre-teens create identity based on brands, yet do not do it naively. They see tweens as non-manipulable, taking pride in street knowledge and market savvy. Also, these authors describe pre-teens as remarkably fickle in their preferences and hard for marketers to please. On the other hand, the protectionist viewpoint sees children as in need of adult guidance and protection in the face of the strong forces of commerce and marketing, which attempt to take advantage of the alleged gullibility of children (see Mayo and Nairn, 2009; Quart, 2003; Schor, 2004).

Cook and Kaiser (2004; see also Rysst, 2008) outlined the historical development of the category of tweens and analyzed the tensions involved, especially in the case of girls. The major issue in marketing to tween girls, especially by apparel manufacturers, is the premature sexualization of these young girls’ bodies by offering them “adult” merchandise, eagerly accepted and even searched for by tweens themselves, and capitalizing on the ambiguities of this age group.

In this regard, the category of tweens becomes a favored site for political and academic debate, in particular because of these kids’ intermediate position, which leads to a particularly vivid analysis of consumer culture. Also, consumer socialization researchers are starting to place a great emphasis on tweens (see, e.g. Tuft, 2007). The famous phrase KGOY (kids grow older younger) applies to tweens in particular.

Our study proceeds from the assumption that “cool” is always socially produced in an intermix between the local culture of the group of people in question, commercial culture, local and global influences, and social relations between different groups. We also assume that the semantic field of the notion of “cool” is relatively wide. The central question of this exploratory study is: how exactly do young consumers themselves represent “cool”? What does “cool” mean for them? How do these representations of “cool” hail them as subjects? Thus our main aim is to map the semantic field of the notion of “cool” expressed in the essays by a particular group of Estonian pre-teens.

Our previous quantitative studies have shown that younger teens (12 to 15 year-olds) in Estonia are more susceptible to consumer culture compared to older adolescents (Kalmus and Keller, 2008; Keller and Kalmus, 2009). Following from this, we believe that 12-year-olds are a promising group to study in terms of how children’s/youth culture is enacted in the continuous interplay between ambitions of being a unique individual and the need to fit in with peers, in the constant borderline-drawing between us and them, between childhood and teenhood, and between global and local influences, especially commercial ones. We believe that the essays by Estonian tweens reveal the cool consumerism of post-socialist youth in a vivid form.

Pupils’ essays as an object of analysis

The data corpus consists of 42 essays written by pupils of a secondary school in Tallinn, the capital of Estonia, in March 2007. All pupils, among them 19 boys and 23 girls, were sixth graders, and most of them 12 years old. Our method does not enable us to characterize the pupils in terms of socio-economic status; however, the type, location and prestige of the school allow us, with some reservations, to describe them as middle class.

The pupils wrote the essays during an Estonian language class. The teacher introduced the assignment, was present in the classroom during the writing and collected the essays.
Grades, however, were not given. The assignment was worded: “How would I be the coolest?” No particular indications or directions on what topics to touch on were given. Some pupils titled their essays as “What is cool?” while others used no title. The length of the essays varied from one paragraph to one page.

Initially, the data were collected for a Bachelor’s thesis by Kerttu Kongas, a third year student of the Institute of Journalism and Communication, University of Tartu (Kongas, 2007). We used the data, but conducted a completely new analysis[1].

The emphasis of this study lies on discourse analysis of the essays to find out how “cool” was constructed by the pupils. Our analysis was inspired by discursive psychology, developed most influentially by Jonathan Potter and Margaret Wetherell (Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell and Potter, 1992; see also Edley, 2001). We focus on determining the tweens’ interpretative repertoires, defined by Wetherell and Potter (1992, p. 90) as “broadly discernible clusters of terms, descriptions and figures of speech often assembled around metaphors or vivid images”. As Nigel Edley (2001, p. 198) points out: “The main point about interpretative repertoires is that they are relatively coherent ways of talking about objects and events in the world / . . . / Interpretative repertoires are part and parcel of any community’s common sense, providing a basis for shared social understanding”. We chose this approach to discourse due to the emphasis that the concept of interpretative repertoires places on human agency compared to, for instance, a Foucauldian perspective, which tends to view people as subjectified by institutional power. Discursive psychology makes it possible to analyze interpretative repertoires as flexible resources that pupils can use creatively to talk about “cool”. In addition, this type of approach helps us to understand the cultural resources and limitations that exist for the construction of “cool” among this age group.

In addition to interpretative repertoires, we utilize two concepts that are at the center of what might be called critical discursive psychology and that are often used inseparably from the analysis of interpretative repertoires. To analyze the field of tension between contradictory ideas in the representation of “cool” we resort to the concept of ideological dilemmas (Billig et al., 1988). The authors elaborate the theme of “lived ideologies” as beliefs, values and practices of a given society, its common sense (Edley, 2001, p. 203). An analysis of ideological dilemmas provides an insight into how creation of meaning is full of contrary and competing arguments. In their indeterminacy, these dilemmas are rich resources for everyday sense-making.

The concept of subject positions initially derives from Louis Althusser’s (1971) theory of subjectification, according to which ideologies create subjects by providing them positions from which to carve out identities within a given discursive regime. We proceed from the assumption that each of the interpretative repertoires creates its own subject positions with certain characteristics, roles and abilities. According to Edley (2001, p. 210), “Subject positions can be defined quite simply as ‘locations’ within a conversation. They are the identities made relevant by specific ways of talking”. However, subject positions within texts are never one-dimensionally reducible to persons, the authors of the texts. Subject positions are textual constructions that are born and live within the creation of a particular text. Each of the authors may employ several subject positions in different discursive situations; these positions may also be remarkably short-lived, fickle and contradictory. At the same time, they provide “vantage points” from which each interpretative repertoire is meaningfully and legitimately created.

We would like to point out that the essays in our data corpus are rather brief and normative statements of what qualifies as “cool” and what does not. Having been written in a classroom probably also had some effect on the content of the essays, as conducting research in an institutional context increases the probability of obtaining socially desirable answers, the “answering for an A effect”. Saying “this is not a test” may be of little significance: for pupils any activity in school which has to do with giving answers obviously is a test (Connell, 1969; cited in Gallatin, 1980, p. 355). A certain degree of social desirability, however, should not be deemed as a methodological weakness in discourse analysis, as it
helps to reveal even more clearly what Estonian tweens consider as socially shared norms, values and beliefs. Moreover, a classroom context may impact boys’ and girls’ discourses differently. Previous research in Estonia has shown that adolescent boys may “play tricks” on a researcher by deliberately giving wrong or humorous answers to open-ended questionnaire items (Kalmus, 2004), while girls tend to respond in a more conforming manner. The researcher was not present during the essay writing, so the reader for whom these snapshots of selves and “cool” were given remained an imaginary one. Moreover, since the word “cool” may have a trivial connotation, our analysis obviously does not reveal the whole spectrum of the pupils’ value orientations. We have made an effort not to attribute intrinsic superficiality, excessive materialism or being manipulated by global capitalism to these kids. Nevertheless, the world of “cool” is still a prominent part of the youngsters’ lives, as personal experience and previous research (e.g. Saxton, 2005) suggest. We interpret these essays as constructions of youth (consumer) culture and aspirational reflections of it.

Tweens constructing cool

The three most distinct repertoires of representing cool were:

1. cool as appearance;
2. cool as leisure; and
3. cool as sports and hobbies.

In the following, we consider the forms of language use in which each of these repertoires is constructed as well as which subject positions they entail.

The appearance repertoire

Details and norms. The central pillar of this repertoire is consumerism – the protagonist is a fashion and trend conscious tween. The richness of detail is striking. Evidently these young people find it necessary to paint a nuanced picture of appearance style, to display their knowledge of how to combine the tiniest details into the integrated whole of a cool look. Thus, the main subject position this repertoire affords is that of an expert young consumer who either describes the “must be” items of a cool appearance or even presents them prescriptively, as in the following quote:

   Leather bags are pretty and also clothes should be very colorful. Sunglasses are also pretty, they should be relatively big. With small gems on them. . . Jackets are pretty and these should be like with a rubber at the bottom and not too long, in a really cold winter it would be pretty to have jacket a little above the knee, black or something like that. Belts are also pretty, but they should be either really thin or really thick (Girl No. 13).

The attention to detail is what constitutes “cool” and the young consumer as the one who possesses the necessary cultural capital to discern differences and to be capable of choosing cool items.

   I should wear new clothes, for example longer jeans, a longer shirt and a longer thinner sweatshirt. I would have sneakers with medium width on (Boy No. 4).

Adjectives that form part and parcel of this repertoire are “fashionable”, “stylish” and “hot”.

   I would walk around in a fashionable way and talk fashionably (Boy No. 3).

Also, often these epithets are used in the superlative to mark the cutting-edge nature and perishability of “cool”. Only the newest and the hottest is the coolest.

   I would visit the most fashionable shops and listen to the most stylish music. . . (Girl No. 16).

   It means I have the coolest, most stylish clothes and jewelery. Even the newest mobile phone, generally new, interesting technology. / – – / If you want to be cool you have to listen to the most popular, most famous music (Girl No. 3).
In addition to clothes and accessories, general grooming of the body plays an important role in this repertoire:

- I would take care of myself a lot. I would go to solarium, use lotions, go to beauty parlors etc. (Girl No. 8).
- I am the strongest, prettiest and best groomed in my gang (Boy No. 3).

The appearance repertoire constructs “cool” as a set of consumerist norms. Often the modal verbs “should”, “ought to” or even the strong imperative “must” are used. Here the expert subject position finds its explicit expression:

- Being cool [originally in English] is very important; otherwise your reputation is lost (Boy No. 8).

Within this repertoire, friends of both sexes are viewed according to the norms of “cool” as markers of social status:

- In addition to friends I should have the MOST handsome boyfriend. He should also be the coolest and take care of his looks (Girl No. 10).
- I would have the hottest boyfriend and the prettiest girlfriends (Girl No. 16).

However, a firm set of norms causes negation by some young people. Thus the same repertoire can be resorted to in an ironic way:

- I think I would be the coolest, if I had a chauffeur who would drive me to school with Ford Mustang. I would wear black jeans (tight), a black shirt with sleeves rolled up, black and red tie (loose) . . . (Boy No. 2).

Here the expert subject position is supplemented with tongue-in-cheek protest against the over-emphasis on appearance, offering a more distanced viewpoint. Being able to poke fun at what is a very handy and dominant way of making sense about “cool” seems to be a version of “cool” in itself for some boys, not least in this imagined interaction with the female researcher for whom the material was written. Thus a strong element of “trick-playing” and ridiculing the whole assignment may play a role here as well. It may also be that such terms as “stylish” and “fashionable” refer to a more abstract imagery, in a way a larger repertoire based on socially shared stereotypes and images, on which these tweens draw in assuming that the readers of their essays know what “hot” or “stylish” means. References to such stereotypes may offer a resource for poking fun at and even distancing oneself from those images, thus providing a basis for a tongue-in-cheek representation.

**Shopping.** The notion of shopping is prominent in this consumerist interpretative repertoire, as the following extract reveals:

- My favorite shop is A&G. I’d spend my whole life there (Girl No. 8).

Here the urban background of these youngsters must be taken into account. These young people spend considerable time in the urban environment of shopping malls. In the appearance repertoire, shopping makes it possible to be fashionable and one has to do it often enough and in the “right” shops to stay in tune with the latest trends. In the following quote, we can see a tautological definition of “cool” through cool shopping practices:

- I buy clothes only from cool shops, because then I am very cool (Girl No. 12).

Obviously such shopping is also at least partly imaginary and involves wishful thinking, since the pocket money these middle-class Estonian tweens receive is far from sufficient for the extensive and frequent clothes shopping they envision. Financial resources – availability or lack thereof – are never mentioned in the essays. The “cool me” in the imaginary world seems to possess all the necessary means, and the everyday reality in which mostly parents buy clothes for 12-year-olds is left unmentioned. Shopping, even when no money is spent, as a cool recreational practice is done with friends. As is explicitly emphasized in one essay, shopping with one’s mother and having to listen to her opinion about clothes is absolutely uncool. The description of “cool” within the consumerist repertoire “demands” a display of independent expertise in shopping.
The interplay of global and local. The appearance repertoire, on the whole, draws primarily on various elements of global consumer and youth culture, as well as on transnational subcultural resources (see A˚skegaard et al., 2005). A significant indicator is a frequent use of the English word “cool” in the essays, instead of the Estonian lahe. Almost nothing particularly Estonia-specific can be found in this repertoire. However, some linguistic adaptations of international brand names add a local flavor to the appearance discourse. Global brands are rarely mentioned (the only one whose full name was used was Nike) and, if reference is made to them, the brand names are used in an adapted, “Estonianized” form. For example, the Vans brand is transformed into vansid, with no capital initial letter and with the Estonian grammatical plural added, referring to a pair of footwear of the Vans brand. The same applies to the Adidas shoes called Superstars. These sneakers are referred to in the Estonian grammatical plural, not capitalized and spelled with a double “a” as in the Estonian version of the word “star”: superstaarid. The company name Adidas is never mentioned. Thus the global “brandscape” seems to provide a wellspring of symbolic resources for these post-Soviet tweens, but does not evoke any uncontested awe which would make them use the brand names in original spelling. Instead, they rather freely mix and mold these symbols according to their linguistic and interactional needs (e.g. easier pronunciation and more comfortable usage).

Gender and consumerism. The consumerist repertoire is remarkably gendered. Gender is “done” (that is, one’s gender identity is socially constructed through a continuous flow of practices and acts of self-presentation rather than merely being given as biological) via various combinations of consumer items and specific ways of using and wearing them. One of the protagonists of the essays is a young good-looking female who stands on the threshold of womanhood. This type of “cool” is an explicit negation of childhood, and entrance into the sexualized world of femininity.

I must not be very child-like, but womanly instead (Girl No. 8).

The depiction of femininity draws on a stereotype: pretty, fashionable, well-groomed, frequently shopping, possessing large amounts of cultural capital, that is, style and trend-knowledge obviously highly inspired by the fashion industry and promotion in the mass media, and a figure very familiar from girls’ magazines or fashion advertisements in large shopping malls. Thus, the consumerist elements of material self-expression prove to be the building blocks of not only a version of “cool”, but also a version of constructing gender, building a very fragile and tentative feminine identity.

This resonates with the studies of pre-teen girls’ sexuality, in which “cool” is usually associated with teenhood and references to eroticism versus uncool childishness, characterized by chastity and innocence. Many of the critics of marketing to children accuse this very “cool-creating” marketing system of manipulating tweens into premature sexuality and acting older than they really are (see Rysst, 2008; Schor, 2004). Several of the quotes above demonstrate the interplay of the personal identity of 12-year-olds and the marketing discourse of looking “womanly”, with the help of various goods and services (such as solaria, make-up and relevant clothes).

Within this repertoire, masculinity is constructed through socializing with “women”, but not much attention is paid to relationships or flirting; instead, one’s appearance and the consumerist orientation are prominent:

I would flirt with women but I would not go out with them. I would go shopping for clothes every day (Boy No. 3).

Also, spending time with the opposite sex requires special attire:

When I spend time with a girls’ gang, then I’ll put on hip-hop style clothes and put on some perfume (Boy No. 11).

A specific subculture (hip-hop) seems to offer a pool of items to be mixed in a certain manner, creating a confident image and thus being especially appropriate for the rather tense and challenging time spent with the “girls’ gang”.
The leisure repertoire

The leisure repertoire constructs “cool” primarily as doing pleasurable things. In several essays that build on this repertoire, the Viru shopping center in central Tallinn (one of the largest and trendiest malls, designed primarily for fashion shopping) plays a specific role. However, the Viru mall is less associated with purchasing items in this repertoire, being mostly linked with just “chilling” and “hanging out”. Friends or one’s own crowd or gang play a crucial role here. “Hanging out” in the Viru shopping mall or simply spending leisure time in the urban environment, thus, has a strong social dimension. One must be seen and heard having friends in order to be understood as cool.

All girls would chase me. I would walk around with my gang all the time (Boy No. 3).

The display side of leisure time spent with friends finds an interesting expression in one particular activity young people practice in the Viru mall. As described in the essays, girls try on different clothes in the shops’ fitting rooms (predominantly clothes that they can rarely afford), take photos of each other and then upload these pictures to their accounts on the social networking site Rate.ee:

It is relatively cool to go to Viru. Just sitting around there and taking pictures. Those pictures that you can put to rate.ee later (Girl No. 18).

Significantly, most of the activities presented in the leisure repertoire occur in the places provided to young people by powerful private enterprises (the SNS Rate.ee is owned by the biggest mobile communication operator in Estonia). However, even though tweens readily adopt these places made so easily available to them by a capitalist industry, not least with the aim of “hailing” (future) customers, they often use these structures creatively, making them spaces of their own.

The dominant subject position constructed in the leisure repertoire is the fun-lover and pleasure-seeker. These youngsters portray their (often imaginary, as demonstrated by the conditional modality) selves as relaxed, carefree and surrounded by friends. Going to the city and being with friends, as focal themes, construct the whole repertoire as an opposition to school and home, which are controlled either by teachers or parents. “Cool” as leisure is associated with kids’ own time and space.

The sports and hobbies repertoire

This repertoire revolves not so much around just spending leisure time and having fun as being engaged in sports and hobbies. Its prerogative is to be active and energetic, having plenty to do. Here doing things well, excelling in something that is also acknowledged by others reveals the social nature of “cool”.

I have art talent, that is why I have won a drawing contest (Girl No. 11).

Within this repertoire, the tweens listed things they love and do well, in which excellence and expertise, as well as enjoyment, are represented. The choosing, judging, skillful agent as a subject position emerges. One subtype of this central subject position is that of an achiever who wins competitions or gets to travel with a sports team.

Also football is cool. I particularly like to go to competitions with my team. We have had matches in Germany, Sweden, Finland, Aland, Austria, Russia, Lithuania, Latvia, the Czech Republic and Poland. But I think that this summer even more awesome trip is coming. In summer we are planning to go to the USA (Boy No. 6).

In some of the essays, however, an ironic note is added to this achievement-oriented repertoire, thus showing tension and the necessity of demonstrating a self that is not unconditionally accepting of the mainstream, of a hegemonic star- and fame-oriented youth culture. Going to the USA has an exaggerated meaning in one essay:

I would make my own band. I would make this band very famous. I would become a film star. I would go to Hollywood (Boy No. 3).
In addition to the more other-directed and formal achievement-oriented activities, crafts and pastimes done more privately can also be identified within this interpretative repertoire. Thus, another subtype of the subject position of skilled agent emerges in some essays – that of a creator who finds self-realization in creative activities per se, not necessarily aimed at social approval or being better than others.

In connection with construction I also like designing things a lot. In addition, I like drawing, but not glueing and painting with gouaches etc. like it is usually done in school art classes (Boy No. 13). I also like handicraft. Sewing, crocheting, cooking. Cooking is most wicked. There you can decide yourself what you add, how cut chop. I also like to combine clothes. So cool. I fully enjoy this. Pants, a blouse. Will I add a shawl? Or not??? There I have free hands, I do what I please (Girl No. 10).

Very much like the appearance and leisure repertoires, the sports and hobbies repertoire features mostly elements and practices that are widespread in Western youth culture. The SNS Rate.ee or the Viru shopping mall, which are nodal points of Tallinn tweens’ life, are clones of their Western counterparts; football and drawing are done by millions of pre-teens around the world.

However, the primary element that connects this repertoire to a specific locale is not cultural, but geographical and natural. The kids’ activities are, to a remarkable extent, represented in the context of time of year. Estonia’s four distinct seasons are prominent factors in the activities-oriented repertoire, since the climate dictates many of the kids’ hobbies, for example, skiing or going to the beach. Natural phenomena in themselves, such as colorful trees in October or awakening wildlife in April, play no role whatsoever. Nature as a valuable resource in its own right, something to be observed, is not part of the tweens’ “cool” discourse. In these essays, nature only provides a background for certain activities that are possible and enjoyable at specific times of the year at this latitude.

Summer is also cool, because then you can swim, run, scream, lie in the sun, fool around and just be groovy. My birthday is in summer too. Actually winters are cool too, because then there is snooooow! (Girl No. 12).

As the essays’ authors are all city kids, their construction of the “country” is also related to activities and time of year. The countryside becomes cool primarily in summertime; it is a place to visit.

In summer it is very nice to go to the friends’ place in the country and to lounge on the beach (Girl No. 22).

In Estonia, the ideological distinction between rural and urban settings and lifestyles is a sharp one. The “country” referred to in the city kids’ essays involves traditional life in a village. In their imaginations, this environment offers limited opportunities for hobbies, sports and leisure activities, providing no infrastructure for cool hanging out or shopping outlets. The countryside acquires romantic connotations in summertime (many popular songs glorify summers in the country) and these references may resonate with the tweens’ constructions, limiting the notion of cool countryside to summertime exotica.

**Dilemma between fitting in and sticking out**

In all these repertoires, most vividly in the consumerist appearance-oriented one, the focal ideological dilemma many of the pupils have to negotiate their way through is the interplay between individuality and sociality, conforming and uniqueness. Thus, we may interpret these two poles as two “lived ideologies”, which are in constant dialog both on the theoretical level, as shown in many studies on Western or Westernizing youth culture (see Miles et al., 1998; Wang, 2005), and on the level of everyday practices, for instance, when choosing items to wear at school or when chilling in the mall. Thus, we identified this dilemma as a network of meanings that intersects with all three interpretative repertoires, thus showing its relevance and poignancy for these tweens.
Uniqueness, one’s own style, is highly valued, although at the same time difference from others still has to fall within acceptable boundaries, because going to extremes could mean risking ending up alone:

I like my clothing style and what you yourself think is most important. /–-/ Clothing is not most important but you are cool, if you have nice clothes. Clothes, music, friends, money, fashion, pretty hairstyles (appearance). /–-/ What is not cool is to try to be like others. Being different from others is really cool. /–-/ And you are super cool, if you have lots of cool friends like I have (Girl No. 2).

Mimicking others, trying to be acceptable to the group without an authentic personality of one’s own is derided:

I like that I can be what I am. I do not like to play to be somebody who I am not in reality. I must admit that even I am cool in the opinion of relatively many people (Girl No. 12).

A constant search for a group to fit into seems to be an important issue to deal with:

The ones of my age (11-13) are fashion crazy. So I cannot mix much with my peers. And the older ones are not interested in the 12-year olds. . . (Girl No. 1).

In addition to an immediate group of friends, which provides a point of reference, the individuality-sociality dilemma exists on a higher, societal level:

Also certainly the society around us makes one cool. If you feel that you are nobody, your self-esteem falls and this way you cannot become cool. If you get on well with all the people in your class, you feel that you are cool (Girl No. 4).

At the same time, the ideological dilemma can be solved by downplaying the whole idea of “cool” – interpreted as implying a fashion-industry dictated mainstream and, as such, causing rebellion:

In my opinion everybody could wear the clothes they themselves like, not wear those that are liked by others. Everybody could have hairstyles the way they want. In my opinion being cool should not be a must for anybody. It would be cool, if everybody were equal (Boy No. 12).

In the context of the whole sample, however, the above quote is a relatively rare celebration of individuality, which protests against group norms and fashion dictates and represents “cool” as equality, without consumerist competition or a need for trend-awareness.

Conclusions

We focused our analysis on the three most distinct interpretative repertoires: cool as appearance, cool as leisure and cool as sports and hobbies. Our analysis revealed that the semantic field of “cool” is much wider than the dichotomy of opposing or conforming to consumer capitalism: it can be interpreted as a continuum of different degrees of agency exerted while constructing and “living” “cool”. On one end of the continuum stands the consumerist repertoire of cool as appearance. Within that discourse, the options made most easily available, even “culturally dominant” (Edley, 2001, p. 190) by consumer capitalism seem to be quite readily and uncritically accepted, leading to the reproduction of relatively strong consumption-oriented norms by tweens. This repertoire interpellates tweens as expert young consumers, whose task is to make stylish and trendy choices, but within the range of options offered by the market.

The cool as leisure repertoire, too, involves places and structures provided by the capitalist industry. They are adopted by tweens, but used rather creatively. Here the main subject position is the fun-lover and pleasure-seeker, who, however, is more agentive, molding the available options to needs and wishes. Finally, the repertoire of cool as sports and hobbies focuses on being active and doing things by oneself, sometimes choosing options not so easily available. In this repertoire, the creative and even critical subject positions of the achiever and creator are more vividly expressed.

The peer relations dimension is important in all three repertoires; varieties, however, exist. Peers and friends can be represented as vehicles for showing off and displaying, or as
companions for leisure. Whereas the expert consumer, fun-lover and achiever are all constructed to a large extent as dependent on and seeking acceptance by peers, the creator is more self-sufficient and independent.

In all three repertoires, the global and local do not conflict; they are not problematized in any way, as is often encountered in a more elitist media debate in Estonia, which laments the contamination of authentic Estonian language and culture by “Americanization” and the commodifying force of global consumerism. Such tensions do not form part of these young kids’ meaning-making resources. Various expressions of transnational consumer and youth culture are locally used as completely everyday and unproblematic.

As the essays demonstrated, “cool” is gendered. Gender works, to a large extent, via competent use of gender-specific fashion details and attire, which play an important role in peer relations. Femininity also means womanhood, i.e. negation of childishness, supporting the idea of this age as a symbolic threshold between childhood and teenhood (see Waerdahl, 2005).

The essays remarkably tap into the ideological dilemma between individuality and distinction versus merging into the group (Simmel, 1997 [1911]). This dilemma forms a network that penetrates, to a certain extent, all repertoires of constructing “cool”. In these young people’s writing, however, some ideological dilemmas that are present in Estonian adults’ debates (whether in the media or everyday conversations) are completely missing. Most significantly, one of the absent themes is the dilemma between the perishability of “cool”, resulting in an ever-persistent desire for novelty (for instance, in clothing or technology), versus sustainable consumption and the value of self-made or “good old things”. Evidently, such concerns have not entered the everyday life of tweens in the yet-maturing Estonian consumer culture.

Tweens are a very susceptible group, taking marketing and brands more at face value than do their older peers. They are also the group that reports clothing- and appearance-related bullying at school most frequently (see Kalmus and Keller, 2008). They exist in a tense intermediate stage between childhood and youth; therefore, “cool” may sometimes be an area in which major identity battles and power struggles within the peer group are fought. Responsible marketers, thus, should emphasize even more strongly the equal value of different clothing styles and subcultures, contributing to raising tolerance and open-mindedness among tweens. In addition, more sports- and hobby-oriented versions of “cool” should be promoted and celebrated, where young people’s agency and creativity is valued, not just buying oneself into looking cool. Another challenge for responsible marketers is introducing to young girls different ways of constructing a cool self (for instance, being sporty, adventurous, nature-loving and knowledge-oriented) as alternatives to traditional ideals and practices of just being pretty and “womanly”, and taking excessive care of one’s appearance.

Our study does not reveal, however, to what extent and how these kids internalize and follow marketing messages. Although trendiness, brands and consumerism are generally considered important, there is little detailed brand knowledge or loyalty. Marketers’ messages are filtered through peer culture: it is by no means a “raw” or “unprocessed” Nike or Vans “cool”, but a localized version of it.

Thus, “cool” is something that youngsters consider to be connected with their own culture, as opposed to adult culture. These kids in a transition country are immersed in it and find it meaningful. Whether they develop a healthy and informed critique towards both the sellers of globally promoted commercial “cool” and the vehement protectionists remains to be seen.

Notes
1. The material is used with the written permission (sent by e-mail) of Kerttu Kongas.
2. The numbers in parentheses indicate the numbers of the essays in the data corpus.
References


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