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VISUAL PROMOTION IN THE MUSIC INDUSTRY. EXAMINING THE INFLUENCE OF
VISUAL BRANDING AND BRAND COMMUNICATION ON MUSIC PERCEPTION

DOCTORAL THESIS SUMMARY

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SUMMARY

In today's world, music is consumed at every corner, on a wide variety of promotion and distribution channels, and is subject to complex communication and promotion processes and strategies. Many people have the feeling that the commercial music industry is competitive and oversaturated because of the rising number of artists, especially on the internet, and the fact that everyone is competing for attention (Penchev, 2019). Therefore, nurturing a consistent artist identity should receive a significant amount of attention and priority (Achacoso, 2014; Allen, 2018). Evaluations made by the public are nowadays not restricted to the music itself, and it is evident how many artists who dominate the top positions on commercial songs chart have real brands assembled around them as well as effective strategies for brand communication that have been planned and implemented (Lieb, 2018; Borg, 2020). This appreciation will sometimes turn into fandom, and it can stem from the interaction that artists have with the general public and the visual elements they display either on the internet or through conventional media outlets (Meler & Skoro, 2013; Lieb, 2018).

In light of this branding knowledge and the subjectivism of music fans, a crucial question in the music business is whether branding and communication can aid in both enhancing the artist's image, which has already been established (Borg, 2020; Meier, 2017; Chertkow & Feehan, 2012; Hutchison, 2013), but also how music itself is perceived. According to numerous research over the years (Iwamiya, 1994; Gillespie, 1997; Geringer, Cassidy & Byo, 1997; Juchniewicz, 2008; Finnäs, 2001; Platz & Kopiez, 2012; Thompson, Graham & Russo, 2005), visual stimuli can alter how music is perceived. It is clear that this influence exists and that specific visual stimuli can affect how listeners experience songs, their emotions, quality, or overall appreciation, even though the course of this influence in these experiments is not always consistent or fully explained and understood.

However, there is a **gap** in the literature in terms of investigating the influence of visual stimuli on a listener's perception of music in a manner that is based on branding and brand communication.

Considering this context, the present paper's **theme** is the way the visual brand identity of a music artist influences the way a song is perceived. More specifically, this thesis aims to test,

through both qualitative and quantitative methods, the manner in which the visual identity of an artist is altering how music is perceived by people with regard to the attitude towards the song and its components, emotions, and behavior. Compared to existing literature, this paper analyzes this phenomenon in a modern context which is found on the music market today, more precisely by using a brand identity as a visual stimulus.

Based on this context, the following **research questions** appear:

RQ1: What are the obstacles that must be conquered in order to achieve success in the music industry, and how may success be defined within this profession?

RQ2: Why is it vital for a music artist to have their own brand, and how should it be done in the most effective way?

RQ3: How can a visual brand identity affect a listener's appreciation of the music, their perception of the music's quality, as well as the type and intensity of emotional reactions to the music?

RQ4: How can a visual brand identity affect a listener's attitude towards the song, the emotional reaction, and the intentional behavior?

RQ5: How can a particular element of a visual brand identity presented in two different colors affect a listener's attitude towards the song, the emotional reaction, and the intentional behavior?

Answering the research questions and verifying the hypotheses can be innovative and of great **relevance** from a variety of angles. The relevance comes from two directions, both theoretical and practical. At the **theoretical** level, the results will cover a gap in the literature, providing explanations in the matter of the influence of the visual for a contemporary situation, which imitates the interaction with an artist from everyday life, where the song is a modern one and the artist is accompanied by promotional materials. At the level of communication, this work manages to exemplify several theories of communication in a field poorly covered in the literature and makes intensive use of concepts and techniques of branding and brand communication. Also, this work tries to explain phenomena encountered at the sociological and psychological level, borrowing research tools from these fields in order to analyze cognitive variables related to attitude, perception and behavior. Therefore, this paper performs the testing

and analysis of the impact of visual features on musical perception in a modern context, where the artist is accompanied by a visual brand identity, characteristic of communication and advertising processes found everywhere today. It also opens the way to a variety of new research ideas by having this new experimental tool that can be replicated using a multitude of newly found variables.

On the **practical** side, the current work can provide valuable information to industry specialists, providing information tested through experimental research to fill the validity gaps in their current knowledge, often based on subjective experiences or anecdotal information. The main use consists of helping managers and music branding specialists with new concepts, instruments, and strategies that are useful in the efficient creation of nowadays musicians identities, as well as overcoming the hardships of reaching success in the business. All these tools and strategies can therefore be built on the conclusions that this work offers, using visual stimuli in different forms to complete the artistic product for a better relationship with the fans and to sediment the musical brand. In addition, exposing these influences caused by visual stimuli contributes to a more transparent music industry, raising new questions and discussions regarding the cognitive bias of listeners, and even problems related to reasoning errors in music criticism. Also, exploring the effects that visual elements can have on how music is perceived can offer new lines of thinking to industry specialists, to better explain to them why some artists are more successful than others and whether the visual part plays a notable role or not.

At **novelty** level, what this paper brings is the presentation and testing of the phenomenon of visual stimuli influence on music in a contemporary context, where visual stimuli are represented by an online brand identity of an artificially created artist that simulates music artists from the industry itself. Compared to research in the field, the novelty is supported not just by testing the phenomenon in a modern and practical context, by also by the fact that the influence is not only tested experimentally, therefore quantitatively, but also analyzed and compared qualitatively, through discussions with specialists who work in different branches of the nowadays' very dynamic music industry.

In analyzing the **literature**, starting from the promotion factor of marketing, advertising is reviewed, explaining the mechanisms by which it is realized and its objectives, mainly seen as a type of communication used to convince an individual to buy a product (Belch & Belch, 1998;

Fletcher, 2010). The importance of branding is also highlighted, together with the explanation of the central branches of a brand, such as brand identity and brand image, where consistency is a key element in successful branding (Aaker, 2012; Blackett, 2016). The analysis of the importance of branding later led to the analysis of a particularity, that of emotional branding through color, noting how colors convey certain emotions, help the brand in differentiation and nurture a connection between the brand and the consumer (Cunningham, 2017; Oladumiye & Ebenezer, 2018).

The promotional processes in the music industry are also comprehensively presented. The focus in the first phase is on explaining the fact that artists and music can be seen as products, so they can generate revenue and can be subjected to promotion processes and strategies (Rutter, 2016; Baym, 2018; Borg, 2020). It can be observed how success can mean a lot of things, from a personal sense of accomplishment and connection with the fans, to a steady stream of financial revenue and a solid business plan (Hughes & Lang, 2003; Beeching, 2010; Baskerville & Baskerville, 2018; Allen, 2018). In achieving success, it can be seen how the Internet and social media are vital factors, because the music industry is increasingly leaning towards the digital environment, social media and streaming (Lieb, 2018; IFPI, 2022). Thus, the main promotion methods of the artists could be identified, from the creation of a brand identity (Tortorella, 2013; Lieb, 2018), to the use of specific tools where this identity is found, such as a website, a press kit and accounts on social networks (Beeching, 2010; Chertkow & Feehan, 2012, Baskerville & Baskerville, 2018; Borg, 2020).

In the end, the spotlight remains on the visual side of the promotion, discussing in detail what it means to outline an identity. It is highlighted how an identity refers to a combination of tangible and intangible elements, meant to differentiate the brand, starting from values and promises, and ending on specific visual aspects (Chertkow & Feehan, 2012, Tortorella, 2013; Aaker, 2014; Gouitcheche, 2018). It is also highlighted how brand communication is carried out once the identity is set up, noting that respecting consistency, knowing the target audience and highlighting unique qualities are vital (Beeching, 2010; Chertkow & Feehan, 2012; Tortorella, 2013; Borg, 2020). Moreover, the main branding touchpoints in the case of a music artist are noted, seeing how websites, blogs, press, human interaction, concerts, press-kits, CDs,

merchandise, posters and relationship with stakeholders are all relevant touchpoints (Chertkow & Feehan, 2012; Taylor, 2017; Johnson, 2019; Borg, 2020).

It is shown that visual stimuli, in addition to the attractiveness they offer, can influence the attitude, the public's emotional reaction and intentional behavior in relation to the music they listen to. In terms of attitude, it can be observed in experimental literature how both the general appreciation of the song and specific characteristics such as sound quality, speed or pitch can be influenced by visual stimuli (Iwamiya, 1994; Gillespie, 1997; Boltz, Ebendorf & Field, 2009). Regarding emotions, it is notable that the emotion felt by the listeners can also be influenced by the visual stimuli, but the influence is complex and not yet very clear, and it can appear both when there is congruence between the emotions transmitted by the visual stimuli and those transmitted by music, as well as when there is a contrast between them (Adams, 1994; Geringer, Cassidy, & Byo, 1997; Boltz, Ebendorf & Field, 2009; Thompson, Graham, & Russo, 2005; Moore, 2010). This influence can also occur on an intentional behavior level, although this theme is explained in the literature at a theoretical level rather than experimentally tested. Concepts and patterns related to intentional behavior are highlighted, such as repeated listening to music (Madison & Schiölde, 2017), recommending music to other people (Lee, Pritchard & Hubbles, 2019) or sharing music (Brown & Sellen, 2006) . It is evident that the behavior of people can be influenced by album art, photos, familiarity with the artist, which can also involve visual stimuli, but also by the presence of music in a physical format, which automatically involves such stimuli.

The methods used for accomplishing these goals are the interview with professionals and the sociological web-survey experiments to test what the literature and the specialists say. The first three research questions (**RQ1, RQ2, RQ3**) can be answered through an analysis of **interviews with specialists**. In this situation, the goal is twofold, both confronting the literature in the field with what those in the music industry say, as well as outlining some concepts and preparing the ground for the experimental stage. In order to answer the research questions, a semi-structured interview was applied to a number of 18 participants, people with professional activity in the music industry, also called music specialists or music professionals. These individuals hold a variety of professional positions within the industry, including those of record producer, music performer, music marketer, artist manager and music business coach

Next, the question **RQ4** represents an experimental effort, where the influence of a set of stimuli as a whole on the perception of music is tested, and in this case the part of the results consists of a descriptive analysis of the data, as well as the correlations between the variables.

The **first experiment** aims to test a set of stimuli as a whole. This is done to see if there is an influence that an integrated visual identity can have on how songs are perceived in terms of attitude, intentional behavior and emotions. The visual identity used as a stimulus is composed of several elements analyzed together, to simulate a real situation. In light of this, and with the intention of determining if the results of published studies about the influence of the visual on the aural can be replicated in the context of a more current, but traditional, and static brand identity context, the following hypotheses have been developed:

H1. A song accompanied by visual branding stimuli, in comparison with the lack of them, determines a more positive opinion on (H1a) the song and on (H1b) the elements of the song.

H2. A song accompanied by visual branding stimuli, in comparison with the lack of them, determines a more positive (H2a) emotional reaction and (H2b) emotional attachment.

H3. A song accompanied by visual branding stimuli, in comparison with the lack of them, increases (H3a) the intention to listen to the song again and (H3b) the willingness to recommend the song.

H4. When a song is accompanied by visual branding elements, the actual opinion on music is positively correlated with (H4a) the attitude to the song, (H4b) the emotions, and (H4c) the planned behavior.

H5. When a song is accompanied by visual branding elements, in comparison with the situation in which they are missing, the relationship between the attitude to the song and the planned behavior is greater.

H6. When a song is accompanied by visual branding elements, in comparison with the situation in which they are missing, the relationship between the emotions after listening to a song and the intentional behavior is greater.

For this survey-based experiment, two online surveys that match the control and the experimental groups have been developed. While for the control group the visual branding stimuli were missing, for the experimental group they were present.

Question **RQ5** is also answered through an experiment, but in this case, the stimulus is a single one and is present in two different variants, depending on the color. As a result of the first experiment, but also analyzing the specialized literature, **for this second experiment**, the following hypotheses were formulated, intended to test this time the influence of a single stimulus, adding the color variable to see if two different colors can differently influence the perception of music:

H1. A song accompanied by a visual branding stimulus (cover) determines a more positive attitude on (H1a) the general opinion on the song and on (H1b) the elements of the song.

H1.1. The presence of a colored visual stimulus (cover), in comparison with a black-and-white one, determines a more positive attitude on (H1.1a) the general opinion of the song and on (H1.1b) the elements of the song.

H2. A song accompanied by a visual branding stimulus (cover) determines a more positive (H2a) emotional effect and (H2b) emotional attachment.

H2.1. The presence of a colored visual stimulus (cover), in comparison with a black-and-white one, determines a more positive (H2.1a) emotional effect and (H2.1b) emotional attachment.

H3. A song accompanied by a visual branding stimulus (cover) increases (H3a) the intention to listen to the song again and (H3b) the willingness to recommend it.

H3.1. The presence of a colored visual stimulus (cover), in comparison with a black-and-white one, increases (H3.1a) the intention to listen to the song again and (H3.1b) the willingness to recommend it.

H4. When the visual stimulus (cover) attached to a song is colored, the actual opinions on music are correlated with (H4a) the attitude on the song, (H4b) the emotions, and (H4c) the planned behavior.

Using a web-survey, two different experimental situations are created, each with a visual stimulus in a different color, to analyze whether there are general differences and also particular differences in terms of correlations in the way music is perceived.

Therefore, the current work can be found in a paradigm that combines constructivist or interpretive principles, through literature analysis and conducting interviews to discover different perspectives, as well as positivist principles, through the conceptualization of the information in clear concepts and experiments, through which the validation or invalidation of some hypotheses is desired (Schwandt, 1994; Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006).

In terms of **results**, the data obtained conducting these semi-structured interviews showed that concepts such as music industry success, are debatable and versatile and are affected by a wide range of variables. In a similar manner, although the concept of good music is highly subjective, it is possible that it can primarily be recognized by originality, a powerful emotional resonance, and an appealing melody. Experts assert that visual stimuli can in fact have an effect on song appreciation, the perceived quality of music, and emotions; however, these effects can be influenced by specific settings, as branding can help differentiate products in the market and imply a sense of authenticity.

For the first experiment, nearly all of the first hypotheses have been proven false or only partially true. In this research, using visual stimuli did not result in notable increases with regard to attitude towards the music and its components, despite the fact that studies by Gillespie (1997) and Boltz, Ebendorf, and Field (2009) states that such stimuli may lead to improvements in appraisal. As for the partial validations, some correlations could be observed. For example, in comparison to the control group, people who see the visual components express more wonder, more, and less tension about the music they have just listened to. At the same time, once the stimuli are incorporated, the statistical relationship of how the song is appreciated with the intention to play the song again rises from $r_{CG}=.707$, $p<.01$ to $r_{EG}=.816$, $p<.01$. Moreover, compared to the control group, the desire to listen to the music again is more strongly connected

with the emotions of disappointment and transcendence, and the desire to suggest the song to other people is more strongly correlated with the emotions of nostalgia, tenderness, and overwhelm.

Regarding the second experiment, it can concisely be said that the results do not suggest that a visual song cover can significantly influence elements related to attitude, behavior and emotional reactions compared to songs that do not possess such visual material, and the color difference of the stimulus used does not produce important effects in terms of the present hypotheses but may produce some differences in terms of intentional behavior. Regarding partial validations or any other notable data outside of the relationships within the hypothesis, some correlations can be observed. For example, the correlations obtained are positive and are stronger when the blue/colored stimulus is used in terms of the general emotional attachment item of the actual behavior variable. Within the actual behavior variable, the correlation between general emotional attachment and preference for pop is positive and stronger when a blue stimulus is used ($r=.263$, $p<.05$) in comparison with the situation when a black stimulus is used ($r=.039$). At the same time, the correlation between general emotional attachment and song appreciation (an element of attitude) is one where the level of significance increases notably when a blue stimulus is used, compared to the black one ($r_{EG1}=.109$; $r_{EG2}=.354$, $p<.01$). Even though there are not significant differences between groups in terms of intentional behavior, it is noteworthy that that the sub-variables of intentional behavior turned out to be strongly correlated to each other.

Also, the data revealed that regardless of the presence of a stimulus, there is a strong relationship between general emotional attachment, and emotional reaction average, suggesting that sometimes, the strength of the emotions, no matter their type or valence, might improve the general emotional attachment. While it is known that a correlation does not necessarily imply causation, the information raises new research questions and also offers the music industry professional a tested insight on how perceptions work. Another such case would be in terms of the attitude variables, where the attitude towards the song as a whole has a moderately strong correlation with the attitude towards the specific elements of the songs. Furthermore, there is a moderately strong correlation of the attitude towards the song with the popularity potential.

The invalidation of the hypotheses represents, however, a success in the efforts of further isolating the variables that can produce influences on musical perception. Since both when using

a complex brand identity and when using a single static visual stimulus, most of the hypotheses are invalidated, it can thus be discovered and suggested that an efficient visual stimulus could perhaps be a dynamic one of video-type or consisting of a live presence of the artist. In addition, these results are in line with the suggestions of the literature, which, although it does not clearly state that static visual elements do not have an important effect, includes mostly experiments whose success appears in situations where dynamic variables of this type were used (Adams, 1994; Boltz, Ebendorf & Field, 2009; Ellis, 2013).

In terms of **contributions**, on the **academic** side, the results primarily manage to provide valuable information with reference to the field of the music industry and branding, improved by effective conceptualizations in the form of schemes and hierarchies of the main variables from the sub-fields of the main theme. Therefore, the work first of all offers a modern canvas of concepts and concept categories, while clear description of the music industry from a promotional point of view is offered as well. Secondly, the paper offers a concise operationalization of the variables that can be used in testing the perception of music and musical artists in a modern context, enriched and tested qualitatively through the expertise of specialists. This context represents the current music industry through the prism of branding and brand communication. Thus, both through the crystallization of the subject through the literature and through discussions with specialists, the provided ideas bring value to the academic field, practically serving as a conceptual basis for a variety of potential qualitative or quantitative research, which can now be based on the new concepts and processes that this paper offer, information that is more faithful to the current music industry where an increasingly strong emphasis is placed on branding.

In addition, at the experimental level, the results obtained have a high informational value for future experimental research because they manage to eliminate or recontextualize the variables that have been tested. Basically, through this elimination process, the information in this work can suggest new variables, such as unconventional, dynamic visual identities, with human presence and movement in them, in the form of video, for example. In addition, the experiments offer a new tool, in the form of unique web surveys, which can be improved or used as such by researchers to test a variety of situations where visual stimuli influence perceptions of any kind. The web surveys developed for this work have a great potential for replicability. They are

developed and enriched based on literature, manipulation checks and pre-testing, being a unique hybrid practical tool that manages to logically link two apparently different fields.

On the **practical** side, the ramifications are also multiple. On the one hand, the specialists in the music industry as well as the artists themselves can use the tools and strategies outlined in this work for effective promotion and branding. This information is all the more effective as it is based not only on literature and experimental research, but also on the practical experience of other specialists in various music industry sub-fields, a trademark of today's dynamic music industry. Artists and specialists can use these data, plans, schemes and concepts to generate efficient branding, brand communication, or advertising plans, taking into account the standards of efficiency and artistic authenticity stated in this work. In addition, the experimental research part of the visual influence can trigger the attention of those in the industry, using the information to make more efficient use of the elements of visual music promotion when releasing a song.

Both artists and those in the music industry can understand that although it is not always clear in what way the visual influence on music takes place, some correlations between attitude, various behaviors and emotions actually exist. They will understand that the way a person evaluates a song is a complex process that could be based not only on the isolated appreciation of the song but can also be influenced positively by the creation of a harmonious artistic image, composed of professionally made elements, congruent with the music from an emotional point of view, where originality is emphasized, and which are created in a such a way that they have sharing and recommending potential.

In addition to stating the separate contributions for the two fields, academic and practical, it is also vital to state a general contribution that this work offers. While specialized literature sometimes offers isolated, very particular or laboratory situations, and in the music promotion guidebooks some of the information can sometimes be based on personal experiences or situations cherry-picked by music professionals with only a moderate degree of objectivity, the results of this work offer a set of information that reconciles and merges both sides. The results complement and correct each other, and parts of the information from the theory and from the qualitative research end up being experimentally tested, starting a prolific cycle that can continue

through the analysis of new theories and information, and then through testing new relationships between variables.

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