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BATTLE OF THE BRANDS: PRODUCING MEDIUM-SPECIFIC VIDEO
PROMOTION OF MUSIC COMMODITY SIGNS FOR THE NEW MEDIA EPOCH

BY

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This project is an investigation of how video can work to effectively promote musical artists within the new media environment. With the emergence of Web 2.0 in the early 2000s came the ability for anyone to create and upload their own content. There was a notion that new media would be a solution for all of the problems associated with the distribution and recognition of creative content. As user-generated webcam and cellphone videos reached millions of views on websites such as YouTube in the mid-2000s, this belief that anyone can be an internet sensation just by sharing their content online was further reinforced. Being both a video producer and musician myself, I can attest that this is sadly not the case. This poses the complex question of how to effectively differentiate content from the seemingly infinite amount of competition on the internet. It made me work to explore how I, as a video producer, can construct my work in a way that will both stand out and foster online virality.

I began this study by researching how nationally and internationally recognized artists are effectively branded through video by mapping out the general history of music videos, promotional booking videos, and television album commercials, as well as observing how these were expanded from radio commercials. It gave me a perspective on how brand is established and reinforced to effectively promote musicians. This was in order to apply similar techniques to promote two local artists in the Champaign-Urbana community, I Am God and Justin Larkin, as well as Cavetone Records, a record label based in Charleston, Illinois.

Upon completing this mapping project, I studied various scholastic media texts, primarily those focusing on branding, semiotics, and medium theory. I then analyzed these theories' practical relationship with visual promotion. I focused primarily on how semiotics operates within branding to attach value and emotion to a commodity, differentiating it from competition and building consumer loyalty. Also, how media operate as environments and how a promotional

text operates specifically within new media. Ultimately, I applied this knowledge of media theory while developing my promotional video productions of I Am God, Justin Larkin, and Cavetone Records. This allowed me to achieve further theoretical understanding, as well as their praxis in both the new media environment and the overall image of the promotional subject.

My positionality in the context of this study is one of scholar, video producer, and fan of music. I decided to conduct this study in order to expand my skill of video production by learning how to effectively utilize topics in media theory to expand brand image and promote musical artists. The study also served as a way to merge my academic focus of video production with my passion for music. It gave me an excellent opportunity to take academic concepts outside of the classroom and directly apply them within the local community in a way that expands my knowledge of these topics, my ability to create an effective video production, and my portfolio of work for employment upon graduation.

A REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Branding. One key theory that this study focuses on is how brand is effectively created and maintained as a tool for differentiation and applying value and emotion. Branding is the process of attaching symbols to separate a subject from its competition, adding cultural values and emotional ties to influence the perception of the audience. For instance, punk rock bands do not simply sell music; they sell rebellion against mainstream convention and do-it-yourself ethics.

The general concept of branding a subject stems from human nature. Similar to how people automatically create their own opinions of each other, people also judge and brand companies, regardless of whether or not the company has actively worked to brand themselves (Schley & Nichols, 2005). Companies spend money and work constantly to develop and

maintain their brand in order to generate the best and most effective consumer image possible by constructing a unique aesthetic through the attachment of culturally valuable signifiers.

Pike (2013) defines the brand of a company or product as “particular characteristics that are configured in ways that seek to create differentiated meaning and value vis-à-vis competitors in particular market contexts” (p. 320). Simplistically, branding works to create an individualized and unique consumer perspective of the subject, making it stand out from its competition. It is the force that differentiates one product from another. This is the cause of countless consumerist feuds, such as PC owners versus Mac owners, Pepsi drinkers versus Coca-Cola drinkers, and Ford drivers versus General Motors drivers.

The way that a meaning is conveyed through brand is the same as meaning is conveyed in any facet of communication: through the use of symbols. Essentially, branding is a method utilized to create and distribute value and meaning through the use of symbols (Smith et al., 2002). Brands establish differentiation from each other symbolically, which creates a commodity sign containing these values that can be used to effectively sell. It is the reason a metal band would use horror-inspired symbols and dark, high-contrast photography while hip-hop artists utilize realist elements and status symbols indicative of lower-class, urban culture.

In addition to diversifying a subject from the opposition, brands also lead to strong bonds between the buyer and the product or service. They allow the consumer to create personal relationships with the branded, forming emotional bonds of trust and self-identity (Hanson, 2000). These personal bonds that the consumer associates with brands foster loyalty over competing companies and products, as the individual uses their consumption of certain brands as method of self-expression and identification.

Some companies have expanded this concept of the emotional link between brand and

consumer by purposefully attaching specific, strong emotions to their brand. A study of emotional branding focusing on consumer opinion of trust, bonding, resonance, companionship determined that while the latter four were difficult for a brand to achieve, “[c]onsumers fully trust most – but not all – of the brands that they buy” (Rossiter & Bellman 2012, p. 291). Judging from the findings of this study, companies should work to effectively convey emotional ties of trust to heighten their brand equity. In relation to this study, the audience must trust that the aesthetic and values of a musical artist or record label will remain intact. The most visible example of this is when a band is accused of “selling out” for signing from an independent record label to a major one. Major record labels utilize smaller subsidiary labels as a way to maintain the artist’s independent credibility.

Branding is a never ending process that requires constant attention and maintenance to be successful. Not only must a brand be effectively established, but it must also be maintained to retain value. Goldman & Papson (1996) state that “[b]rand equity dissipates quickly if left unattended” (p. 23). Brand equity is extremely fragile in that it can easily be damaged. One thing detrimental to a brand is imitation. When a brand becomes noteworthy and exceptional, others will follow in its footsteps in order to achieve a similar level of notoriety and success. This is an ironic situation, as differentiation is a primary component of branding. Understandably, this obviously has a negative impact on the original brand, forcing constant repositioning (Goldman & Papson, 1996).

Mishaps and other negative information about the company or product can destroy the value of the brand (Hulbert, Capon, & Piercy, 2003), as brand is entirely based off of how the consumer sees the subject. As the public perception of a company declines, the value of their brand declines. An major example of a considerable loss in brand equity is the oil and gas

company BP. BP's oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in April 2010 caused the company's brand equity to fall 61% in two months (Marketing Week, 2010). This loss in value also damaged the relationships BP holds with other organizations. For instance, funds required for clean-up efforts were hard to obtain from their bankers, resulting in BP paying considerably higher fees than would usually be required (Ritson, 2010).

A famous example in the music industry is when pop group Milli Vanilli were discovered to be lip-synching to prerecorded music that was created by someone else. This caused a huge media and audience backlash, even prompting The National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences to revoke their Grammy award (Phillips, 1990). Brand equity takes a considerable amount of time and money to carefully develop and build and can be quickly ruined with one mishap.

Branding is an extremely vital element of the business world today. Holt (2006) argues that branding has become a "core activity of capitalism" (300). This is due to its ability to distinguish one's company or product from its competition, as well as form a loyal following of consumers. Judging from the power that comes with branding, it is no wonder that "the brand has become a central feature of contemporary economic life" (Lury, 2004, p. 27). A well-established, unique brand is the main component in the current business world that is able to separate a commodity from the seemingly infinite amount of competition.

Brand images have become such an important aspect of business that they have their own monetary value attached to them. Current business acquisitions are conducted with the estimated value of intangible assets, such as the value of the brand, held to an extremely high regard. One notable example is Cadbury Schweppes's acquisition of Procter & Gamble's soft-drink company Hires and Crush, where of the \$220 million paid, \$200 million was cited to be for the brand

value (Goldman & Papson, 1996). To place the value of a corporation's brand in perspective within the current landscape, the American branding consultancy Interbrand (2013) estimates the top five global brands as follows: Apple, \$98,316 million; Google, \$93,291 million; Coca-Cola, 79,213 million; IBM, 78,808 million; and Microsoft, 59,546 million. A large amount of a company's worth is in their image.

Music serves as a major element of corporate branding today. This is done through the process of building partnerships between music and brand/company. Krishnan & Kellaris (2010) state that “[h]uge investments are made for creation and airing of auditory branding stimuli” (p. 131). Through this process of sonic branding, the company attaches a popular piece of music to associate the song with the image of the company or product. This advertising practice of attaching the sonic identifier of a popular song to a brand works to enhance the image of the company, memorability of the commercial, and awareness of the song. In effect, the brand and musical artist are benefitted in a mutual way.

These partnerships were originally seen as simply a way for artists to earn additional money by selling a company the rights to use their material for their advertisement. However, Sutherland (2011) states that “as album sales decline and labels' marketing budgets are slashed, more collaborative partnerships are becoming the norm, with brands wooing stars with opportunities for creative input and raised profile rather than cold, hard cash” (p. 30). Examples of this are Polaroid making Lady Gaga the creative director for their Gray Label line of products and Intel employing will.i.am from Black Eyed Peas as the director of creative innovation (Sutherland, 2011). Brand partnerships not only offer additional revenue for musical artists, but further establishment of brand equity and notoriety. On the side of the company, the attachment of the musical artist with their image expands the consumer audience of the product and the

cultural value of the brand.

Altshuler (2007) argues that new musical artists are now found through friend referral over the internet, rather than radio play. Similarly, people now have the opportunity to discover the source of branding content online, which allows the music that is used in commercials to be easily identified and downloaded. This makes it extremely beneficial to have these musician and brand relationships. David Elsworth, the director of creative development at Coca-Cola, states “[b]randed content is not pushed at people but requested, downloaded, collected or shared” (Altshuler, 2007, p. 23). Consumers now work in a more active relationship with brands. Successful brands will be actively downloaded, shared, and commented on through the use of new media, while unsuccessful branding will not achieve this virality.

A notable example of a band that achieved success due to their music appearing in a commercial is indie rock group Noisettes. Their 2009 sophomore album *Wild Young Hearts* was released after their single “Don’t Upset the Rhythm (Go Baby Go)” was featured on the television advertisement for the Mazda 2. This ad gave the band a large amount of attention, causing the release of the single to chart at number two, while the album made it on the top ten (Sutherland, 2011).

New media benefits the artist within this partnership due to these commercials generating online attention and social media virality coupled with the previously mentioned ability to easily identify the artist who’s content appears in the advertisement. With the rising amount of competition within the music industry, coupled with radio and televised music videos favoring the most popular artists, a partnership with a company is an enormous break for an independent band such as the Noisettes. Having their song featured in a commercial gives them mainstream attention that they would be extremely unlikely to achieve otherwise.

Companies utilize these relationships with music artists with the goal of gaining brand equity, rather than a direct profit. Hampp (2011) states:

[A] growing roster of brands like Converse, Scion, Intel, PepsiCo, Red Bull and others are opting for more of a corporate-underwriting approach to music--from serving as a part-time label to funding original music videos to hosting recording sessions. And many are doing so with little expectation of a direct return on their investment--many marketers cite 'positive buzz' or 'cultural relevance' as their key indicators of success, not product sales (p. 8).

This use of the musical artist treats the musician as a signifier for positive cultural values, associating the brand with the values attached to the musician. Working with famous musicians works to generate good entertainment press for the company to further spread their brand. It also works to directly advertise to the fan base of the artist, associating the brand, company, and product as an extension of the musician.

Corporations have also begun to have a strong presence and involvement with music festivals in order to expand brand equity. Hampp (2013) specifically examines South By Southwest (SXSW) and the success brands have faced by being involved with the annual festival, stating that the 2012 festival was so successful that every sponsor returned in 2013, along with additional ones. A notable example of the success of SXSW 2013 is that the Warner Sound Captured by Nikon showcase had over a half-million people watching the online live stream, as well as over 154 million posts associated with the #NikonWarnerSound hashtag, resulting in it being the number one trending topic several instances (Hampp, 2013). The involvement of brands with the music festival are beneficial by generating a large amount of social media presence, as well as a positive and culturally valuable image from the perspective of

the participants of the music festival.

While there are various academic texts of how corporate brands are constructed, expanded and maintained, as well as multiple texts on how corporate brands utilize musicians for their brand equity, there is a significant gap in literature focusing on the musical artist. The specific direct-to-consumer active brand construction of musicians is a subject seldom talked about and approached in a scholarly, problematizing way. These aforementioned pieces of music-related branding literature are concerned with how the music works to enhance the brand of the company, rather than how the brand of a musician is established.

Semiotics. The concept of branding cannot be completely understood without a grounding in semiotics and an understanding of the importance of floating signification. Simplistically, semiotics is the study of how meaning is created and transmitted through the use of signs (Eco, 1979). These signs are comprised of two parts: a signifier, which is the object, and the signified, which is what this object represents (Seiter, 1992). For instance, the signifier is the symbol or word itself, while the signified is the cultural message that the sign conveys to the person interpreting it. These two distinct parts of the sign are inseparable from one another in the practical sense of communication. A sign is subjective in that it can be interpreted by different people in various ways.

In terms of branding, the signifier is detached from its original context, creating the floating signifier. The floating signifier is then applied to the product or company in order to transfer meaning. Goldman and Papson (1996) state that “ads combine and recombine signifiers and signifieds to define a sign currency that can be joined to commodities” (p. 24). They go on to mention an example of associating the signifier of cowboys to Busch beer. This project of attaching signifiers to a brand is in order to transfer the meaning of the signifier over to the brand

itself, associating the company or product with that meaning.

The relationship between branding and semiotics is based on the fact that all of the elements that make up a brand can be interpreted as signs. Graphical elements, products, services, environments, and even employee behavior, all “have the ability to trigger responses in consumers’ minds about [a] brand” (Santos, 2012, p. 102). Even the way a consumer chooses to use the product or service creates signs about the brand, left for individual interpretations by onlookers.

As previously mentioned, a primary branding technique is to apply a signifier in order to transfer its meaning over to the brand. This is done through a process of detaching the signifier from its original context to boost the value of a brand, ultimately creating a commodity sign (Goldman and Papson, 1996). These images being attached to the brand come with a positive social and cultural value that is beneficial to the company’s image. The commodity sign is the floating signifier working within the context of the brand.

This practice has been utilized in advertising for decades. Koten (1984) cites a quote from a communication research manager for Coca-Cola:

We nominate Pavlov as the father of modern advertising. Pavlov took a neutral object and, by associating it with a meaningful object, make it a symbol of something else; he imbued it with imagery, he gave it added value. That is what we try to do in modern advertising (p. 31).

This is exactly what the attachment of floating signifiers does to a brand. It applies the value of a concept (the detached, floating signifier) to a commodity (the signified product that is being branded) in order to associate the same emotional ties the audience has with the signifier to the product. Musicians within the country genre utilize floating signification with the United States

flag, the Confederate flag, cowboy clothing, earthy color tones, and rural landscapes to associate patriotism, traditionalist values, and nostalgia to their music.

The practice is effective due to its ability to transform a brand into a way for the consumer to define their lifestyle. Modern consumerism is ideologically linked to a lifestyle, as what a person purchases and uses is seen as an identification of how they live (Czitrom, 1982). This includes, but is not limited to, what one wears, what one drives, and what one eats. Commodity signs work because of the existence of shared systems of meaning and an interchangeable set of rules for interpretation derived from other advertisements (Goldman, 1987).

The modern theory of semiotics is based within the paradigm of post-structuralism, which states that the meaning of any element within a cultural system is taken from its relationship to all of the other elements within the same system (Seiter, 1992). Basically, meaning does not exist on an independent level. It is derived from the element's difference from all of the other elements within the system. This also comes with the belief that symbols are polysemic, in that the same symbol can be interpreted in various ways.

This concept of meaning being created through this relational context is utilized in branding. Goldman and Papson (1996) argue that “[a]dvertisers often work in ways mindful of how the pioneer of semiotics, Saussure, approached his task, slicing everything into paired categories” (p. 25). An easy way of establishing what constitutes a brand is by contrasting it by its opposite. Through the act of juxtaposing positive elements that constitute a company's brand with negative signifiers, it establishes the belief that the company or product outshines its competition.

In addition, any meaning that the sign holds is completely relative to the individual processing it. The sign itself does not actually hold meaning, rather the meaning is ultimately derived from the individual's interpretation of the sign (Chandler, 2007). Different cultural backgrounds, opinions, and preferences will cause people to read signs in alternate, unique perspectives. Floating signification operates on two orders of meaning. The first order of is the metaphorical value relationship, such as the aforementioned Confederate flag's association with southern heritage and patriotism. The second order is the critical cultural interpretation, such as the themes of racism and pro-slavery.

Signification of signs comes in two levels of meaning: denotation and connotation. Fiske (1990) defines denotation as "the common-sense, obvious meaning of the sign," and connotation as "the interaction that occurs when the sign meets the feelings or emotions of the users and the values of their culture" (pp. 85-86). Denotation refers to the literal, objective definition of a sign. Connotation moves into the subjective sphere, where the meaning is left to individual interpretation.

Medium theory. After achieving an understanding of semiotics and branding, it is time to discuss medium-specific concerns by examining medium theory, remediation, and the concept of the medium as an ecosystem. Due to the impact that media has on the interpretation of the message it contains, it is important to examine how new media operates. This is why a focus on the effect of medium-specific texts, as opposed to remediation, or the act of transferring content from one medium to another, is a essential to consider when producing video specifically for new media.

McLuhan (1964/2003) summarized efficiently with his phrase "the medium is the message" (p. 17), which describes a medium as being an environment that impacts its content's

meaning, as well as the meaning behind the content of other media. This places the medium (television, radio, film, new media) at an extremely high importance, due to its ability to influence how the message is perceived by the audience. Media impact their messages in different ways, so it is vital to have an understanding of how content operates within the medium used.

Soon after in 1968, Postman coined the term media ecology to refer to the study of media as environment (Strate, 2004). Postman (1970) stated that the primary issue with media ecology is “how media of communication affect human perception, understanding, feeling, and value; and how our interaction with media facilitates or impedes our chances of survival” (p. 161). The media environments are made up of a variety of technologies, symbols, techniques, and communication modes. Just as how a literal ecosystem operates, a medium must adapt in the midst of new and emerging mediums in order to survive. No medium exists in isolation from the others.

Despite the vast difference between each of these environments, remediation is a constant practice today. Bolter and Grusin (2002) describe remediation as the process of transferring content from one medium to another. A large amount of content online is remediated from other media. Walus and Mattson (2013) explain that “[t]his reliance on remediation occurs in Web 1.0 with word processing and hypertext remediating print and now in Web 2.0 with the presence of audio and visual texts originally constructed for television” (p. 5). With websites such as Netflix and Hulu, episodes of television series’ have been remediated as online content. Musical artists have remediated their originally televised music videos to video-hosting websites such as YouTube. Musical albums have been remediated from physical releases to a digital collection of audio files through websites such as iTunes and Amazon.

Just because remediation is possible within new media does not mean that it is the most effective application for branding and attaching the aforementioned commodity signs.

Remediation from television to new media is the equivalent of moving an animal from one ecosystem to another. To properly construct a brand it is important to produce new texts suitable for survival within the new media environment. For example, promotional videos should be constructed with a short time duration and fast-paced narrative in order to achieve maximum retention and promote virality.

A unique component of the Web 2.0 new media environment, as opposed to other media, is the focus on the individual experience. Deuze (2006) describes this phenomenon as “hyperindividualization,” (p. 68) which arises from the freedom of personalization and is based in distantiating from the perceived mainstream society. With new media, the individual audience member is given considerably more freedom in their choice of content than they are with any other medium. Television and radio features some freedom with a variety of channels and stations to choose from, but the internet hosts a virtually infinite array of content that the individual audience member actively explores and chooses from. In addition, the individual is also given the ability to upload their own content and interact with other audience members.

Peirce (2011) argues that new media’s ability to engage the audience in interaction and participation, both within the medium-specific content and with each other, gives the ability to “cultivate superfans” (p. 322). The experience of engaging with a remediated television episode or film online does not end when the credits roll. New media offers a way for the viewer to easily seek additional content, connect with other fans, and possibly connect with members behind the content itself. However, due to the freedom of on-demand content, audience retention is

negatively impacted as the average attention span has diminished. Audience members are able to instantly move on to another text they find more appealing the second their interest weakens.

A major difference with online video is that new media contains a much higher ability to lend itself to niche audiences, while television and film mediums are primarily required to obtain the largest audience possible for financial reasons. Peirce (2011) argues that while television values a program based on individual viewers, new media bases value on total views or clicks, allowing repeat viewing from a smaller, niche audience to be beneficial. The specific amount of individual viewers is not able to be accurately obtained with internet content as it is with television.

The concept of a medium as an environment expands beyond the realm of audience interpretation of message meaning and into overall perceptions of the world. McLuhan & Fiore (1967) argue that “[a]ny understanding of social and cultural change is impossible without a knowledge of the way media work as environments” (p. 26). Media serve as the context in which societies come to an understanding. McLuhan & Fiore (1967) further explain that all media serve as extensions of human components, such as the wheel being an extension of the foot. In effect, these extensions alter human perceptions, which ultimately leads to changes of humanity as a whole.

This understanding of branding, semiotics, and medium theory was essential for my process of creating promotional new media video for I Am God, Justin Larkin, and Cavetone Records. I applied my understanding of branding and floating signification to effectively portray a differentiating brand within all nine of the videos. Studying medium theory and remediation gave me an understanding of how media greatly impact the way messages are interpreted, as well as the effectiveness of crafting medium-specific texts.

REFLECTION OF MAPPING THE PROMOTIONAL LANDSCAPE

Before beginning to develop new media-specific promotional videos for the artists and record label, I needed to have a strong understanding of the promotional landscape of active music branding throughout the years as it relates to video. I achieved this by examining the history of promotional video for musicians throughout television, film, and new media. I also reviewed radio in order to determine its relationship with the aforementioned media in terms of musician promotion. I conducted this by specifically mapping out the past and current approaches of direct-to-consumer advertising through radio, television, and the internet. It examines how record labels have worked to purposefully construct the image of their artists. This method of historicizing allowed me to understand how branding is actively conducted within the music industry through convergent public relations to alter the perception of the audience. I then applied this understanding while branding I Am God, Justin Larkin, and Cavetone Records with my direct-to-consumer new media texts.

Radio commercials. Radio commercials for music were utilized in order to advertise an upcoming or recent album release or a local concert date. One of the earliest examples I could find was an advertisement for the rock group Moby Grape from 1967, which took me by surprise. While future commercials were heavy in narration, this one simply featured a voice yelling the artist's name with one of their tracks as a music bed. The end featured a bit of information of the album's availability and record label. This was a very odd approach that went against the usual methods of advertising in order to appeal to a niche and "hip" counter-culture.

Other than this early exception, radio commercials advertising albums have not considerably changed since the 1970s. They were all explanative commercials that served to introduce the audience to the artist. These spots featured information about the history of the

artist, the upcoming album, and a preview of a couple notable tracks. The dialogue and content were tailored to match the aesthetic of the artist. Concert ads were conducted with the exact same formula.

Due to the increase in television commercials and the launch of the station MTV in 1981, it became more and more uncommon to hear a radio commercial for a musical release beginning in the 1980s. Prior to this, famous major label releases were promoted, notably Black Sabbath's self-titled release in 1970, Lou Reed's *Transformer* in 1972, The Supremes' self-titled album in 1975, and Billy Joel's *Glass Houses* in 1980. I found it difficult to locate recent radio spots, only finding ones promoting small, independent release such as Satan's Pilgrims' *Psychsploitation* in 2009 and Mister D's *Gangster's Get Lonely* in 2011.

TV Commercials. Television commercials for music advertisement began as a remediation of the aforementioned radio commercials. Just like the radio advertisements, these commercials were driven primarily by narration, offering a brief explanation of the artist and the album and featuring a preview of a few of the tracks. The use of visuals was minimal, secondary to the voiceover narration. Notable examples are the commercials for ABBA's *Arrival* in 1976 and Michael Jackson's *Thriller* in 1982. *Arrival* featured shots of the band exiting a plane along with footage of the band performing, while *Thriller* was comprised of a crude animation of patterns behind the photo on the album cover.

Of course, there were exceptions to this, such as the advertisement for Elton John's *Captain Fantastic And The Brown Dirt Cowboy* in 1975. This featured an extremely psychedelic cartoon, bearing a strong resemblance to The Beatles' film *Yellow Submarine*. This use of floating signification worked to associate Elton John with the popular psychedelic movement of the time. With this video, narration only occurred near the end to provide necessary information,

similar to the Moby Grape radio advertisement.

Currently, TV commercials for album release are incredibly uncommon. Although their formula is still very similar to a majority of previous advertisements, they move much faster with intense cuts and constant camera motion while utilizing text overlay in replacement of voiceover narration. An example of this is the commercial for Whitesnake's *Good to be Bad* in 2008, which features 38 live performance shots within 30 seconds with text overlay. Guns N' Roses' *Chinese Democracy* commercial, also in 2008, relies solely on text, one background image, and the album cover for visuals. However, it is edited with rapid text changes and constant motion.

An interesting technique some commercials used was to promote the musician while also promoting a product. This works by attaching the musician as a floating signifier to a commodity, while also attaching the product to the musician in a mutually beneficial matter. Notable examples include ABBA and National in 1976, Michael Jackson and Pepsi from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s, George Michael and Diet Coke in 1989, and recently Taylor Swift's album *Red* and Target in 2012.

Music Videos. The most widely recognized and popular form of promotional video for the musical artist is the music video. Beginning in the early 1960s, music videos were simply performance based, as if the artist was being viewed in a live setting. Examples include Elvis Presley's "Return to Sender" in 1962 and Manfred Mann's "Do Wah Diddy Diddy" in 1964. They featured simple camerawork and shot transitions.

In the late 1960s and into the 1970s, a more cinematic approach was popularized as music videos served as components of larger films, expanding away from the standard of the performance approach. Notable examples include The Beatles' *Yellow Submarine* in 1968 and Devo's *The Complete Truth About De-Evolution* in 1976. These films incorporated elements of

the musical, progressing a narrative through a collection of songs. They featured a cinematic approach to the music video, in both format and production. While including surreal imagery and expressionistic camerawork and/or animation, they still feature a nature of performance by the artist through lip-synching.

In 1981, the music video reached new heights with the introduction of the television station MTV. The Buggles' "Video Killed The Radio Star" was the first music video shown on MTV (MTV 2012). These music videos in the era of MTV took an extremely different approach from the radio and TV commercials that both predated and followed. Rather than introducing the audience to the artist, these music videos featured a collage of footage set to the music. The overall aesthetic of the videos matched and complimented the music. These productions were very expressionistic and/or narrative, with the artists not always visually present. This MTV style of music video exists to this day. Recent popular examples of surreal, cinematic approaches to narrative in music videos include Bon Iver's "Holocene" in 2011 and Frank Ocean's "Thinking About You" in 2012. Throughout "Holocene" the artist is not present at all, while in "Thinking About You" Frank Ocean appears in brief segments as a minor role.

Experimentation with the music video seemed to run wild in the 1990s, as videos varied greatly from each other. Commonly seen were artist performance, such as Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit," and cinematic approaches, such as Eminem's "My Name Is." Less common was the video collage approach of early MTV, such as Beck's "Loser." The videos continued the exploration of matching visual aesthetic to the musical sound. Nirvana's dark, smoky high school gymnasium within "Smells Like Teen Spirit" matches their grungy vibe. The ultra-colorful and fast-paced nature of "My Name Is" parallels Eminem's insane, edgy personality. The country-fried, quirky lo-fi video of "Loser" synchs up perfectly with Beck's unique, folksy sound. This set

of variety and experimentation is dominantly driven by the use of floating signification. Not only do the aforementioned elements of the videos compliment the music, they also serve to transfer meanings over to the artists themselves. Nirvana is counterculture, Eminem is maniacal, and Beck is a unique blend of folk conventions and do-it-yourself punk rock ethos. This signification-driven style of music video has carried on to present day music video production.

Online video promotion. With new media, artists now have the ability to promote their music by releasing videos outside of the corporate controlled realm of television broadcasting. In terms of video, the internet is cluttered with remediated approaches to music promotion. For example, the YouTube video *Crippled Rejex Exposed* uses the conventional documentary format to introduce the viewer to the band. Interlaced throughout the interview footage contains the band's music, performances, and various random cinéma vérité style footage of the group. The video is very reminiscent of the television series *Behind The Music*, with overly dramatic, seemingly satirical interviews.

However, there are some effective productions that were constructed specifically for new media application. This non-remediated approach is specialized for a narrower target audience and an eye to achieving virality. One promotional text created specifically for new media is the YouTube comedic sketch *Band Practice* by the group Zoo Babies. These type of videos have extreme viral potential, as they use the exact same approach as countless short entertaining clips on popular video sites. The only difference is the added element of musical promotion, which serves as the final ten seconds of the video. It is a great way to spread an artist's music in a subtle manner.

As a second example, the YouTube video *Black* by the band Pepper serves as a small teaser of an upcoming single of the same name. The video is simple and clean, featuring thirty

seconds of the music with dramatic shots of the artist. Due to the extremely vague nature, short time duration, and sleek professionalism, it leaves the viewer wanting more, which instils an urge to search for additional information.

Conducting this mapping process provided me with an insight of the historical changes and transitions in music promotion from radio to new media. Per medium ecology, this process demonstrated how these texts have adapted due to the rise of a new medium. Firstly, once MTV was founded and televised promotion begun, there was a noticeable dwindling in radio spots. Secondly, as new media took control of promotional content, broadcast video discarded the original voiceover format remediated from radio and depended primarily on overlaying text and attention-grabbing visuals. Currently, as the internet is overcrowded with content remediated from television, there is a strong need for new media-specific branding in order to effectively adapt within the environment in a manner that achieves differentiation and leads to audience retention and virality.

REFLECTION OF VIDEO PRODUCTION PROCESS

With synthpop group I Am God, singer-songwriter Justin Larkin, and self-defined “sleaze pop” label Cavetone Records, the three subjects for this project were considerably different from one another in both their music and their aesthetic. Therefore, I needed to apply three distinct branding processes, each containing different needs and essences and requiring a different set of cultural sign systems. I approached I Am God by utilizing absurdist humor and satire, Justin Larkin by introducing elements of filmic elegance, and Cavetone Records by expanding their vintage aesthetic and connectivity with the vinyl record community. Each subject also featured a varying level of self-awareness of branding before I began the project, with Cavetone Records already well-established and Justin Larkin with an ambiguous and unclear brand direction.

Brand One: I Am God. I began the project with electronic pop trio I Am God, creating three videos: *I Am God Live Experience*, *I Am God's Gear*, and *I Am God Documentary*. I personally was interested in working to promote this group due to their preexisting uniqueness from other artists in the community. The group is distinguishable from other acts due to their incorporation of strange absurdist and surreal humor, which is something I have mainly only seen this applied to video work throughout television, film, and new media. It is rare for a musical artist to work within this aesthetic.

Their unique humor is seen in every realm that the band operates, from their live performances to their social media presence with Facebook and Twitter to the composition and lyrical content of the songs themselves. They operate with odd, satirical anti-humor that works in strict opposition to the conventional approaches of being a musical artist. Although this rough brand was more effective than other unconscious brand construction, further establishment and expansion was necessary to develop it into a powerful brand. Through the promotional videos, I complimented and further expand this unique satirical brand to promote further investment between the listener and the artist within the new media environment. I ultimately created videos that lampooned amateurs failing at corporate professionalism, using floating signification of poor video shooting, sloppy editing, goofy preset shot transitions, overly dramatic voiceover narration, and the use of stock images.

I began by examining surreal humor on late night television, in accordance with the belief that “[n]o medium today, and certainly no single media event, seems to do its cultural work in isolation from other media” (Bolter and Grusin, 2002, p. 15). Observing absurdist comedy programs on television, I saw a collection of shows that work to lampoon and deconstruct

conventions of television. Notable examples include *Tim and Eric Awesome Show, Great Job!* with public access programs and *The Eric André Show* with late night talk shows.

I then refurbished this concept for a new media-specific text, creating a deconstruction of wrongful approaches to pseudo-professional video production within the new media landscape. These ineffective approaches to online video content rely heavily on remediation of form and style from television content. Generally speaking, I Am God serves as a satire of the average independent band. Therefore, to effectively compliment and further expand upon this brand, my promotional videos must satirize current independent production attempts to promote artists.

To effectively lampoon this current trend of poor attempts at professional production often seen with user-generated content of YouTube, I observed many amateur promotional productions. I did this in order to figure out how to correctly produce a video incorrectly. I also engaged in method directing to be able to discard my knowledge and skill of video production while shooting and editing these videos. I watched various sloppily constructed and remediated texts from YouTube to get into the mindset of the pseudo-professional amateur that the project satirized. I uploaded the videos under this alias, which I named “Shua Grubbé.”

When shooting footage for the videos I applied shaky camera work with constant motion and zooming and used automatic white balance, iris, and focus. I constantly centered the subject with seemingly little regard for headroom and no application of knowledge of shot composition. Concepts such as the rule-of-thirds and lead room were avoided to achieve a satirical, amateur aesthetic. I utilized this floating signification that I Am God’s target public would recognize and associate with an accidentally humorous, poorly created video.

In addition, for mock interviews I positioned the band members in visually unpleasant ways to mirror an amateur’s lack of production knowledge. I placed one member of the band in

front of a window to create a silhouette, one behind an extremely bright white wall, the third in a manner that caused a harsh lens flare that was casted over him. For equipment, I used a cheap, consumer-grade Panasonic HC-V700 along with a combination of in-camera microphone and incorrectly placed boom and lavalier microphones with automatic audio recording levels.

I applied a lot of this aesthetic in post-production. I used, and overused, many effects, editing techniques, and noticeable “mistakes” that are common in beginner videography. This includes page-peel transition presets, obnoxious drop shadows and strokes for text, reusing identical footage, incorrect sizing of overlying graphics, spelling errors, unpleasant audio cuts, audio clipping, and slightly off-center text. This deconstruction of amateur attempts at professional promotional production helps to convey the strange and satirical nature of the band.

In addition to this, I altered audio and image files used to give off the impression that the videographer held no regard for digital compression. I compressed the audio files of the band’s music to 96kbps mp3 to give it an extremely lossy sound that would never be heard in a professional promotion. I also greatly compressed the images I used throughout the *I Am God Documentary* video to look as though there were taken off the internet with no regard to the large aspect ratio of high-definition, 1080p video.

Throughout the entirety of the three videos, I gave no telling sign that my productions were parody. The attachment of these signifiers of unprofessionalism works within the aforementioned ideological mindset of post-structuralism. These signifiers will be interpreted vastly different with the general public than they would within the niche audience that favors absurd humor. The type of person that would find these videos humorous would find *I Am God* worth investigating further. These promotional videos spread throughout the target market due to the fact that someone who enjoys this style of humor is then likely to share one or more of the

videos with others within the same target audience, therefore achieving virality within the niche group.

Brand Two: Justin Larkin. My second subject was Justin Larkin, which was approached in a much more conventional manner than the absurdist nature of I Am God. The major difference between the two was that I did not have to worry about establishing brand differentiation with I Am God, as they were already extremely different from the majority of other independent artists. Justin Larkin's preexisting brand, or lack thereof, was not actively established to separate him from the seemingly infinite amount of acoustic guitar-wielding singer-songwriters trying to achieve notoriety in the current music industry. He was simply portrayed as a man who travels, plays the acoustic guitar, and sings. There was no existing incentive from his brand to actively pursue his music.

The three videos I produced for Justin Larkin: *Fly On*, *Nowhere Is A Place*, and *Silent Deceiver*, focused on brand differentiation in order to separate him from the competition. Allen (2002) explains that branding is a process that "relies heavily upon the input of signs and symbols to differentiate product and make them meaningful" (p. 48). Therefore, throughout these promotional videos I applied various floating signifiers to transfer their value over to Justin Larkin, setting his brand apart from the rest. I utilized signifiers such as stark black and white footage, longshots, art deco font, and title cards in order to transfer the classic cinematic aesthetic, constructing a brand of artistic and poetic elegance.

Goldman and Papson (1996) state that the most likely way for a brand to stand out is with signifying style. Therefore, these three promotional videos worked to establish Justin Larkin's brand as that of an elegant, artistic musician with a classic cinematic essence. These videos serve as a teaser for Justin Larkin's music, as he plays a segment of one of his songs while a relevant

and thought-provoking quote from him is revealed. These quotes convey Justin Larkin's poetic, thoughtful, and passionate perspective of music. The use of high-contrast stark black and white, longshot composition, and font indicative of 1920s art deco, the videos feature a filmic aesthetic, communicating that the artist is artistic with a classic touch .

The videos utilized minimalism in their composition and mise-en-scene in order to place an emphasis on sound and the notion of looking into the mind of the artist. They each begin with the shot close to Justin Larkin, only to then slowly zoom and fade out while a quote from the artist slowly fades in, superimposed on the screen. This video zoom and textual fade provides perspective on the literal environment that the artist is being recorded in while also shedding light on the thought process behind both the song and the artist's music as a whole. It places the song in context of the greater world.

The locations in which the videos are shot bare a strong importance. The empty theatre in *Fly On* is symbolic of the raw exhibitionist nature of his songwriting. The record store in *Silent Deceiver* is symbolic of the artist's involvement in the music community and his beliefs about the efficacy of music. The interior of the car in *Nowhere Is A Place* is where the artist lived for months and is the subject of the song. Each of these locations also serve as floating signifiers, the theater conveying values of high-art, the record store conveying the musician's engagement within the local music scene, and the car conveying Justin Larkin's sense of travel and exploration.

In essence, the videos worked to effectively emphasize preexisting valued and desirable components of the musician. Not only does this distinguish Justin Larkin from the large amount of similar artists, but it also deemphasizes him from the negative stereotypes associated with the traveling singer-songwriter. It explores reflexivity of the artist and allows the viewer to obtain an

inside look at the music without resorting to the clichéd and remediated notion of the music documentary. Rather, it achieves this in a unique and visually interesting way by the inclusion of interview quotes as overlaying text.

Brand Three: Cavetone Records. The third and final series of promotional videos were for Cavetone Records. By far, this record label had the strongest established brand out of the three subjects before I had started this project. Also, contrary to the other two, the record label had also previously explored the environment of new media video production as a method of promotion. Rather than focusing on brand identification and differentiation, which Cavetone Records had already firmly established, this project was centered around further enforcing and maintaining this brand with an eye to internet virality.

Cavetone Records is an analog-only vinyl record label based in Charleston, Illinois. The label closely focuses on a classic analog aesthetic that strongly contrasts them from the digitally-driven music industry of today. Per the Cavetone Records brand, these promotional videos, *Plurals*, *Wobble*, and *How to be a Cavetern*, were created in order to form an unusual link of signification of this vintage analog aesthetic within the new media environment.

It is important to note that these retro values and signifiers are applied without remediation, keeping in mind the medium-specific concerns of YouTube and the internet. They tackle the question of how to effectively advertise to the niche traditionalist music fanatic within the confines of a digitally-driven society. They each serve as cultural commentary about the vinyl-favoring target audience, focusing on the values of sound quality and dedication in the midst of a world of convenience and on-demand content.

All three of the videos are structured around elements that are indicative of the retro culture. *Plurals* and *Wobble* are both centered around inside jokes within the target market of

Cavetone Records, while *How to be a Cavetern* plays with the vintage signification of institutional films repurposed for new media. *Plurals* and *Wobble* in particular operate by juxtaposing Cavetone Records against negative signifiers. As Goldman and Papson (1996) state, “[o]ne way to define sign value is in terms of what it is *not*” (p. 25).

Plurals revolves around the common grammatical error of adding an “s” to pluralize the word vinyl, which is a common cause of annoyance within the target market of the label. Those who incorrectly say “vinyls” are often seen as following record culture strictly for the cool factor. Through joking about this grammatical error, Cavetone Records associates itself and socially connects with the vinyl community. The video follows a narrative of a man courting a woman, who (along with her father and friend) constantly uses irregular plural nouns incorrectly by adding an “s.” The man tolerates this until she says “vinyls,” which causes him to angrily leave her, revealing that the video was a promotional piece for a record label. This conveys that the values of Cavetone Records live up to its brand. They release strictly analog productions on vinyl for the right values (in the eyes of the target audience).

Wobble touches upon the topic of cheap vinyl pressing, which causes a loss in audio fidelity, makes records easy to warp, and allows the record to bend, literally creating a “wobble” sound. This was a huge problem in the 1980s, as many major record companies would press thin records for economic reasons. It is common for record buyers to specifically search for records pressed thick enough to not have this loss in sound quality. The video is set in an analog garage sale strewn with vintage signifiers. It is structured around a campy jam session of a purely analog musical composition, featuring a vinyl wobble as accompaniment. When a man tries to wobble a Cavetone Records product, the record does not bend. This prompts the man to become impressed and purchase the record, ending the video. This further stresses the fact that the ethics of the label

live up to its brand and the values of their target public, as they press records on thick, 140 gram vinyl for the optimal sound quality.

How to be a Cavetern is a lampoon of vintage educational and institutional films from the 1940s to 1960s. It establishes Cavetone Records as a unusual and quirky business by exploring weird intricacies of an internship at the label. The video is structured around a voiceover that is specifically speaking to the on-screen character, creating an weird use of normally non-diegetic sound often utilized in these films. Although being a parody of content from a different medium, the text is not remediated. Rather, it was reconstructed from the classic films to contain a short time span and a quick narrative indicative of the modern viral video. The video utilizes many floating signifiers to transfer vintage values, such as the classic title card, orchestral music, found footage, black and white footage, 4:3 aspect ratio, a retro wired telephone, and the art deco style within the interior setting. While invoking these classic signifiers, the video also features modern attire and technology. The video is a merging between the world of vintage with the current digital environment, which is the essence of the brand of Cavetone Records.

All three of these promotional vides are new media-specific texts as they were constructed with a focus towards virality. The texts are easily digestible, delivering the message with a short time duration and a fast narrative structure. This both promotes sharing and helps develop audience retention. Rather than simply advertising Cavetone Records, as would be the common televised approach, the videos serve to grab the attention of the audience through narrative. *Plurals* and *Wobble* in particular only reveal that it was made by Cavetone Records at the very end of the video. The viewer does not recognize that they are being advertised to until the video is complete.

DISCUSSION

This study served as an exploration of how to successfully brand and promote music within the new media environment. It was a method for me to expand my knowledge in media theory, my skill as a video producer, my portfolio of work, and my connections within the local music communities of Champaign and Charleston, Illinois. The commodity of music is an unusual concept for branding as it contains no actual, literal visual referent. Every visual that is attached to an song, album, artist, and record label serves as floating signification in order to transfer cultural values and aesthetics to establish a unique and emotional brand that stands apart from the rest.

Through my exploration of research, I was surprised to discover a significant lack of research within branding and semiotics in terms of the music industry, let alone of how it operates specifically within the new media environment. This study serves as an introductory step into exploring the application of branding practices within the vibrant and ever-growing music industry in the age of Web 2.0. Further research on this topic is necessary to uncover how to precisely apply these theoretical practices to a musical artist or record label's brand with maximum efficiency.

The nine texts I constructed within this study differ from many new media texts due to their strong stance against remediation. As previously mentioned, medium theory conveys that media are different environments that have a powerful impact on the way their content is interpreted by the audience. Therefore, it is more effective to produce texts with the medium of communication in mind. An effective promotional video on YouTube differs from an effective promotional broadcast due to the on-demand nature of the internet and the act of sharing and embedding externally.

Rather than producing a video by utilizing practices derived from televisual and filmic

content, such as the content overview nature of televised promotions and the music video, I applied practices specific to new media production in order to create these texts. This includes a short time duration, compressed and high-impact narrative structure, and a specific targeting of niche audiences. New media is unique in that the audience involvement with the content expands beyond when the text ends due to the ability to easily seek additional content and share the video. In addition, the use of floating signification brands each of the artists with their own set of values and aesthetics that are attractive to different target audiences. These new media practices are utilized in order to focus on the videos analytics and achieve virality within these target groups. It is an attempt to produce a text that audience members will share, repost, and embed on external websites and social media accounts.

An interesting note is that when beginning this study, my initial plan was to produce promotional videos for three musical artists, rather than two artists and a record label. The third artist was Champaign indie rock band That's No Moon. After conducting a considerable amount of branding work and video pre-production, this band went into a sudden and unexpected hiatus. Having access to insider information and connections with Cavetone Records due to my internship position, I decided it would be interesting to apply these branding practices to an entire record label. I discovered that these practices of attaching floating signification within new media work just as well to brand a record label as they do musicians.

Working with Cavetone Records was vastly different than working with I Am God and Justin Larkin. It gave me experience working with a client that was much more tightly controlled in a business sense. Cavetone Records had previously established a visual brand through the use of new media video content, such as their promotional videos for their bands The Ex-Bombers and Cedar Plank Salmon, while I Am God and Justin Larkin had never explored this means of

promotion. Rather than forming a new link of floating signification as I did with these two artists, I expanded upon previous efforts of the record label. Instead of developing a visual brand with a small group of musicians simply trying to spread their music, I was working with a team with a keen eye towards branding, promotion, and discovering the most efficient method to sell records. It gave me an experience far closer to working within a public relations or promotions division of a company.

My future direction for all brands would be to actively and meticulously work to develop brand in the most effective way possible, as brand is established regardless if a company is aware of it. A strong grasp of the theory of semiotics and the power of floating signification is necessary to be able to apply cultural values and emotional ties to a product through the creation of a commodity sign. Goldman and Papson (1996) state that this creation of brand through the utilization of symbols “bred an advertising style based on overstructured messages and intensive commodity fetishism” (p. 22). It is an invaluable skill to achieve effective brand differentiation and consumer trust and retention. Also necessary is a grounding in medium theory, media ecology, and remediation. Generally speaking, the concept of creating texts specific to the medium that they will be operating within to achieve maximum effectiveness.

This study allowed me to take concepts I had learned in various Communication Studies courses, most notably CMN 3500, and allowed me to apply them outside of the classroom in a practical sense. Through praxis I greatly expanded my knowledge of branding, semiotics, and medium theory and exactly how they apply to the development of effective promotional texts. Being an Electronic Media Production major with a concentration in video production, this experience helps me immensely as I graduate from Eastern Illinois University and enter the creative industry. The gained skills of applying semiotics to branding in a medium-specific

context will greatly aide me when working on video productions that tackle these exact same brand concerns with future clients.

Although this practice is constantly being utilized by major corporations, there is currently a huge lack of this way of thinking about brand outside of internationally recognized commodities. This is especially true in terms of the music industry. Before this study, I had no idea what distinguished a successful new media video from an unsuccessful one, in terms of production practices. My technical, compositional, and pre-production skills in video production were not very useful if I did not know how to accurately apply them within the new media environment in a way that establishes and promotes a powerful brand. Now I realize the power of semiotics and floating signification as it relates to branding, of branding as it relates to new media, of media's impact on content and the effect of medium-specific texts as they relate to new media, and how all of this can be practically utilized in video production.

Not only did this study greatly benefit me as a scholar of Communication Studies and producer of video content, it also allowed me to operate within a field that I personally love. It served as an excellent merging between my focus as a student and fan of music. I was able apply my skills and knowledge of communication theory and video production within the local community to assist in the promotion of musical artists that I strongly feel passionate about. I hope to take this experience and apply it within my future career.

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