Sunglasses

Why Are They Cool?

By Julie Martin

In this paper, I will discuss the subject of sunglasses and will explore how many types of sunglasses have become synonymous with the notion of "cool". I will discuss a brief history of sunglasses, and then examine how sunglasses differ from corrective lenses, use examples of "cool" and "not cool" popular culture characters to distinguish the different social implications between wearing sunglasses and wearing corrective lenses. I will touch upon theories and ideas by Helga Dittmar, Erving Goffman and Stephen Riggins to attempt to explain how people's images of themselves and images of celebrities can encourage people to model themselves after those same celebrities. Finally, I will conclude that, due to the properties inherent in the sunglasses and the people with whom society tends to associate sunglasses, one can be considered "cool" by wearing them.

The online Oxford English Dictionary defines "sun-glasses" as "spectacles with tinted lenses for protecting the eyes from sunlight." (Oxford English Dictionary Online 2011) As sunglasses are, according to the aforementioned dictionary, a type of spectacles, one must then define that term. Spectacles are defined by the same source as "[a] device for assisting defective eyesight, or for protecting the eyes from dust, light, etc., consisting of two glass lenses set in a frame which is supported on the nose, and kept in place by side-pieces passing over the ears." (Oxford English Dictionary Online 2011) Simply by reading both definitions for both types of items, it is clear that the typical pair of sunglasses and the typical pair of spectacles ("glasses" or "corrective lenses") are intimately related, sharing many of the same attributes. Both items are meant for use by human beings and, in their most common forms, place lenses before the wearer's eyes. These lenses are contained within a frame and, again, the frames are most typically supported by the nose with other supports that rest atop the ears.

The earliest sunglasses, used to protect wearers from the sun, were used by the Inuit in what is now Northern Canada, circa 1200 A.D. These "glasses" were made of flattened walrus ivory and, in lieu of glass lenses, merely had carved out narrow slits to see through. Though not a modified version of spectacles, these items had the same essential shape and function as modern-day sunglasses; they were worn in order to protect the wearer's eyes from the sun and its glare, with the item primarily supported by the wearer's nose. (Canadian Museum of Civilization 2011)

Modern sunglasses, like those the Inuit fashioned, are also used in order to protect the wearer's eyes from the sun. In addition to protecting from the strength and glare of the sun, most modern sunglasses also protect wearers from dangerous ultraviolet (UV) radiation. While photokeratitis, defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as "inflammation of the cornea, or damage to the corneal epithelium, caused by overexposure to light, esp. in the ultraviolet range," (Oxford English Dictionary Online 2011) is a possible side effect of too much ultraviolet exposure to the eyes, it is primarily UVB and some UVC rays that damage the eyes, with UVA rays not reaching the retina of the eye. Ultimately, cataracts are the major danger to the eyes from repeated acute photokeratitis. (Young 2006) This is why modern sunglasses will have UVA, UVB and UVC protection built into their lenses, to better protect the eye from long-term effects of ultraviolet exposure. Oakley Sunglasses, for example, have protection from all three types of radiation built directly into their lenses. (Oakley.com 2011)

However, many people wear sunglasses for different reasons and not all for protection from the sun, as can be deduced by observing those who wear sunglasses where there is no sunlight (indoors) or even no bright lights. The question of "why do some people wear sunglasses when not trying to protect their eyes?" inevitably arises. For this, we must first more closely examine the relationship between corrective eye glasses and sunglasses.

Our North American society is resplendent with examples of people (or popular culture characters) being considered "cool" while wearing sunglasses, but being considered "not cool" (specifically, either overly intellectual or "nerdy") while wearing corrective lenses. Why is this?

Looking first at the intellectual stereotype, we can see Velma from *Scooby-Doo*, Brainy Smurf from *The Smurfs*, Dilton Doiley from *Archie Comics* and Tina Fey from *Saturday Night Live's* Weekend Update sketch. All four of these characters are viewed as "smart" and all four of them wear glasses. Velma, for example "is seen as the brain of the group" (Wikipedia 2011) in *Scooby-Doo* while the other female character on the show, Daphne, is seen as the more attractive character, who is "not as clever as Velma". (Wikipedia, 2011) Brainy Smurf, capable of explanations a-plenty, is viewed as the smartest Smurf in Smurf Village, although perhaps not the wisest. He is the only Smurf to wear glasses. Dilton Doiley "is the smartest teenager in Riverdale High School" (Wikipedia 2011) and is the only member of the *Archie* teenage gang to wear glasses; Archie, Reggie, Jughead, Veronica, Betty, Midge, Moose, Ethel and Chuck do not wear corrective lenses. Finally, Tina Fey played the role of a news anchor during the *Saturday Night Live* sketch *Weekend Update*, using prop glasses to give her a more educated, sophisticated air. "Ms. Fey is the embodiment of the sexy, smart girl–you know, a real New York type […]. This effect is amplified […] by her thick, Williamsburg-issue glasses, which give her a mysteriously comely look that may be described as Winona Ryder meets Velma from Scooby-Doo." (Gay 2001)

From this, we can draw the conclusion that wearing glasses can, for some, give the impression of intelligence. Even Stephen Riggins mentions Erving Goffman's observation of "scholarly-looking spectacles worn by illiterate people" in order to publicly present oneself differently, using a disidentifying object. (Riggins 1990: 350-351) However, there is another

stereotype for wearers of corrective lenses; that of "nerd". "Nerd" is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary Online as "a slangy, derogatory term, meaning "a person who is boringly conventional or studious." (Oxford English Dictionary Online 2011) Indeed, it is those who appear overly studious that often get labelled as "nerds". Sandra Conaway, in her 2007 doctoral dissertation, explained that "Children learn well before their teen years that the bespectacled are perfect objects of scorn," which drew in part from a British study that showed that children with glasses were bullied approximately one-third more than their counterparts without glasses. (Conaway 2007)

Possibly the best example of a "nerd" in recent popular culture is the character of Steve Urkel, played by actor Jaleel White, from the ABC situation comedy *Family Matters*. "Steve was the epitome of a geek/nerd, with large, thick eyeglasses" (Wikipedia 2011) While there were other traits that made Urkel viewed as a nerd, in particular, his fashion sense, or lack thereof, the eyeglasses he wore certainly aided the cause. During the show's run, Urkel transformed himself into the ultra-cool "Stefan Urquelle" character several times, by virtue of his own inventions of "Cool Juice" and a transformation chamber. Stefan Urquelle was also played by Jaleel White and required no glasses. Urquelle also typically wore more fashionable clothing and his voice deepened substantially. However, it is clear in the very first episode in which Stefan Urquelle appears ("Dr. Urkel and Mr. Cool") that Urquelle can be considered "cool" even while wearing Steve Urkel's clothing. In this episode, Steve Urkel drinks his "Cool Juice" concoction, leading to the start of his transformation. Within a minute, he has become Stefan Urquelle, still wearing a plaid, button-up shirt and jeans that have an unfashionably high waist for the 1990s. However, he has removed the glasses (and pushed his trademark suspenders off his shoulders) and it is clear that the character has a completely different air and attitude. The major visual change in this

transformation is merely the removal of the glasses. This prompts one of the other characters, Eddie Winslow, to say "Do you believe this? Just a few days ago, the world's coolest guy was the world's biggest nerd!" (Tracy 1993)

The Steve Urkel/Stefan Urquelle example is not the only transformation of a nerd to a "cool" figure where one of the major visual changes is the removal of glasses. In his 1999 book *Still Me*, Christopher Reeve discusses his time playing Superman, and his alter-ego Clark Kent, in the *Superman* franchise of movies from 1978-1987. "I remembered seeing George Reeves on TV in the fifties and wondering why Lois Lane didn't instantly recognize Clark Kent as Superman. How could a thick pair of glasses substitute for a believable characterization?" (Reeve 1999: 192) Reeve goes on to explain that he decided to play Superman and Clark Kent as two separate characters. For Clark Kent, he decided to base him "on the young Cary Grant" in the movie *Bringing Up Baby*, in which Grant "plays a paleontologist […] and he's up on a ladder that is rocking back and forth. He looks terribly awkward and afraid […]. He has a shyness, vulnerability, and a certain charming goofiness that I thought would be perfect for Clark Kent. He even wears the same kind of glasses." (Reeve 1999: 193) Once again, the nerdy, awkward character wears glasses that, along with some other traits (shyness, goofiness) help to "sell" the idea that Clark is about as far from Superman as one can get. That said, the Dean Cain representation of Clark Kent in *Lois and Clark: The New Adventures of Superman* did not rely on Clark being awkward to hide his true identity; instead, the Clark Kent disguise was the glasses and, of course, the lack of the iconic Superman costume. "[Lois] doesn't have a clue that they are the same person. It must be the glasses." (Jicha 1993) However, a return to a clumsier, more awkward Clark Kent came during the 2006 movie *Superman Returns*, which is based after the events in *Superman* (1978) and *Superman II* (1980). In that movie, there is a scene set in the

offices of *The Daily Planet*, Lois Lane (played by Kate Bosworth) and her fiancé, Richard White (James Marsden), are discussing Superman's return to Metropolis. Lois recites several facts about Superman (height of 6'4", weight of 225 pounds, various super powers) and Richard looks curiously over at Clark, portrayed in this incarnation by Brandon Routh, on the other side of the room, who is able to hear their quiet conversation due to his super-hearing.

> Richard: "How tall would you say Clark is?"
> Lois: "6-3, 6-4."
> Richard: "About 200-215 pounds?"

The two look over at Clark, seeming to size him up, ostensibly asking themselves silently if this man could actually be Superman. At this point, Clark, who has been listening to the conversation, looks around, seemingly confused and bewildered. He then turns and sees Lois and Richard looking at him and then waves at them with a smile. This causes Lois and Richard to laugh quietly in an embarrassed fashion. It is implied that they have realized what a silly notion it is that nerdy, bespectacled Clark could possibly be Superman, despite many of the physical similarities and their near-simultaneous return to Metropolis. (Singer 2006)

The stigma of nerdiness, brought on by wearing glasses, has been going on for quite some time. In the 1970s television show, *Square Pegs,* Sarah Jessica Parker (who many will remember as the very fashionable Carrie Bradshaw from *Sex and the City*) played the nerdy looking Patty. An anecdote from *People* magazine included a story about how Sarah Jessica Parker was "too pretty" for the part, according to the show's creator Anne Beatts. 'But the casting person took a pair of cheap sunglasses, broke the lenses out and put them on Sarah and said, 'Okay, now look at her.'" (Dam 2001) All that was needed to make her look like a nerd was a pair of cheap sunglasses, with the lenses removed.

Thus, the "cool" part of the sunglasses must be in the tinted lenses and the "uncool" part of corrective lenses must be that they do correct someone's vision in an obvious fashion. This would adequately explain why "clip-on" sunglasses and transitional lenses (that darken upon exposure to sunlight) are not considered "cool", although this particular subject certainly requires more research. For the purposes of this paper, please allow the assumption that typical, non-corrective sunglasses are "cool". Although, this presents a new question: what about the tinted lenses make someone appear to be cool? Before we can answer that question, we must first address what, exactly, "cool" is so that we may then uncover why sunglasses are considered as such.

In his book, *Cool: The Signs and Meanings of Adolescence,* Marcel Danesi tells us that the expression "cool" comes from the jazz club scene of the 1930s. When there was too much smoke in the air, they would open various doors and windows in the clubs to allow "cool air" to enter to clear out the smoke. The late-night jazz scene then was called "cool", which then was extended to the musicians and patrons. (Danesi 1994) Danesi claims that "coolness entails a set of specific behavioural characteristics that vary in detail from generation to generation". (Danesi 1994: 38) "Losing one's cool" is to be avoided, so "cool" people are generally seen as calm and composed. Sunglasses add to this effect as they hide the wearer's eyes from casual view. That means that one of the most expressive parts of the wearer's face is hidden and so cannot be easily read. This aids in the perception that the wearer of the sunglasses is, in fact, calm and composed, which are facets of cool that Danesi wrote about. Without being able to see the eyes of someone wearing sunglasses, you have very little idea as to whether they are being sincere, sarcastic, paying attention, falling asleep or any number of other actions or emotions. As an example of people using sunglasses to give the impression that they are feeling something different than they

actually may be feeling, it is very common to see poker players sit at a table with sunglasses on, sometimes even with hats. On a randomly selected episode of NBC's *Poker After* Dark (Episode 47 of Season Five), for example, three of the six players at the table are wearing sunglasses: Phil Hellmuth, Bob Safai and Phil Laak. Of these, Hellmuth and Safai also wear baseball caps and Laak is wearing an oversized hoodie sweatshirt with the hood pulled up. (Lockwood 2009) According to a special report to ESPN.com, "[m]any players wear sunglasses to hide the involuntary dilation of the pupils that occurs when a player's eyes see something big -- pocket aces, big flop, bigger river card." (Rosenbloom 2005) However, Chip Jett, a professional poker player who has won over two million dollars in live tournaments (Wikipedia 2011) says that sunglasses are a good way to watch one's opponents surreptitiously, as "if people don't know you're […] looking at them, they're less likely to try to mask whatever they're showing." (Rosenbloom 2005) Jett also comments that wearing sunglasses "gives a chance for sponsorship. There are a lot of sunglasses companies out there." (Rosenbloom 2005)

In Stephen Harold Riggins' *The power of things: The role of domestic objects in the presentation of self*, Riggins reminds the readers of Erving Goffman's categories of symbols of objects. In particular, the category of *Disidentifying objects* seems especially relevant to sunglasses and the notion of "cool". If one accepts that the most important thing about "being cool" is "keeping one's cool", or at least projecting that image, then sunglasses can easily become a disidentifying object. Riggins writes:

> "To be able to publicly present the self through objects implies the possibility of deliberate self-misrepresentation. This can be accomplished in part by displaying disidentifying symbols, objects which disassociate a person from any undesired attribute." (Riggins 1990: 350-351)

In the case of sunglasses, the tinted lenses of non-corrective sunglasses act as a barrier to obfuscate the eyes of the wearer from nearby observers and they afford the wearer the ability to project virtually any mood or reaction (or lack thereof) by virtue of that barrier. Should the wearer, such as a poker player playing for high stakes, wish to deceive their audience (the other players at the table) by means of a bluff or a less-obvious physical sign, the sunglasses will serve its purpose as a disidentifying object. A poker player with a pair of aces in their hand will need to "keep their cool" despite knowing that they hold two powerful cards and the sunglasses afford the wearer that possibility.

In discussing Erving Goffman, one would be remiss if his ideas on dramaturgy, from *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, were ignored. Specifically, Goffman viewed people in a paradigm wherein everyone is an actor who, he implied, "struts and frets his hour upon the stage." (Shakespeare MacBeth: 5.5.25) It becomes clearer when knowing that "Goffman states that dramaturgy is about the actor's impression management." (Manning 2007) Indeed, sunglasses are very much a "front stage" prop that allows the actor to better manage the impression he or she is making upon any audience that may be paying attention. However, behind the shield of the sunglasses is where the "back stage" occurs. It is from behind the safety of the sunglasses that the wearer's (or actor's, if you prefer) eyes can express as much emotion, or lack thereof, as they like while simultaneously maintaining their façade. Sunglasses, when not used solely for their use of protection from the sun, can absolutely be considered to be a useful tool when it comes to managing the impressions with which one leaves others.

Celebrities are scrutinized by the public extremely closely, as evidenced by the amount of gossip magazines and television shows that exist solely to help people keep up with the latest celebrity news. Celebrities, therefore, have a very good reason to manage the impressions with which they leave others, as their actions will remain the subject of the public's discussion for

quite some time. As examples, one need only regard the case of O.J. Simpson in the 1990s when he was accused of killing his ex-wife, Nicole Brown and her friend, Ron Goldman. "The pursuit, arrest, and trial were among the most widely publicized events in American history." (Wikipedia 2011) To take a more current example, Lindsay Lohan has consistently been in the public eye since first starring in Disney's remake of *The Parent Trap* and, in recent years, has been in and out of rehabilitation centers for alcohol and drug abuse, as well as in and out of jail for various violations of her probations stemming from driving under the influence. (Wikipedia 2011) Therefore, due to this intense scrutiny by the public, it is unsurprising that celebrities have a long history with sunglasses, particularly with sunglasses as disguises or items with which to better manage their public image. It is said that in the early 1900s, use of sunglasses became more popular, particularly among movie stars and other celebrities, possibly to avoid being recognize, possibly to protect or hide their eyes from the strong lights used in filming in that era. (Wikipedia 2011) If one does not believe that celebrities in the early 1900s used sunglasses as a means of disguise, one should certainly believe it to be true of celebrities of the modern age. As recently as this past September, Michelle Obama, the First Lady of the United States of America, was photographed while shopping at Target. (Clements 2011) She was clearly there in a disguise consisting of less expensive clothing than befits her station, along with a baseball cap and sunglasses. She was recognized, of course, which is why she was photographed, but her intention was clear; she wanted to shop at Target as herself and not as the First Lady. As another example, the blog post *25 Celebrities in Ridiculous Disguises*, posted on September 20, 2010 on the *Fresh Pics* blog, features 12 of the 25 celebrities wearing sunglasses either as their entire disguise or a part of their disguise. (Fresh Pics 2010) While there are certainly other, more ridiculous disguises

listed in the blog post, the fact remains that 48% of these celebrities actively attempting to disguise themselves are wearing sunglasses.

Celebrities are often asked to endorse various products, places and services in the hopes that their endorsements will increase sales for the companies involved. Bill Cosby received a reported $25 million from Coca-Cola while IBM spent $40 million on a marketing campaign that included the actors from the hit television show M*A*S*H in the 1980s. (Agrawal and Kamakura 1995)

> "Ultimately, celebrity endorsements are believed to generate a greater likelihood of customers' choosing the endorsed brand. Thus, the use of celebrity endorsements is an advertising strategy that should […] create brand equity by manes of the 'secondary association' of a celebrity with a brand." (Agrawal and Kamakura 1995: 56)

Thus, given the fact that celebrity endorsements happen regularly, and given the previously-made point that celebrities already have a close association with sunglasses, particularly as disguises from the public, it should not come as a surprise that celebrity endorsements for sunglasses are plentiful. In particular, the 1960s-era "Who's that behind those Foster Grants" advertising campaign by the Foster Grant sunglasses company (now FGX International), linked the brand to celebrities with "a star-studded campaign that was named one of the top 100 advertising campaigns of all time by Advertising Age." (FGX International 2011) This campaign included Peter Sellers, Anthony Quinn, Mia Farrow, Woody Allen, Robert Goulet, OJ Simpson, Terence Stamp, Vanessa Redgrave and Raquel Welch, among others. (Wikipedia 2011) Foster Grant brought Raquel Welch, one of the original spokespeople from the 1960s campaign, back as a spokesperson for the brand in 2009 and 2010. "Raquel continues to combine her tremendous star power and natural beauty to appeal to all age ranges, gender and demographics, making her a perfect fit for Foster Grant." (fostergrant.com 2010)

Sunglasses come in a variety of styles and sizes, shapes and colours, and price ranges. While one can purchase a cheap pair of sunglasses from the local drugstore, these are likely not terribly effective for the purpose of protecting one's eyes from the sun and its ultraviolet radiation. Just as cheap sunglasses exist, so do the extremely expensive. Among the most popular and, therefore, expensive sunglasses brands are Oakleys and Ray-Bans. Directly from the Oakley website, many of the sunglasses available for purchase are upwards of $200, some ranging above $300. (Oakley.com 2011) Ray-ban does not sell their products directly from their website, but a look through retailers showed that Ray-ban brand sunglasses were priced between $100 and $300, typically. (sunglasshut.com 2011) Of course, these prices are perhaps not altogether reasonable to pay for everyone who wishes to have stylish sunglasses. It is with the introduction of similar-looking, yet inferior, products that the "sunglasses are cool" argument takes another step forward.

Helga Dittmar, in her chapter *Material possessions as reflections of identity: Gender, social-material status and social groups*, informs us that

> "the argument was put forward and illustrated empirically that major dimensions of identity, such as social-material position and gender, are reflected in the meanings possessions have for people. People thus express aspects of themselves through their possessions." (Dittmar 1992)

People, therefore, will express themselves through their possessions. While Dittmar speaks more generally about several different possessions and objects, can we not extend this expression of self to sunglasses, particularly name-brand sunglasses, or their forgeries, that look as though they cost a great deal of money? Before we do so, it is necessary to understand a possible reason why individuals would want to be seen wearing name-brand sunglasses, such as Oakleys or Ray-bans. For this, we can return to one of Riggins' additions to Goffman's categories: *Clustering and*

dispersing. (1990) While Riggins speaks primarily about displayed objects rather than worn objects or articles of clothing or accessories, he does speak of clustering and grouping similar objects together. (1990) This indicates a relationship between the objects. As such, if Celebrity A wears Oakley sunglasses and Person B wears Oakleys as well (or perhaps an inauthentic version thereof), then can we not cluster Celebrity A and Person B together? If Celebrity A and Person B were in the same room together, both supposedly wearing Oakley sunglasses, would we not cluster them together as "like objects"? From here, we must draw upon another portion of Goffman's original categories for objects; that of status objects. (Riggins 1990) "In North America price is a major indicator of status artifacts. […] For research purposes, *apparent cost* may be a more practical concept than actual cost. Apparent cost is also useful for what it reveals about attitudes toward status." (Riggins 1990: 348) Goffman's ideas on apparent cost can easily be applied to sunglasses. According to Goffman, then, it should not matter whether Person B is wearing cheap forgeries of Oakley sunglasses, so long as they *seem* to be authentic and *seem* to cost hundreds of dollars. The important part of status objects, such as designer sunglasses, is not that they are of superior quality, but rather that they are *recognized by others* as being superior to the low-end versions of those objects. Thus, our question from earlier is answered; people would like to be seen wearing high-end sunglasses (or reasonable facsimiles) so that others may recognize the brand and assume a potentially different socio-economic status but also so that they may be perhaps mistakenly clustered with Celebrity A or B or C who may also wear that brand. Further, the very existence of imitation high-end items shows that there are people who may not have the means (or the desire to spend over a certain amount for an item) to purchase high-end objects, but would like to be thought of by others as someone who can easily drop $300 on a pair of sunglasses. People's desire for "coolness by association" by being clustered with

celebrities for having something in common with them (an extension of the celebrity endorsements that are so popular), along with the image management that is inherent in causing others to draw certain conclusions about them, are a natural progression of both Goffman's and Dittmar's theories.

To summarize, sunglasses are "cool" for a variety of reasons. The first is that they are not generally corrective lenses, which are seen as "uncool" due to the nerd and intellectual stereotypes surrounding glasses, as seen most clearly with the example of Steve Urkel from the ABC situation comedy *Family Matters*. Although the sunglasses are similar to spectacles, the tinted lenses and non-corrective attribute of these tinted lenses make sunglasses "cooler" than other types of glasses.

This is the second reason that sunglasses are cool: the tinted lenses allow the wearer to hide their emotions more easily. "Cool" people are generally seen as calm and composed, so sunglasses can help mask the wearer's emotions if they're NOT calm and composed, to better sell the idea of "keeping one's cool". (Danesi 1994) A prime example of this use of sunglasses can be seen by watching professional poker tournaments and professional poker players, such as Phil Hellmuth, Bob Safai and Phil Laak, all of whom typically wear sunglasses to prevent others from accurately gauging their reactions and to prevent others from knowing that they are being observed by the person wearing sunglasses. (Rosenbloom 2005)

The third primary reason for the "coolness" of sunglasses is due to the long history they have with celebrities, dating back to silent movie-era stars. The endorsements of popular figures, such as the celebrities in the 1960s Who's That Behind Those Foster Grants campaign, aid

greatly in making those items appear “cooler”, due to the inherent imitation of the celebrity who is acting as a spokesperson by the consumers of the product.

The fourth main reason for sunglasses being “cool” is that if they appear to be particularly high-quality items, other people will make assumptions (that may or may not be correct) about the wearer of the sunglasses. Regardless of whether or not the sunglasses cost $300, as long as they appear to have cost a good amount, observers will be able to make a decision about the wearer and their life, their lifestyle and, most particularly, their socio-economic status.

In conclusion, an item that began its long history as a crafted item by the Inuit in the 1200s, the primary purpose of which was to protect the wearer’s eyes from the harsh glare of the sun and the reflection thereof in the snow, has become synonymous with the idea of “cool” with very little thanks to its protective properties. Instead, sunglasses, while still used for protection from ultraviolet rays, are a personal fashion statement, can be a personal economic statement, act as a physical barrier between one’s “front stage” and “back stage” and, as such, might even be able to help you win a game or two of poker.

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