

## What can be considered to be 'cool?'

Feb 9, 2014 by Daniel J. Bauer

I've been contemplating the fact that social network Facebook (FB) is celebrating its 10th birthday these days. As everyone knows, it's virtually impossible to speak of FB without confronting scads of statistics.

FB says, for example, it now has 1.33 billion global users every month, including 945 million who use the device on a mobile device. A study by iStrategyLabs found, however, a significant drop recently in the number of FB users in the 13 – 17 age group: 25 percent. The same study says that in that span of time, an 80 percent increase occurred in users over the age of 55.

Finally, according to a Pew Research Center survey, 89 percent of Internet users in the 18 – 29 age group use FB, 60 percent in the 50 – 64 age group and, interesting to me, 45 percent of those over the age of 65.

The article I am citing here just happened to toss the word "cool" into the report no less than four times. A fellow doing research for FB commented, "People joke that for the teen, FB isn't cool when your mom is on it. I think it's not even your mom anymore [but] . . . also your grandmother." He added, perhaps with a sigh, "You can't be the cool place forever."

I hung the questions "What is cool in your opinion, and what is not cool?" on my FB page this week, and invited friends to offer answers. May I share some of the responses (mostly sans quote marks) with you?

What is not cool? From Dubuque, Iowa: It once was cool to smoke. Also, what about Humvees? Several years ago those gigantic cars were a status symbol in the U.S. "I wonder where they all went."

Alexandria, Kentucky says not cool in the past was carrying a pager, "the in thing," remember? Also, a telephone on your kitchen wall that you had to rent every month. No caller ID, no call waiting, no voice mail.

From Taipei, not cool: Angry Birds and My Space. Another voice from Taipei, not cool now are FB games, Restaurant City, Farmville etc. Another not cool, same city, is chewing with your mouth open and making sounds while you eat. And, again, from Taipei, not cool is students making mistakes, and their parents fighting for them.

Apex, North Carolina reported in. Not cool is to criticize without taking action to change the status quo. Also, taking a selfie with a "V" hand gesture and posting it on FB.

Dubuque again, not cool is young guys in pants at "half mast."

From Honolulu, not cool are Miley Cyrus, Justin Bieber, Lindsey Lohan "and the lot."

With all that seems not so cool, what is cool?

Our friend in Honolulu says cool is good old-fashioned manners.

From Apex again, several ideas: cool is having passion about something and the drive to do it. Cool is reading a real book and not a Kindle version. Cool is cultivating a society in which people need not apologize for their sexual orientation and are free to marry whomever they want.

Someone in Taipei says that cool is standing on the right in escalators at MRT stations so others may pass, and giving away a seat to someone in need.

Another friend in Taipei defines cool as staying with her parents for Chinese New Year's Eve "because that's not traditional."

From Singapore, what's cool is seeing someone give money to a hungry beggar.

This column is partly about Facebook and its need to re-invent itself to stay relevant. Symbolically, the social network's struggle to be cool, but cool in new ways and for different sorts of people and conditions, speaks to us individually and to our institutions as well, be they political, educational, religious or whatever.

More than half the respondents in this anecdotal study are former students of mine. It encourages me to see the growing maturity of their understanding of themselves and human nature.

The truth is that whether or not we use the term, to some degree we all want to be cool in the eyes of others. It is useful to remember that our "coolness" often depends on our "people skills," our ability to read and adjust to the needs of others. In the end, kindness and generosity of spirit are never out of fashion.

Most important of all, to be good to others and open-hearted isn't only to be cool. It's also the right way to be. (Father Daniel J. Bauer SVD is a priest and associate professor in the English Department at Fu Jen Catholic University.)

### Talking points :

1. Facebook now being 10 years old, its directors worry about it no longer being "cool." Is being "cool" important for people in Taiwan today? Does the meaning of "cool" change from youth to middle age to old age, or from Taipei to Tai Chung to Kaohsiung?
2. Some people define "cool" as a way to act or a way to think or a way to appear to be in the eyes of other people. For some, "cool" refers to a physical object (a new smartphone or a pair of shoes). What is "cool" for you?
3. If some things in life are "cool," some must also be "not cool." Give some examples of "cool" and "definitely not cool" in your opinion.

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