

# UC Riverside

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### Title

Material and Personal Branding in Hip Hop Music Videos

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## **Abstract**

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## **What is a Brand**

Originally, the term “brand” simply referred to the source of a product or service. It was used almost synonymously with the term “trademark.” To think of it literally, cattle would be branded by irons so that ranchers could claim ownership of their stock. However, over time, it was realized that a brand held more than just a name for a product or service. David Ogilvy, the father of advertising, took to defining a brand as “the intangible sum of a product’s attributes.” In simpler terms, a brand encompasses everything a consumer thinks of (both factual and emotional) when they hear a brand name. A solid quote by Molly Hislop describes branding as “the process of creating a relationship or a connection between a company’s product and emotional perception of the customer for the purpose of generating segregation among competition and building loyalty among customers.”

As a brand can be applied to a corporation, product, service, or even person, brand management is essential. Brand management is a marketing function that tries to maintain brand equity, the perceived value of the product or good to the public. It is a cyclical process that seeks to build brand credibility, generate brand loyalty, and gain customer retention. This customer base may go on to endorse the product, contributing back to the brand’s credibility.

## **Music Videos and Branding**

Hip hop was gaining power as a culture. In the 1980-90s, “gangsta rap” began to emerge as a genre. In this golden age, economists saw the rise of hip-hop culture and figured a way to monetize it. A prime example of this marketing mobility was the St. Ides alcoholic beverage advertisement by the Wu-Tang Clan. This well-known American hip-hop group filmed a commercial for the malt liquor’s marketing campaign, drinking St. Ides as they rapped about the

beverage in the half-minute clip. What was most significant about this endorsement was the fact that this brand had no existing ties with hip-hop, yet attempted to build its identity around the genre (Coward). Originally a low-cost, obscure liquor, St. Ides bloomed into a brand that held a hip-hop aesthetic, later on to be promoted by other big players in the genre such as Ice Cube. By handing the creative reigns over to hip-hop artists, St. Ides effectively utilized the influential ability of these key players.

What revolutionized the music industry was the development of technology. Devices became smaller, making audio portable. Video opened up a new door to express songs not only through audio, but also through visuals as well. The rise of MTV and music videos gave artists a platform to portray an image and induce a brand for themselves. Coupled with the accessibility of streaming from portable devices, music videos presented artists an opportunity to develop a strong brand through the unlimited access of the Internet. Also, the shareability of social media magnifies everything that goes into an artist's image, pushing the influence of music videos into new heights (Petchers).

Whatever the brands placed in the music video would be associated with the music, the artist, and the genre. Hip-hop culture primarily boosted an image of luxury lifestyles and hedonistic pleasures, not to mention propelled the fashion industry. Rap artists would often sport tattoos and gold chains, wearing expensive kicks and driving nice cars. Their attire would range from a relaxed Adidas hoodie to a flashy Versace silk top. By continuing to feature these aspects, hip-hop culture branded themselves as a sort of idealistic, self-indulgent lifestyle. Through this, they gained massive influence in popular culture.

## Original is Never Finished

The first example is of Adidas' "Original is Never Finished" campaign (early 2018) in collaboration with an "OG" rap artist, Snoop Dogg. Alegra O'Hare, the VP of global communications for the Adidas Originals brand, sought to create a marketing strategy that merged authenticity with the idea that "we are constantly changing ourselves and breaking down the boundaries that limit imagination" to inspire their customers who are creators. Snoop Dogg was one of the many artists who remixed an original song piece for the campaign.

Overall, the ad is straightforward and notable. The banner picture for the article by The 5<sup>th</sup> Element Magazine on the "Original Is Never Finished" campaign is a picture of Snoop Dogg, watermarked by the iconic Adidas three stripes. For a photo so minimalistic, it is significant in that most pop-culture consumers would be able to piece together what the advertisement is trying to convey by combining these iconic brands (Adidas and Snoop Dogg).

The two-minute video teaser is very simple; it features some abstract shots of Snoop Dogg rapping and some characters decked out in Adidas gear. These visuals integrate many elements into a digestible plotline, creating an aesthetic ad for Adidas Originals. What ultimately ties the artist to the footwear giant's message is the setting inspired by Snoop Dogg's iconic *Doggystyle* (1993) album. The original artwork displays a female dog inside a doghouse while a male dog sits on the roof, watching her. In the video, a cut scene of the dog mascots reveals a live-action version of the album cover. This throwback alludes to Adidas' originality and classic styles that continue to trend today. This is a mutually beneficial relationship for both artist and company: Snoop Dogg gets sponsored by a leading company in its industry, while Adidas is backed by the rapper's influential reputation. Not only does the artist help sell the Adidas brand,



he also brands himself in accordance with Adidas' image of cool and sporty. Therefore, both brands (person and product) remain relevant in the eyes of past and present consumers.

### **Now They Always See Congratulations**

“Now they always say congratulations,” belts Post Malone in the chorus of his hit, “Congratulations” featuring Quavo. This music video came to rise in 2016, pushing the SoundCloud artist to stardom overnight. This was also the music video that inspired this capstone project. Somewhere in the song, Post Malone says “If you f with winning, put your lighters to the sky.” The music video, in coordination with the lyrics, shows a shot of a lighter. However, what was particular about this lighter was its iconic silhouette that can only be attributed to a Zippo. The lyrics could have alluded to any generic lighter, but the fact that it was paired with a visual representation felt like it was marketing Zippos. Whether or not this was intentional or endorsed by Zippo will not be known, but it was notable enough for me to realize that product placements can happen so subtly in music videos. Other popular brands are featured throughout the video, whether it be the Alien brand laptop they use in the sound room or the Chicago Bulls hat a background character wears.

The music video focuses on a theme of accomplishment, incorporating the concepts of “I made it” and “Congratulations.” How they are communicated illuminates subtle branding. Post Malone himself is decked out in chains, rings, watches, and other jewelry that signify a certain degree of wealth to obtain. Him smoking and in the presence of a happy crowd presents how one can celebrate in hip-hop culture. Confetti then falls and many champagne bottles are popped (possibly Moet?). Ultimately, this music video shows that all of these visual details entail a celebratory occasion. Post Malone, it seems, has made it big.

## Pretty Flacko the Fashion Killer

As we move on from brand endorsements to branding oneself in the industry, we come upon A\$AP Rocky. The rap artist is otherwise known as “Pretty Flacko,” meaning that he possesses “pretty boy swag,” and this nickname is given rightfully so. One of A\$AP Rocky’s most notable music videos is his “Fashion Killa,” sporting a smooth beat and featuring the A-List celebrity Rihanna. What is more astounding, however, is the fact that he mentions 27 luxury brands within the video’s 4 minute duration. He throws out the brand names in a smooth manner that does not sound overloaded by having them rhyme and associated with different articles of clothing.

*“She got a lotta **Prada**, that **Dolce & Gabbana***

*I can't forget **Escada**, and that **Balenciaga***

*I'm sippin' purple syrup, come be my Aunt Jemima*

*And if you is a rider, we'll go shoppin' like mañana*

*Her attitude Rihanna, she get it from her mama*

*She jiggy like Madonna, but she trippy like Nirvana*

*'Cause everything designer,*

*Her jeans is **Helmut Lang**, shoes is **Alexander Wang***

*And her shirt the newest **Donna**, **Karan***

*Wearin' all the **Cartier** frames*

*Jean Paul **Gaultiers** 'cause they match with her persona”*

Fashion Killa lyrics © Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC, Warner/Chappell Music, Inc, Reach Music Publishing

These lyrics show Rocky's extensive understanding of the fashion world, pairing his shoes with Alexander Wang while keeping his trunk Goyard rather than throwing out random pairings. In the video, A\$AP Rocky browses through many stores with Rihanna, keeping her stylish and trendy. I would also like to note that "Fashion Killa" was shot in a grayscale filter. This creates an effect of black-and-white attire that is often attributed to more upper-class fashion preferences of chic, minimal colors.

Not only does A\$AP Rocky play the role of a trendy fellow in the music video, but he also does in real life. He bridged his style with his sound, flexing his personal luxury style off-screen as well. Thus, he has built an image of himself that centers around fashion, hip-hop, and his A\$AP Mob brand. Rocky has gone on to enforce this image by wearing full Gucci to Milan Fashion Week SS18, rocking a full floral outfit on a casual day, to being the celebrity face of Dior Homme. (Grobe).

### **Yeezy for President**

As we move up the ladder, Kanye West holds the crown for hip-hop pop-culture. With 8 studio albums, multiple fashion collaborations in footwear and clothing, and 21 Grammy Awards under his belt, Kanye has mastered the art of personal branding. He emits a very straightforward personality that generates a strong confidence in himself. His songs are each unique, curated to a specific message and mixed with soul samples that have faded into musical archives until he brought them to the mainstream. Though his self-righteousness does not rub well with the majority and his confidence is through the roof, Kanye has managed to present himself as a charismatic leader.

A prime example of Kanye's work is his short video, "Power." For one minute and thirty four seconds, the video features a long take of a camera zooming away from Kanye. As more of the scenery comes into the frame, we see Greek elements that enhance his stoic expression, giving the impression that he is a Greek god himself.

Kanye's success is proven through his many brands. His shoe collaboration with Adidas produced the in-demand YEEZY sneakers. These luxury kicks range anywhere from \$300 to upwards of \$2,500 on the most popular sneakers in retail. He also went on to produce his own fashion line at the New York Fashion Week in February 2017. His continual success in both music and fashion both work cohesively to enhance his image as THE Kanye West.

### **An Odd Future**

As we delve into personal branding, we can transition into an alternative part of hip-hop into the counter-culture side. Tyler, the Creator is nothing short of simple. He says whatever he wants, does whatever he wants, and seems to make music on just whatever he pleases. Bursting with color and energy, Tyler has presented himself as the alternative hip hop king (with his collective Odd Future).

Through his music videos, you are placed into alternate realities tinged with interesting elements such as un-proportionately large objects and the overall bright, contrasting colors that incite a vibrant life. He literally brands himself as a "colorful" character, subsequently showcasing his fashion sense. Many of his attire are branded with his iconic logos (Cherry Bomb heads, Odd Future donuts, and GOLF typography). On his website, Golf Wang, he sells his streetwear brands. Collections are dropped twice a year, with seasonal look books featuring the

shirts, caps, and even socks that he wears in his videos. Thus, he able to capitalize on his music videos. Even more, his brand Golf Wang has collaborated with big brands such as Vans.

More recently, Tyler released a collection of pastel shoes with Converse “One-Stars” dubbed “Gold le Fleur.” This was timed in collaboration with his newest album *Flower Boy*. This allowed him to strategically place the Converse into one of the music videos, Okra, which has amassed over 14 million views to this date. Tyler, the Creator utilizes his resources to market himself and his “Odd Future” culture as a brand. There may be a plethora of talented musicians out there who can sing and play the piano, but it is the individual’s personality and originality that is the real driving point into the limelight.

### **Summary**

Artists are selling more than just their music; they are selling their brand. Music videos, as a medium, open up opportunities to engage the audience beyond their auditory senses. With the widespread use of technology and the internet at one’s fingertips, music videos are easily accessible and create a lasting impact. Rather than restrict the viewer to the imagination of the video producers, music videos allow interpretations that reflect on societal standards and even societal issues. Music videos were an agent of change: Not only did the music have to sound good, but they also had to look good as well. All in all, music videos allow artists to express themselves in a more creative fashion, integrating their personal styles and acting as brand ambassadors. Whether it be enforcing cultural standards that are expected in the hip-hop brand or promoting their own clothing lines, they are influential beyond the music they produce.

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