

**The Effect of Popular, Contemporary Music Artist Persona on Young Adults**

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## Introduction

For my Media and Society class in Sophomore year, I did a textual analysis of violence in music videos. I looked at themes of violence vs. aggression in the music videos and concluded that music videos show violent content, but that content is mainly used to raise awareness of violent conditions. My research for this project brought to light that the content can have a negative effect if people, particularly children and adolescents, consume it constantly. After this project, I started thinking extensively about how music can influence society.

Everywhere I go, I see people my age, and even younger, listening to music. Music has made itself a specific culture among younger audiences, and that culture influences and is influenced by institutions, experiences, and ageism (Bennet & Hodkinson, 2012). In addition, music is woven into the lives of these audiences, constantly in use and listened to (Laughey, 2006). Constant consumption of an artist's music could influence audiences (Railton & Watson, 2011), and we live in a society where the news also extensively follows and covers celebrity and spectacle. People relate to song lyrics, and sometimes to artists themselves. But what influence do these artists really have over society? Think about politicians: they have an image to maintain with their constituencies. The same can be said of artists and their audiences. Their images can either work towards their gain or downfall. What kind of persona do these artists show to their audiences that keeps their fans coming for more? What influence can that persona have on their audience? A persona and its influence could also be specific to the artist's musical genre. Do popular, contemporary music artists fit the stereotypical image of their musical genre, or is it different? If their image doesn't meet those stereotypical expectations, which image is more beneficial?

The Oxford Dictionary defines persona as “the aspect of someone's character that is presented to or perceived by others” (Persona), while one study defines it as “a character type, often associated with a particular genre category” (Donze, 2011). Both definitions relate to one another and are necessary for my research. In addition to the person an artist shows offstage, a persona can also be formed from their lyrics and music videos. Often, there will be a difference between the actual lyrics of a song and the video that accompanies it. An artist’s persona can differ between the lyrics and video. I am interested in seeing how that persona can change from the lyric stage to the music video stage and what kind of effect those personas can have on society. However, not all artists write their own songs or have say in the songs they perform, and the image a song portrays may not be that artist's actual image, but that of the writer, label, or those involved in the artist’s career.

Lastly, it is important to note the use of the advertising celebrity endorsement strategy used in media. This is common among popular music artists, often taking the place of partnerships and product placement in videos and references in lyrics. Artists and/or their labels will often have a partnership or sponsorship with a corporate company and/or brand. These brands can make their way into the artists performances, lyrical and visual, and the placement could influence their audiences purchasing habits of the specific brand or product. This research also seeks to answer whether the use of product placement in a particular artist's music video, or even a lyrical reference, influences the audience to purchase that product? I find it interesting that some products can be so seamlessly placed into music videos, that it is even difficult to realize that a product was utilized, while others seem almost random and confusing, being represented out of place in the video.

In order to answer all these questions, I would have to study music texts in addition to music artists and society themselves. Textual analysis would be best to use, as I could narrow down and analyze themes that are prevalent in popular, contemporary music videos/lyrics, as well as note any brand placement/references that may be present. This would give me an understanding of what kind of image these artists portray based on the prevalence of the themes present. A survey would be a good route for gathering data quickly and concisely on how consumers interact with and understand the music and artist persona. It would give me real life responses and not just what I would infer based on my analysis.

Music, particularly that of the popular, contemporary genre, has always been popular among younger audiences (Bennet & Hodkinson, 2012). These consumers often follow the artists of the genre because they also relate to them, or their lyrics/music videos (Laughey, 2006). But other than the relationships audiences make, what influence does this music genre have over them? This project will help bring a better understanding of the effect themes in popular, contemporary music have over consumers, particularly ages 18-22. In addition, this project will shed some insight on whether celebrity endorsements in this genre of music effects consumer buying habits of a product. This project seeks to answer whether product placements/brand references in the popular, contemporary music genre is an ideal advertising strategy for brands.

## **Literature Review**

Research on popular music artists has been done for various reasons, from the image artists portray to their audiences to the implications of different types of music genres to marketing and sales of music products, all to see how society reacts with the medium. Diane Railton and Paul Watson analyze differences and similarities between music videos and the meanings of their accompanying lyrics in their book, *Music Video and the Politics of*

*Representation.* In addition, and more importantly, the authors discuss how popular culture images in the media influence our perceptions of identity and others. They explain that research involving perceptions of women in media is based on three assertions: (1) “the notion that the recurring images of women in popular media have some influence on how people think of women in real life;” (2) “that these images of women are simply either positive or negative, good or bad, progressive or reactionary;” and (3) “that it is possible to know which is which and, by implication to adjudicate on the respective politics of the image by measuring it against external reality, that is to say, the way real women are, or could/should be, in the real world” (Railton & Watson, 2011). Their research proposes that consumption of certain themes in the media can have an influence on society, no matter what medium it is. Seeing these themes constantly can distort what one sees as reality; in this case, how women are viewed in society. Amanda Krause and Adrian North had similar ideas in their analysis of top song lyrics in the United Kingdom. They looked at specific themes that relate to gender stereotypes in song lyrics, defining them as: inspiration, aggression, passivity, cooperation, diversity, insistence, embellishment and activity. They agree that the prevalence of these themes ultimately causes society to believe them (Krause & North, 2019). This research shows the issues with constant consumption of media and how it can affect society’s perception of reality and continue to create socially constructed realities.

Further research suggests that artists should create an image for themselves that “follows the tradition of the images already established in the specific musical genre in which the artist operates” (Stamatiadis, 2018). If a particular artist brand image was successful in the past, labels are going to want new artists to model that to help them gain the most money. In order to be that successful, new artists are supposed to follow that stereotypic image, but lately — particularly with younger, more contemporary artists — popular music artists have been making their own

identities. Billie Eilish is a perfect example of this in today's day and age. She completely rejects the typical popular, contemporary music artists brand of pop princess, and strays away from typical marketing schemes of oversexualization of the female body.

Donze's article on artist character types provides a definition of persona, which is "a character type, often associated with a particular genre category" (2010). Her essay maintains that an artist's persona is derived from their specific genre, for example country music features cowboys, rap music is made by gangsters, and pop music is created by pop princesses. (Donze, 2010). However, these designations are culturally created by society and what is perceived as the norm for that genre among the society (Donze, 2010). As noted above, artists are constantly changing these norms and are bringing out their own brand identities. A study on female music artist image stereotypes utilized judgements of artists based on four specific traits: a "traditional" feminine stereotype, "qualities of sexual attractiveness," and "positive, but not specifically feminine traits" (Thaxton & Jaret, 1985). They found that pop singers were not rated high nor low on any of the traits, but female artists in general were rated positively, despite genre of music (Thaxton & Jaret, 1985). They concluded that "female recording artists generally are not presented in the same stereotyped manner as women are usually portrayed in other forms of media advertising" (Thaxton & Jaret, 1985). This article is quite interesting when compared to the music scene today. Female pop artists, while bringing in new brand identities, could be seen as more sexualized. However, this sexualization is more of a body positive nature, or at least an attempt to it. The clothes they wear in videos — and sometimes lack thereof — for example, can be seen as a way of saying that females should be able to wear what they want. However, themes can always be misunderstood, and it's possible that this imaging could be showing that an artist believes that only a certain body type should wear certain clothes.

Even the clothes that artists wear in their videos could be a marketing scheme for a company. Product placement is often used in the music industry, mainly due to the corporate partnerships and sponsorships that recording labels, and sometimes artists themselves, form (Chang, 2003). This is good for companies and brands who need an outlet where they can gain a new consumer base through an artist's audience. They can use product placement to help raise awareness about their brand to a target audience. For example, if a company is looking to reach a new target market of young adults between the ages of 18-25, then product placement in the music videos of popular, contemporary, hip-hop, and R&B artists would probably be a strong strategy for them to utilize.

There are several studies on consumer buying habits based on product placement in the media. One study posits that "people have stronger memories for brands and claims that are placed versus those that are advertised" (2011). The study found that although product placement does not affect audience buying habits immediately, it does influence brand interest (Thornton & Burkhalter, 2011). According to their results, "the association of a brand with a main artist in music videos has a positive impact on the respondent's interest in the brand" (2011). This is important to note, as I may then not be inclined to infer that brand placement does affect buying habits. In another paper, however, it was found that audience likelihood to purchase a brand and/or product has to do with the attributes an artist's persona has (Randrianasolo & Sala, 2016). They found that the more a consumer identifies with the artist, the more they are likely to purchase something of theirs (Randrianasolo & Sala, 2016). This is another important aspect to note, as it allows me to infer that there is a possibility of strong influence of consumer buying habits, albeit only if a consumer feels a strong connection with the artist. A study was conducted on what makes authentic brand placement in music videos. The authors found that consumers

“build relationships with recording artists,” discover brands through music” and “consider the authenticity of the brand placement when viewing music videos and evaluating the brands that are mentioned and/or shown in the music videos” (Burkhalter et al., 2017). They also noted that the consumers are the ones who determine an artist's intentions regarding the authenticity of the brand placement (Burkhalter et al., 2017). If a consumer feels that an artist is not genuine, or that the brand placement is forced, it could stop any progress the marketing strategy could have had. Consumers will not want to buy the product and could even stop supporting the artist.

It is important to note that most recording labels have corporate sponsorships and partnerships already in place, which may require artists to always have a brand placement in their music videos. This could take the form of the clothes and/or accessories the artist wears in the music video or the props used. Unfortunately, there is not much research regarding sponsorships and partnerships in the music industry, which is quite limiting. Having more of an understanding on how these corporate trends work in the music industry would shed some light on what is required of artists vs. what they are able to express on their own. Still, one could look at sport sponsorships to gain a broad understanding of how corporate sponsorships work in the music industry. Michael Erbschloe explains in his essay about corporate sponsorships, that sponsorships are all about “exchange theory” (Erbschloe, 2019). Exchange theory of corporate sponsorships have “two main precepts: Two or more parties exchange resources, and the resources offered by each party must be equally valued by the reciprocating parties” (Erbschloe, 2019). Looking at this definition, one could understand sponsorships in the music industry as a corporate brand offers something to the recording label, and vice versa. For example, a clothing brand could offer funding of a music video for a recording label, so long as the artist wears the product in the video, and/or the audience is told that there was a product placement. The author



notes this as something the sport industry does. He explains that “The sport facility or event may offer businesses increased awareness, image enhancement, and product trial or sales opportunities. Companies in return, may offer support through investments of money, media exposure, or in-kind services” (Erbschloe, 2019). Again, this may not be a direct reflection of an artist’s image, just something that they are required to do. However, if the sponsorship is not common knowledge, audience members may not see it as something separate from an artist’s persona. They could see, for example, that the artist only wears expensive clothing or a specific brand, even though the brand items were gifted only as part of the sponsorship.

The research shows that there is a definite influence over audiences when they have a constant consumption of a media. This research seeks to understand how music affects audiences, specifically through the persona artists put into their music and brand placements. As such, I will be employing three methods of inquiry to help gather data for this project: content analysis, surveys, and focus groups.

## **Methods**

I am proposing three methods of inquiry to help gather data for this project:

### *Content Analysis*

I will be conducting a content analysis of the selected artists' music videos and lyrics to determine what kind of personas they portray and how they compare from the lyrics to the music video. The goal of the content analysis is to determine what kind of persona each selected artist has made for themselves. It will allow me to make connections between any changes in persona from the lyrics to the music videos as well as over an artist’s professional career. I will be looking for specific images/themes in the videos and lyrics that may give clues as to what kind of image the artists put out. For example: is a male artist only talking about drugs, alcohol, weapons

and women in his lyrics and is that shown in his videos? How many times do I see those themes throughout his music career? This analysis also requires a look at the writers of the artists' songs, and whether they write their songs themselves, have other people write their songs for them, or if they collaborate with others in the songwriting process. The image a song portrays may be more of a reflection of the songwriter than that of the artist.

In addition, I will be looking for product placement in the music videos and any references to brands in their lyrics. This part will also include a look at sales data of the said product during the time the song/video came out, which could give me an understanding of whether the artists reference/placement had an influence on consumer buying habits. I will also be looking at each recording label the artists are signed to and look at any corporate affiliations those labels may have. This will give me an understanding of any endorsements that the artists are required to support that may not ultimately be a part of their image.

I will be analyzing the musical content — lyrics and music videos — of three male and three female popular music artists. I chose three so I would be able to compare the different artists against each other. I maintained a diverse pool so I could have different personas and see how they are different or like each other and what effect each persona might have on society. In addition, each of my artists' have videos that contain products placements and/or song lyrics that reference brands. My three female popular music artists are Ariana Grande, Katy Perry and Billie Eilish and my three male popular music artists consist of Khalid, Bruno Mars and Justin Bieber. The male artists have ranked on Ranker in the top 10 male pop artists of 2019 and 2020 and the female artists have each ranked within the top 15 female pop artists of 2020. I will be analyzing five of the top music videos/lyrics of each of the artists that have references to brands/product placement in their videos. I chose five so I can make sure to have a wide array of

videos ranging from the beginning of their musical career to the present and that are not from the same album. This will let me see if there are any changes to persona. The videos must be among the top viewed, as they will have been seen by the greatest number of consumers, thus having a greater effect.

### Surveys

I will be conducting a survey to gather data on what college students think of the selected artists and their personas. The survey will have two parts: one that asks participants about the influence of artist personas and the other about the influence of brand placements in the music videos and references in lyrics. Popular, contemporary music artists have a wide base of young adult audience members, ages 18-22 (Watson, 2019), so a college campus is perfect to use as my sample of respondents. I can generalize about the influence music artists have over college students and their buying habits by sampling a college population. According to Niche.com Albright College has almost 2,000 undergraduate students, so roughly 200 respondents (10%) is a likely sample size with a margin of error of 6.58. I am not sampling based on any demographic other than age but have a want for participants who actively listen to one or more of the selected artists to respond. This is mainly convenience sampling, as respondents within my desired age range are available to me, but still has aspects of snowball aspects as I will be relying on other sources to share the survey.

The survey will consist of open-ended, dichotomous, and interval questions. The first part of the survey is to see what respondents think the artists' persona is and whether they think it is positive or negative to society and why. This section will consist of questions asking respondents about themes present in the artists' lyrics and videos, their thoughts on those themes, and reasons why they may continue to be a consumer of the artists' music. Of course, these questions will

contain skip patterns, so if a respondent doesn't particularly listen to an artist, they will only answer questions that pertain to the ones they do listen to of my selected singers. The second section of the will be specific to how audiences respond to product placement in artist videos/lyrics in general and in the selected artists videos/lyrics. This part of the survey is used to know the likelihood of someone purchasing a brand/product because of an artists' reference to it in the music video and/or lyrics. Skip patterns will again be utilized in this part, in the case that a respondent has not listened to a specific song referenced or seen the video a product was represented in. Questions in this section will also take on a third person role —asking what a respondent thinks the influence product placement/reference has on their peers — as this method may garner more willingness to answer than a direct question to the respondents.

### *Focus Group*

I will be conducting a virtual focus group as a second part to the survey on audience perception. This focus group will be a discussion on what students think are the artists persona, why they think it is that, whether they think the artists hold a positive or negative influence based on their persona and why. People relate to artists in different ways, based on their own experiences, values, and beliefs. They may follow artists that specifically showcase a brand that appeals to those values. The goal of this focus group is to understand what people of different backgrounds think of the artists' personas, since people could think different things and have different reasonings for their views. This focus group will also ask about the reasoning for why people may be inclined to purchase a product/brand that was featured in an artists' music video and/or lyrics. A group of 8-10 focus group participants in the age range of 18-22 is ideal for my research.

## Timeline

### September

- Submit proposal to a research board in early September
- Resubmit with changes if required

### October - November

- Work on textual analysis of artist music videos and lyrics

### December

- Complete textual analysis of artists music videos and lyrics
- Submit IRB materials for surveys
- Surveys should be sent out once IRB materials are approved

### January

- Resend surveys if required
- Consolidate and analyze survey data as it comes in

### February

- Submit IRB materials for focus groups mid-February
- Focus group information should be sent out once IRB materials are approved

### March

- Conduct focus groups and consolidate and analyze data

### April - May

- Write report and present research

## Budget

I will not actively need to fund my use of YouTube or lyric sites such as Genius for my textual analysis, nor for the use of survey creation platforms like SurveyMonkey and Google and Microsoft Forms. However, I will need to fund several aspects of my focus group. My focus group will be virtual so I will not need to cover any traveling expenses, but I will need to pay for a pro version of Zoom for the group session. A pro Zoom account costs \$14.99 per month so ideally, I'd only need to pay one to two months of it resulting in a total cost of \$29.98; almost \$30. In addition, I'd like to give my participants an incentive/gift for participating in the focus

group in the form of a \$5 Starbucks gift card. If I have 10 respondents, the cost would be \$50 for the incentive; it would be \$40 for eight. Therefore, my budget for the research project is in the range of \$70 to \$80. I will not be utilizing a moderator as I will oversee the discussion.

Item	Cost	Quantity	Total Cost
Zoom Pro	\$14.99/month	2 months	\$29.98
Starbucks Gift Cards for Participants	\$5/each	8-10	\$40-\$50

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