

Two examples will illustrate this: Nike's Air Force One and Manolo Blahnik.

Air Force One No, we are not talking about the presidential plane. We are talking about Nike's basketball shoe designed in 1981. By itself it is so plain (a thick sole, some vent air holes on the top, and a Velcro ankle strap) that unless you knew of it already, you wouldn't give it a second look. And while it endured for two decades—thanks to an occasional lift from hip-hop celebrities—it achieved cult status in November 2001 when rapper Nelly made it the theme of his single, appropriately titled “Air Force One,” which became an instant hit. Some lyrics in it include: “You couldn't get this color if you had a personal genie. I am a sneaker pro, I love Pumas and shelltoes. But can't nothin' compare to a fresh crispy white pair...” While the company (Nike) has occasionally brought out limited editions of other colors, the white-on-white, the subject of Nelly's paean, is now the most coveted shoe among hip-hop fans and pretenders alike.¹³

Manolo Blahnik The designer of this high fashion shoe is one of the most revered shoe designers of the century, but that doesn't put it on the consumer's wish list. Rather it is the roster of its famous fans—Madonna, Patti Labelle, and Winona Ryder. Of course, what really expanded its circle of admirers is its frequent appearance on the fashionable TV show *Sex and the City*.

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BRAND COOLNESS

What makes a brand cool? This question has long perplexed marketers. Marketing scholars Caleb Warren and Margaret Campbell recently provided a research-based answer. They found that to be cool, brands have to have bounded autonomy. Autonomy can be defined as having a will of one's own and acting according to one's will, one's character, without being constrained by consideration of others' desires or expectations. Others' expectations are, naturally, reflective of how things are done by people at large, i.e., what the prevailing norm is. Autonomy defies prevailing norms. That means to be cool, products or brands must be unconventional, different from the existing brands in form or in substance.

However, such autonomy must be bounded—that means it should be a modest departure from the norm, not an extreme departure. It should still not cross over into the zone of the unacceptable. Unconventional yes, but unacceptable no. Of course, not everyone embraces cool brands. Researchers also found that only consumers with some need for autonomy embrace cool brands. Autonomy entails standing apart from the crowd; coolness requires being on the edge. The two go together.

A brand can be cool either in its substance (brand's performance and design) or in the image it creates by association or through communications. Thus, iPod was cool on arrival because of its functionality and aesthetics, but also because its ads showed images of hip people sporting white ear buds. Old Spice became cool largely due to its unconventional (but not offensively so) ad campaign featuring Isaiah Mustafa in The Man Your Man Could Smell Like commercials.

Further reading: Warren, C. and Campbell, M. (2014), “What Makes Things Cool? How Autonomy Influences Perceived Coolness,” *J. of Cons. Res.*, 41(2), 543-563.

