Everything is so 5 minutes ago

by Olivia Barker

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A year or so ago, mesh trucker caps, screaming "John Deere", perched on the heads of hipsters in such edgy haunts as Williamsburg, a Brooklyn neighborhood. Now, Ashton Kutcher wears them. "As soon as Ashton Kutcher adopts a trend it is over," says Robert Lanham, author of the recently published Hipster Handbook. “Ditto Kutcher's female counterpoint, Avril Lavigne.”

Out in a mall 30 miles from his neighborhood, Lanham spies a succinct illustration of his point: a red-and- white trucker hat with "Idiot" slapped across the front. When it makes it to the mall it is over. Then who becomes the real idiot.

The cool continuum is being compressed. What used to require years to migrate to the mall now takes only a matter of months. How can hipsters stay ahead of the mall? "The way culture is these days, everything is so five minutes ago," says Jon Hein, creator of Jumptheshark.com.

"There's a lot more available to us in a shorter period of time," Hein says, from cable channels to thousands of Web sites. "Cycles churn faster and faster, until the suburbs can almost catch up to the cities.”

Soon the formerly subversive — tattoos, belly piercings and fauxhawks — turn up at the prom. "The very nature of cool is that not everybody's in on it, so once people know about it, it's hard to stay cool," Hein says. "The shelf life shrinks. When it becomes mass-marketed, it loses something," Hein says. "Things go downhill from there."

Part of what's changing is mainstream companies feel they need to tap into an edgy aesthetic to sell their product, with sometimes disastrous results. "If you have to tell someone it's cool, it's not," Hein says.

There's the trickle-up phenomenon also. Just as runways and fashion magazines stole the safety-pinned look from late-'70s punks, posh stores from Barneys New York to Fred Segal in Los Angeles are peddling pricey versions of such heretofore hipster chestnuts as plastic floral mules, Vans slip-on sneakers and, yes, trucker hats.

Being cool means being the first to yank something out of context and layer on the contradictions. Having money, for instance, is OK if you cloak it in Salvation Army apparel.

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Then the masses discover it. At Wet Seal, a chain store in the mall, the '80s new-wave look is in full revival mode: low-slung belts, black rubber bracelets and silver-dollar-size hoop earrings.

At a store called Tees Me, T-shirts with shiny (not vintage) Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles hang on the racks. A few doors away, Hot Topic features a Strawberry Shortcake beach towel in the window. It's new—and that's a big no-no: Hipsters insist on authentic items from the past, not mass-marketed reproductions today.

Cool is also "about finding something extremely underground," Lanham says. To Diana Kramer, 14, cool is more elusive. "You can't define it. It's what you like," she says. "You can be trendy or you can choose to have your own style." Her friend, Allison Monfort, bemoans "all that preppy stuff" at H&M and Abercrombie & Fitch, because it's contrived cool. Hot Topic, too, is patronized largely by "poseurs," says Allison, 13, a padlocked chain around her neck and chipped red polish on her fingernails. She's partial to thrift stores in the East Village.

"Ooh, this is cool," marvels Jordon Davis, holding up a new leather jacket. Lanham's internal hipster barometer hears little irony. Davis, 19, an aspiring model and artist, is an Angeleno on his inaugural visit to New York. Clad in black cowboy boots, tight blue jeans and a shaggy haircut Lanham dubs the Casablanca, Davis is "more classic," says his friend Roz Dunn, 24, a party promoter who lives nearby. "I'm crazier."

Dunn's uniform includes black motorcycle boots, light blue jeans secured by a ribbon belt and a white acrylic sweater capped by puffy sleeves and lace trim — the kind your mother forced you to wear in fourth grade.

Lanham has an epithet to describe this completely uncool crowd: midtown.

And Bianca Casady is the antithesis of midtown. Strolling cellphone in hand along Bedford Avenue, she's wearing a houndstooth jacket over a tunic that looks like it was swiped from a candy striper (a friend made it), piled on top of some blue sweatpants featuring a faint camouflage print. On her feet: white sneakers from the Air Jordans heyday. Her hair, she cut it herself, is an electro-mullet (Lanham’s term).

"My influence is really tacky street fashion. I'm really into gold, cheap gold," says Casady, 21, designer.

Lanham just beams.