

FIELD GUIDE / ISSUE 001

THE COOLNESS LABORATORY

A DELIBERATELY UNSCIENTIFIC
STUDY OF THE STRANGE THING
WE CALL "COOL".

Twelve editorial pages of models, examples, critical reading, creative exercises, and one empty coordinate plane. No winners. No rankings. No secret personality test.

SAHIL TAYAL / 28 OCTOBER 2026

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THE STUDY THAT ISN'T

This guide is part essay, part design workbook, part affectionate rebellion against reducing people to metrics.

One useful distinction: a person can find something cool without believing it is good, ethical, fashionable, successful, or worth imitating. Coolness is an interpretation occurring in a particular social setting. That makes it fascinating to investigate and dangerous to turn into a universal scoreboard.

WE ARE STUDYING

Creative expressions

What happens when you adjust intensity, tempo, texture and presence as if they were art-direction choices?

WE ARE NOT STUDYING

Your human value

Nothing here estimates talent, attractiveness, status, moral worth, popularity, or psychological traits.

THE THREE RULES OF THIS LAB

01 A coordinate is not a grade.

$X = 80$ does not beat $X = 20$. The axis only specifies a chosen direction on a toy map.

02 A preference is not a prophecy.

Choosing bright color today does not reveal who you are in every room or tomorrow.

03 Play with categories; do not imprison people in them.

Labels can generate imaginative metaphors, but they are poor containers for lived complexity.

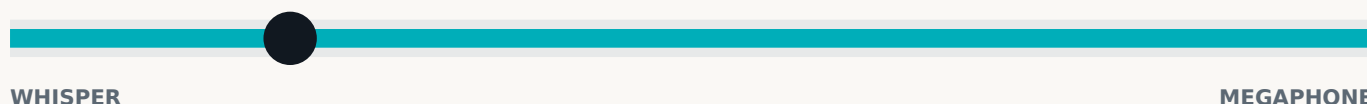
Field note: Your expression can be both playful and serious. You do not need a coolness certification to make a poster, wear a strange color, or revise your point of view.

MODEL 01

THE FOUR CREATIVE DIALS

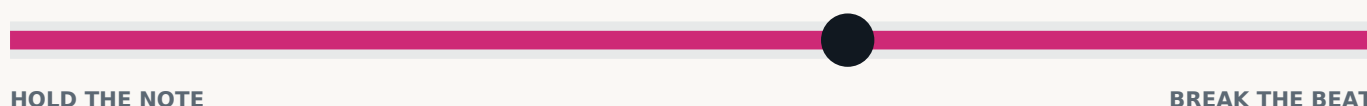
Four intentionally invented spectrums. They are prompts for making, not validated traits of people.

01 / SIGNAL



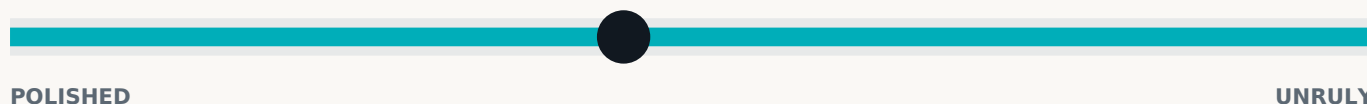
How prominently does the expression announce itself? Volume of style is not confidence.

02 / TEMPO



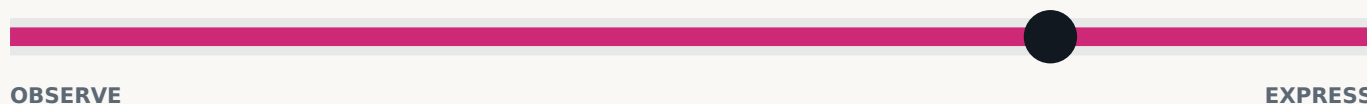
Does the form unfold slowly or demand rapid movement? Tempo is not competence.

03 / TEXTURE



Are surfaces spare and controlled, or layered and irregular? Either can be intentional.

04 / PRESENCE



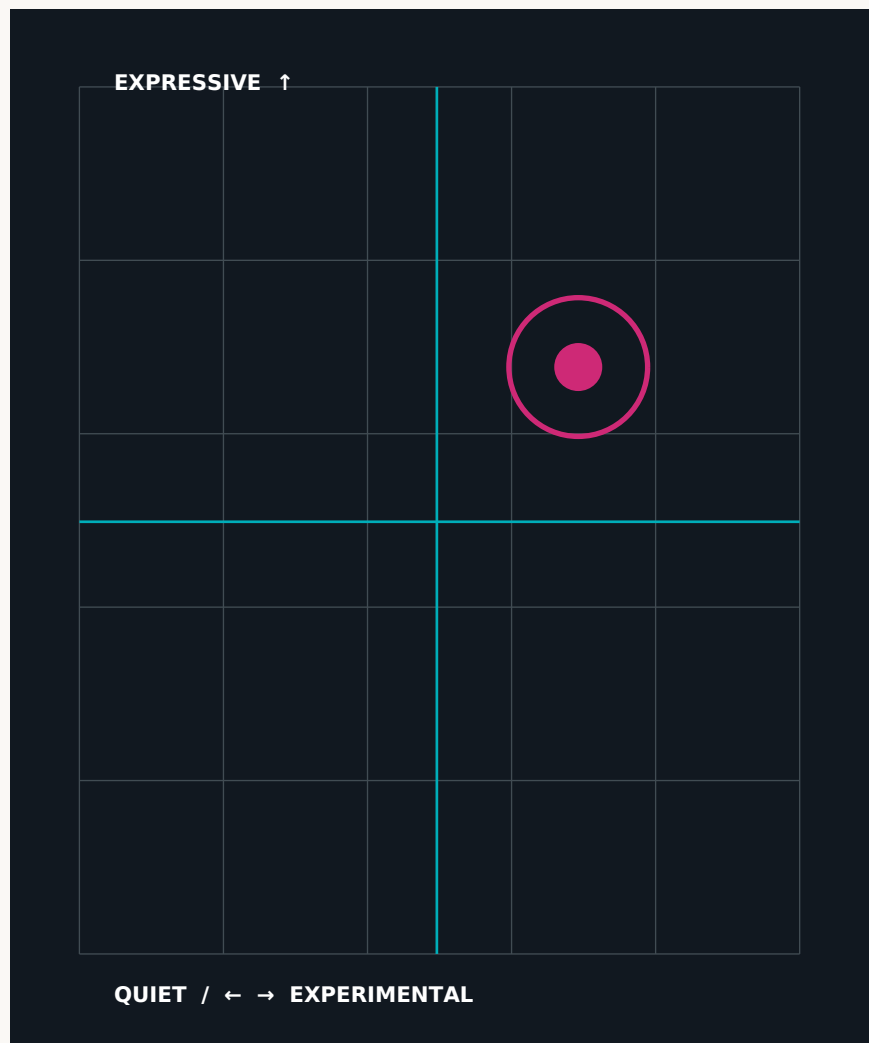
Does this creation leave space or seek to participate? Neither is superior.

IMPORTANT: ZERO VALIDATION CLAIMS

No survey established these four axes. No statistical construct, clinical outcome, or population benchmark exists for this installation. The numbers reflect where you set a dial; nothing more.

MODEL 02

THE MAP IS A METAPHOR



X coordinate
Mean of Signal + Texture

Y coordinate
Mean of Tempo + Presence

The displayed point changes as your inputs change. There is no target area, good corner, or ideal value.

Hypothetical example

Signal 40

Tempo 80

Texture 60

Presence 20

Example: $X = (40 + 60) \div 2 = 50$. $Y = (80 + 20) \div 2 = 50$. Coordinates (50, 50) do not mean someone is "half cool."

Interpretation, not inference. If two people land at the same point, their stories can still differ because the mapping discards detail. This is a feature of the artwork and a reminder of what any simplified diagram leaves out.

FICTIONAL CASES

THREE STYLES. ZERO PODIUM.

These scenarios are inventions. Their lesson is to ask better questions about context—not to assign people to categories.

FICTION / 001

THE SILENT FIREWORK

Speaks briefly in a meeting, then asks the question everyone had avoided. Wears muted colors, experiments wildly in private.

Possible reading: An understated exterior can coexist with high imaginative intensity. Quiet is not absence.

Question: What happens if the room only values the loudest voice?

FICTION / 002

THE BRIGHT INTERRUPTION

Arrives in a fluorescent jacket, turns a routine task into a playful ritual, and notices when the joke stops landing.

Possible reading: Visibility can create energy, but attentiveness still matters. Being noticed is not being understood.

Question: When does a playful signal become unwanted noise?

FICTION / 003

THE IN-BETWEEN INVENTOR

Composes a playlist from incompatible genres. Changes their style between contexts without announcing a rebrand.

Possible reading: Flexibility need not be hypocrisy. Consistency can be valuable without becoming compulsory.

Question: Who decides how much consistency we owe others?

FIELD PROTOCOL

MAKE A STYLE. CHANGE THE ROOM.

A comparative exercise in context. You can complete it with a poster, an outfit sketch, a paragraph, or a fictional character.

A / COMPOSE

Choose two dials to emphasize. Write one sentence describing the result. Example: "slow tempo + unruly texture = a hand-drawn invitation that refuses to hurry."

B / RECONTEXTUALIZE

Place the same creation in three settings: a community performance, a job interview, and a private conversation. What becomes legible? What becomes distracting?

C / REVERSE THE GAZE

Who is interpreting the signal, and with what expectations? Avoid treating the audience as a uniform group.

D / REFINE WITHOUT SURRENDER

Choose one adjustment that helps communication while keeping the part of the expression that matters to you.

What this exercise can reveal: how judgments shift with setting and purpose. What it cannot reveal: an objective score of how cool you are.

RESEARCH 01

WHAT THE LITERATURE CAN SAY

This installation did not run a study. The references below are sources for reflection, not validation of our dials.

EMPIRICAL STUDY

Pezzuti, Warren & Chen (2025), "Cool People"

The researchers report experiments with 5,943 respondents in 12 countries. Perceptions of "cool" and "good" people overlap, but are not the same. In their results, cool targets were more associated with traits such as extraversion, adventure, openness and autonomy; good targets were more associated with warmth and conscientiousness.

READ THE LIMITATIONS

Participants had to understand the slang term "cool"; many experiments were online. These findings concern patterns in perceived traits, not the truth of impressions about a particular person. Cultural similarities in this study do not erase local context.

SOCIOLOGICAL FRAME

Erving Goffman (1959), The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life

Goffman describes everyday social encounters through a theatrical metaphor: people present themselves to different audiences and manage impressions. It is a theoretical lens for considering situations, not a machine for inferring intentions.

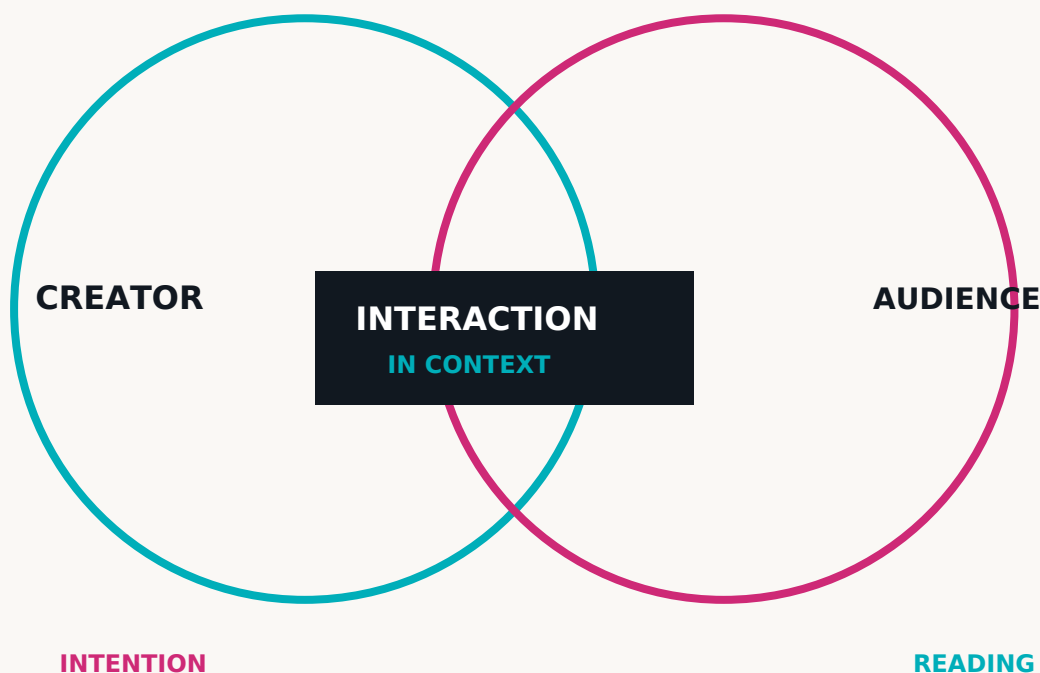
Our editorial inference: because the social meaning of a gesture depends partly on the audience, a permanent "coolness rating" would be an especially impoverished account. That conclusion is our interpretation; it is not a measured finding from the website.

Keep your categories honest: evidence ≠ theory ≠ editorial interpretation ≠ satire.

CULTURAL CONTEXT

THE ROOM CHANGES THE SIGNAL.

A deliberately simple map of what shapes the meaning of an expression.



The creator chooses elements with particular aims and constraints. The audience notices selectively, using expectations, past experiences and situational norms. The setting provides rules of its own: a jazz club, formal ceremony, school corridor, online forum or intimate kitchen are not interchangeable.

The diagram is not a causal model and has no estimated coefficients. It simply resists one tempting error: to attribute every reaction solely to a person's essence.

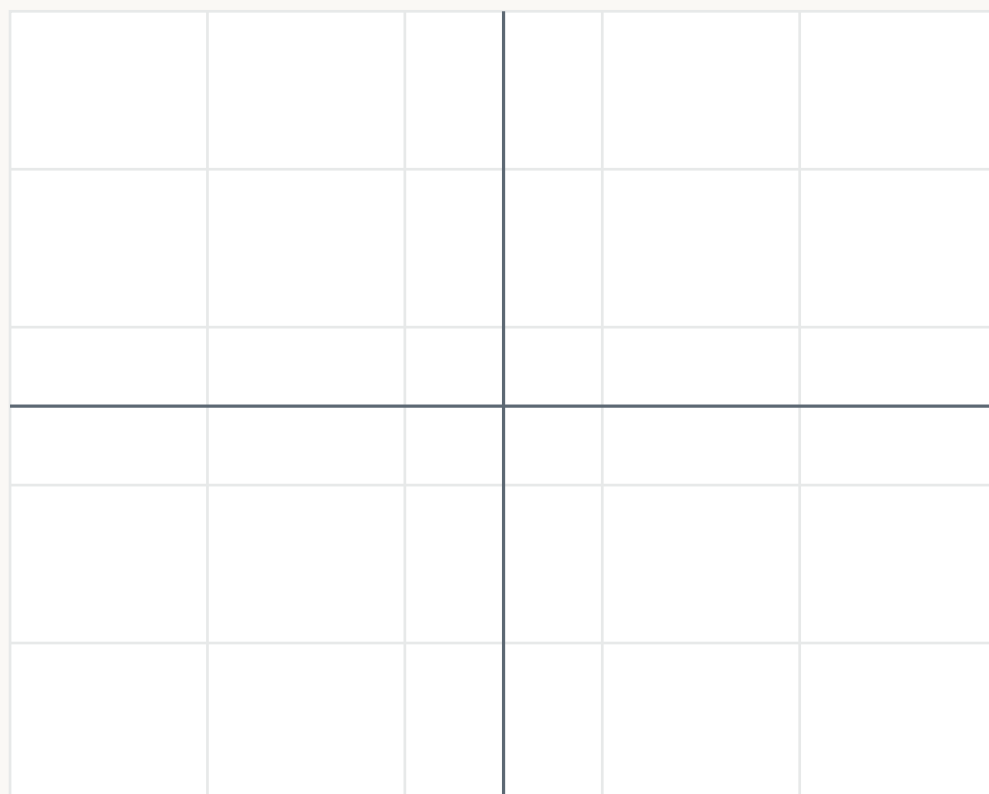
Try it: Think of a style choice that felt natural in one room and difficult in another. Which expectation changed? What part of the choice would you keep anyway?

WORKSHEET A

DRAW YOUR OWN COORDINATES

Choose a fictional design, not necessarily a person. Mark your preferences. The point is to notice tradeoffs.

EXPRESSIVE ↑



SIGNAL

0 _____
 25 _____
 50 _____
 75 _____
 100 _____

TEMPO

0 _____
 25 _____
 50 _____
 75 _____
 100 _____

QUIET ←

→ EXPERIMENTAL

1. Set your Signal, Tempo, Texture and Presence preferences from 0-100. These are invented creative scales. 2. Compute $X = (\text{Signal} + \text{Texture})/2$ and $Y = (\text{Tempo} + \text{Presence})/2$. 3. Mark the point. 4. Change one input and reflect on what moved.

My creation is:

One choice I would defend:

One thing this graph cannot show:

WORKSHEET B

RUN THE TWO-ROOM TEST

Create two plausible descriptions of the same style choice, each told from a different setting.

SCENE 01 / A ROOM THAT UNDERSTANDS

Imagine the setting in which your choice feels alive and legible. What exactly makes it work?

SCENE 02 / A ROOM THAT MISREADS

Now change the setting, not the person or design. Which assumptions or norms produce friction?

Debrief. What would you explain, translate or adapt? What would you leave untouched? Avoid the false choice between performing for everyone and refusing all feedback. Agency and social skill can coexist.

One possible takeaway: an interesting identity is a process, not an object that can be placed on a shelf with a definitive label.

CRITICAL READING

SIX QUESTIONS FOR ANY "COOLNESS"

These questions work for brand presentations, influencer rankings, personality quizzes and this installation itself.

01 WHO DECIDES?

Is the audience named? Are judgments from one context generalized to everyone?

02 WHAT IS MEASURED?

An attitude, a self-report, observed behavior, or a creative dial? These are not interchangeable.

03 WHERE IS THE VALIDATION?

Was the scale tested for the claim being made? Could another explanation fit the result?

04 IS THERE A HIDDEN RANKING?

Does a supposedly neutral coordinate smuggle in a preferred quadrant, class or identity?

05 WHAT IS EXCLUDED?

Whose voices, cultures, settings, accessibility needs or alternative tastes are missing?

06 CAN I OPT OUT?

Can people reject the label, question the assumptions and keep their dignity?

A rule worth keeping: Being admired is not the same as being admirable. Being unusual is not the same as being valuable. Neither statement makes curiosity, craft, friendship or play any less worthwhile.

SOURCES & RIGHTS

OPEN WORK. OPEN QUESTIONS.

A reading list, a licensing note, and the limits of what this guide claims.

REFERENCES

- Pezzuti, T., Warren, C., & Chen, J. (2025). Cool People. Journal of Experimental Psychology: General. DOI: 10.1037/xge0001799. <https://doi.org/10.1037/xge0001799>
- American Psychological Association. (2025, June 30). Cool is cool wherever you are. <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2025/06/cool-personality-traits-across-cultures>
- Goffman, E. (1959). The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life. Anchor Books. Publisher: <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/61106/the-presentation-of-self-in-everyday-life-by-erving-goffman/9780385094023/>

THIS IS NOT A SCIENTIFIC TEST. The sliders, coordinates, labels, examples, graphics and exercises in this guide are original creative materials. They have not been psychometrically validated; no clinical, personality or performance conclusions should be drawn from them.

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CONTACT. Questions, corrections or a delightfully strange field observation? Write to sahil@sahiltayal.com. The website and archive begin at <https://sahiltayal.com>.

COOL IS A CONVERSATION, NOT A CERTIFICATE.
MAKE SOMETHING. CHANGE YOUR MIND. KEEP THE DOOR OPEN.