

The Role of Visual Identity in Music Perception

A Talk with Specialists on Song Likability, Perceived Quality and Emotional Reactions

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Since the music industry is oversaturated, the role of branding becomes of great importance. Although of a paramount value for success, the influence of visual identity on contemporary music perception is still poorly discussed. The present paper aims to exploratory assess the role of visual elements on the way music is perceived. Sixteen semi-structured interviews with music specialist are conducted. The primary topic approached refers to the role of visual identity in terms of song likability, perceived music quality and emotional reactions. The results suggest that branding may help in the differentiation process by creating memorability and clarity on the market. However, for a valuable creative product, there must be a balance between shaping the brand identity and maintaining the artist's authenticity.

Keywords: music industry, brand communication, visual identity, perceived music quality, specialists' interview

Introduction

The commercial music industry is often seen as being full of emerging artists. Due to the increasingly easy access to music distribution and advertising tools supported by the development of technology and the Internet, some might even say that the market is oversaturated (Meler & Škoro, 2013; Lieb, 2018; Haynes & Marshall, 2018). In today's society, an artist has access to many more or less free and easy-to-use tools that can be used to reach a target audience. Thus, to differentiate themselves from others, they must

build a more effective presence (Hughes et al., 2013; Hutchison, 2013; Allen, 2018). Such a presence can be achieved through branding and brand communication. In branding, the image represents the way the consumer perceives a product, a service, a company or a person, and specialists can try to direct the way this image is born by building an efficient and solid brand identity (Morris, 2005; Schroeder, 2005; Allen, 2018). In the case of the music industry, one can talk about a combination of personal branding and brand communication. An artist, seen as a personal brand, is almost always accompanied by brand extensions such as music, merchandise, paid concerts and other revenue vessels that are subject to classic branding and brand communication processes (Baker, 2005; Taylor, 2013; Khedher, 2014).

Considering that people spend a lot of time on social media connecting with and following artists' pages, and that these platforms are a simple and inexpensive way to advertise, today's brand identity may be efficiently shaped and promoted using visual elements (Chertkow & Feehan, 2012). More specifically, video performances, emotionally evaluated imagery, movements, gestures, photos, videos, show elements or physical attractiveness can sometimes increase the perception of the quality, emotional intensity or general appreciation of the music (Gillespie, 1997; Finnäs, 2001; Juchniewicz, 2008; Boltz, Ebendorf & Field, 2009; Ellis, 2013; Waddell & Williamon, 2017).

If we connect these findings to the modern music industry, the implications might be substantial. We can speculate that successful music is sometimes judged not only on the basis of its musical merits, but also on the basis of listeners' past or concurrent interactions with the visual elements surrounding the performer (Thompson, Graham & Russo, 2005; Boltz, Ebendorf & Field, 2009). The relevance of this approach is of high value since it is still poorly covered by the literature. If in previous experiences one discusses the influence of videos, gestures, physical appearance and live shows, in the context of branding and the online environment different but modern aspects are brought into discussion. The visual elements of a brand identity, sometimes called visual branding touchpoints in the music industry, can be the artist or band logos, event posters, promotional photos, visual styles of web and social network pages, color palettes or merchandise (Chertkow & Feehan, 2012; Allen, 2018). While the aforementioned literature suggests that dynamic stimuli, such as video and live performance, may influence the perception on music, there is research needed to determine if such an influence takes place in the context of more static stimuli, such as the ones of a conventional brand identity applied to the modern music industry.

From a more practical perspective, the relevance of the paper is materialised at the business level as well. The main implication consists of offering music, branding and communication specialists the concepts, the tools and the strategies useful in efficiently designing nowadays artists' identities and overcome the challenges of making it in the modern music industry.

Thus, aiming to fill in a gap in the literature, to prepare a fertile ground for further experimental research, and to help the music industry in improving images and perceptions, the present paper aims to exploratory discuss the role of visual elements on the music perception. Moreover, this work also aims to contextualise concepts related to the music industry, in the view of some specialists from the industry itself, so as to provide

a concise framework for future experimental research. More specifically, the main objective of this paper is to find out how visual brand may influence music appreciation, its quality and emotional reactions, in the view of some people active in the industry. Additionally, the paper seeks to offer some essential explanations for industry success and the branding phenomenon in order to better comprehend the information about influence for future experimental endeavours.

A semi-structured interview is conducted with sixteen specialists. The vision of specialists in media, music performance, music management, music consulting or music advertising is vital to get a complete and synchronised image with what is actually happening in the industry at the moment, and to bridge literature gaps in terms of operationalisation of visual influence processes in the contemporary music industry.

Branding and the visual aspect of promotion in the music industry

Music, like any other product or service with a financial incentive, is subject to marketing and communication tactics and practices (Meler & Škoro, 2013; Lieb, 2018). Within the music industry, besides the music itself being marketed for direct income, through records, tickets, merchandise, etc., the artists themselves are promoted through a communication-oriented strategy.

Selling and promoting the music itself is often not enough. Today, a brand image, which is a result of a well-communicated brand identity, can make a notable contribution to achieving success, according to Frith (2007). He offers Robbie Williams as an example, emphasising the fact that his live performances and brand image provide value as much as his music catalogue itself. Nowadays, due to the development of technology and the explosion of social media, the creation of a “package”, a brand identity and targeted marketing actions can be useful in the case of artists. Thus, the idea that an artist can be subjected to branding processes and brand communication is often encountered (Allen, 2018).

The application of strategies related to communication and branding of a person can have valid advantages in the music industry. Outlining an effective brand identity, and subsequently a consistent communication of that identity can direct the way people will form their perception of the artists and interact with them and their music. Through sustained communication efforts, the artist will reach the target audience more efficiently, will generate loyalty among them, will encourage people to listen to the music and will make them empathise and relate better with the performer (Baker, 2005; Beeching, 2010; Hutchison, 2013; Lieb, 2018).

Godin (2009) suggests that a general public is difficult to please and attract, especially in the context of a saturated market. Thus, achieving success is often accidental. However, the author suggests that focusing on current fans, a specific target audience that can be reached through branding and brand communication, could contribute to success. This group of people can then further promote the brand through word-of-mouth (Godin, 2009).

Through the branding process, an artist's public identity is shaped and solidified, highlighting unique values, personality and characteristics. In addition to shaping and solidifying a visual identity, personality, style and a discourse that respects the values, promises and characteristics of the artist, the brand must be communicated through various advertising and public relations actions (Meler & Škoro, 2013; Rowles, 2018). Since the artist in search of success is, or tends to become, a public figure, some visual elements become practically mandatory even if only logistically. Such elements can be event posters, artwork for CDs or streaming platforms or even the actual physical appearance of the artist. Thus, in case of the music industry, the artist's brand, strong or weak, is present whether they want it or not, and the artist's actions practically constitute a form of brand communication (Chertkow & Feehan, 2012).

There are often multiple views on brand identity. On the one hand, the brand identity embodies all the values and characteristics that the brand conveys through the many channels of communication to build positioning in the minds of consumers and a brand image (De Chernatony, McDonald & Wallace; 2010; Wheeler, 2017). On the other hand, brand identity is often emphasised from a predominantly visual point of view, and it is stated by experts and academics (Sicard, 2012; Aaker, 2012; Wheeler, 2017) to include logos, typefaces, images, colours, styles, symbols and visual shapes, as well as other visual identity elements like commercials, packaging, and so on. Such aesthetic elements must mix effectively with the artist and their music for a brand to be considered authentic (Chertkow & Feehan, 2012; Borg, 2020). It is suggested that a few distinct graphic components are often sufficient to provide an overview of the basic message and spirit of the brand without the requirement to first listen to the artist's music.

Visual brands of artists are noticeable all around us, and especially in the case of commercial music artists, we can find many examples of memorable identities. At the logo level, names like Kiss, Abba, Nirvana, Metallica, David Guetta or Elton John are relevant examples (Jackson, 2012; Carter, 2017; Dobric, 2020). Visual brands of artists are also easily and effectively expressed on social media and on the website. Logos, promotional materials, colour palettes, pictures or videos, all are found in one form or another on the pages of artists (Hutchison, 2013). These visual brands, completed by potential merchandise and the online presence of artists, are also a good way for communicating visual identity (Hutchison, 2013; Johnson, 2019), and this identity communication consists of activities that both the artist and music professionals or specialists engage in.

A music professional, in the understanding of this work, is a person who is knowledgeable about such industry communication processes and can either use them or recognise them. Finding enough persons with a very particular position is a challenging task that does not accurately reflect the reality and diversity of what it means to work in the industry (Britten, 2009; Rutter, 2016; Young, 2018). Therefore, in this paper, when referring to professionals in the music industry, the roles they perform are to manage, mentor, counsel, analyse, study, or promote musicians through different means. In other words, we are talking about a person with experience in the music field, who actively engages in the communication part of the music industry, rather than simply being a listener or fan.

The influence of visual cues on music perception

Since music can induce affective responses, subjective quality evaluations and a particular intentional behaviour, the incorporation of visual stimuli opens a varied spectrum of communication possibilities. Platz and Kopiez (2012) suggest that in addition to influencing how a song's qualities are perceived, visual features can aid in conveying and communicating meaning, possible through branding and communication. Artists can use visual expression to help others recognise them. With a distinctive graphic identity, they could likely stand out in the already-competitive music business (Schroeder, 2005).

There are several angles from which to examine how individuals experience music in the presence of visual cues. While some studies (Iwamiya, 1994; Adams, 1994; Thompson, Graham & Russo, 2005) examine how the emotional valence of a song is altered, others (Boltz, Ebendorf & Field, 2009; Gillespie, 1997; Juchniewicz, 2008) also examine general attitudes toward specific elements like rhythm, melody, loudness, or song quality, and some of them examine the phenomenon of intentional behaviour affected by context (Brown & Sellen, 2006; Lee, Pritchard & Hubbles, 2019). Since branding strategies usually incorporate and express feelings, the affective dimension is considered a significant element (Borg, 2020). These investigations show that, regardless of whether they concentrate on the emotional content, the expressiveness of the song, or the overall impression, music may be perceived differently when other visual stimuli are utilised.

It is important to highlight that the research under consideration focuses exclusively on the evaluation of the music piece under specific stimuli, and not on the evaluation of the artist as a whole package, the latter already being acknowledged as one of the key outcomes of effective branding and brand communication (Chertkow & Feehan, 2012; Hutchison, 2013; Meier, 2017; Borg, 2020).

The literature offers several experiments that emphasise the important role of visual elements on the music perception. Although they do not assess contemporary music or visual brand identity, they can provide research perspectives. For instance, regarding the level of appreciation of songs or their characteristics, Gillespie (1997) suggests that musical characteristics, such as speed, musical vibrato or the speed of some instrumental performances can obtain more positive evaluations when visual stimuli are used, videos in this case. The research also suggests that the degree of musical specialisation of the evaluator does not affect the potency of this influence.

Furthermore, Iwamiya (1994) conducts a study where audio quality is intentionally reduced, but visual stimuli are attached to it. This situation is compared with the situation in which the audio quality is normal, but no visual stimuli are present. The results suggest that the visual factor manages to compensate, the quality being rated approximately the same in both situations (Iwamiya, 1994). In addition to video stimuli, physical presence has also been analysed in terms of presentation, facial expressions, body movements or even gender. Although the direction and intensity of the influence is not always clear, it is indeed present in some variables, such as general perception, assessment of quality, rhythm, experientiality, or musical ability (Thompson, Graham & Russo, 2005; Juchniewicz, 2008; Wapnick et al. 2009; Waddell & Williamon, 2017).

On top of quality and general song appreciation, the influence of visual stimuli on the emotion music transmits is also analysed. An attempt by Boltz, Ebendorf & Field (2009), using a set of images and videos as stimuli, suggests that visual materials rated with negative or positive emotions manage to congruently influence the cognition of neutral musical pieces. This research solidifies what other studies have revealed in the past (Moore, 2010), suggesting that videos in particular may influence the emotional response. However, both analysis of previous studies and some that have failed to replicate the same outcomes (Trevor & Plazak, 2016) argue that the type of stimuli used, as well as the congruence between visual stimuli and music, both emotionally and contextually, may affect the results.

The emotional influence that visual stimuli can have on musical cognition, along with the influence on quality, movement and gestures, expressiveness, or likeability (Iwamiya, 1994; Juchniewicz, 2008; Ellis, 2013; Platz & Kopiez, 2012; Waddell & Williamon, 2017) raises a curiosity in the context of branding and the contemporary music industry. As previously mentioned, within a visual identity of an artist, the main elements are song artwork, posters, websites and pictures. Videos, conversely, although analysed in most of the above-mentioned studies, represent rather a brand communication channel, sporadic (with the release of new songs), and which does not respect the permanent, or at least long-term, character of the elements with which the identity is initially built.

The review of these findings raises a logical interest to further investigate the impact of visual stimuli in the music domain. Thus, as it is scarcely analysed in the literature, it becomes intriguing to explore if the mechanisms of visual influence on music perception also operate in a modern and more communication-oriented context, such as the brand identity associated with an artist.

Methodology

Analysing the influence of visual stimuli on the aural elements requires a stronger operationalisation than that found in the literature so far. The influence of branding and visual identity in the case of the music perception is still barely studied in the literature. As qualitative methods are meant to gain a deeper understanding of the knowledge, opinions and experiences of participants (Kvale, 1994; Moriarty, 2011), the present study, through a semi-structured interview, aims to comprehensively approach music and communication specialists in order to better understand the role of branding in conceptualising and influencing music perception.

The semi-structured methodology is ideal in our case because it allows us to use information and concepts solidified in the literature, while maintaining the open character of the conversation. Moreover, it offers the possibility to re-address topics for clarification and slide naturally to follow-up questions regarding secondary branches of the main themes (Galletta, 2013). In this scenario, the follow-up questions are addressed by revisiting themes where the responses seemed insufficient, or on the contrary, aroused a real interest of the respondent, this leading to a useful additional elaboration of the

topics addressed or increasing the specificity of some more general answers (Kvale, 1994; Qu & Dumay, 2011).

The interpretation of the answers is mainly based on coding, grouping, and connecting ideas and concepts in the themes imposed by the questions inspired by literature. At the same time, sub-topics are developed inside the large themes later when new concepts and themes are highlighted by multiple respondents, in order not to exclude relevant and valuable information from outside the main topics. In addition, the narrative presentation is also crystallised in a scheme (Figure 1) to concisely illustrate the information obtained and its ramifications.

This endeavour helps in gaining information on the promotion process and on the influence and benefits branding and branding communication bring to artists. More specifically, the research questions are the following:

- RQ1: How can music industry success and music branding usefulness in the contemporary context be operationalised?
- RQ2: How can a visual brand identity influence the music appreciation?
- RQ3: How can a visual brand identity influence the perceived quality of a song?
- RQ4: How can a visual brand identity influence the type and strength of the music emotional reactions?

Sample

The sample is composed of 16 respondents working in the music industry, aged between 23 and 42, with different professional positions, such as music producer, performer, music marketing specialist, artist manager, advertising specialist in the music industry, or music industry coach (see Table 1). From a socio-demographic point of view, the respondents were asked for name, age, title, or occupation and received the option of anonymity. Out of 16 respondents, 10 chose the anonymity option, so it has been decided that all the respondents are going to be coded for privacy and consistency reasons (from R1 to R16).

There is no clear pattern among the respondents with reference to particular jobs they perform in the industry. In the music industry, most jobs are unique, flexible, or even free-lance (Rutter, 2016). Exceptions to this would be the notable global record labels where employee confidentiality agreements make access to interviewees either impossible or limited.

The industry's unpredictable nature of job duties makes this profession one where many work only part-time (Rutter, 2016), where each position is automatically linked to others, and where there is no single job description. However, the responsibilities can be related to various branches, such as PR, management, coaching, concert and tour promotion, or journalism (Britten, 2009). This diversity is also expressed in the list of the respondents of the present research, a sample of professionals that hold multiple or different positions (Table 1). This diversity is controlled by the experience that the respondents have in the field, starting from at least 4 years in the case of younger

respondents (R5 – Musician and Event Planner), up to 10 years or more (R12 – Artist Advertising and Management Executive).

Additionally, the Internet has enabled change and diversity in terms of work opportunities in the music industry. It is suggested that workers in the nowadays music sector are to be more knowledgeable and versatile across disciplines (Young, 2018). Given that the promotion of the artist is carried out by a variety of music professionals using a variety of strategies, the interdisciplinarity among the current respondents is beneficial for identifying common points and themes and eventually help formulate new hypotheses that are more anchored in the reality of the contemporary music industry.

Table 1: List of the respondents and their professional positions

Respondent code	Country	Respondent occupation
R1	Romania	Musician, Vocal Coach and Sociologist
R2	Romania	Music Producer
R3	Romania	National Radio Program Director
R4	Netherlands	Producer and Music Journalist
R5	Romania	Musician and Event Planner
R6	Romania	Musician and Professional Video Producer
R7	Romania	Music Composer and Producer
R8	Romania	Radio Presenter and Social Media Executive
R9	Romania	Communication and Influencer Marketing Specialist, Streaming Manager
R10	Romania	Musician and Advertising Teaching Assistant
R11	Denmark	Musician and Digital Concept Development Specialist
R12	United States of America	Artist Advertising and Management Executive
R13	United States of America	Founder and CEO of Music Business and Coaching Platform, Author, Podcast Host, Content Marketer, Musician
R14	United Kingdom	Head of Promotions at a Record Label
R15	United Kingdom	Music Industry Consultant
R16	United States of America	Web and Graphic Designer

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Due to the limited availability of potential interviewees, a convenience sampling method has been used. The interviewees have been selected by using three strategies: 1. searching the web pages of specialists in the music industry to obtain their public contact info in order to message them by email; 2. approaching specialists from music industry groups on Facebook and LinkedIn; and 3. contacting people in the music industry from our own professional network. The geographical distribution of the respondents is explained by the convenience sampling and limited to the interviewees' availability. However, as the

purpose of this work is to find common ground among specialists within the process of designing a conceptual basis for more advanced analyses, this shortcoming becomes an advantage. Working beyond a national framework, some of the interviewed specialists collaborate with artists from different geographical areas than theirs. In this case, the physical proximity becomes irrelevant. Consequently, when designing the interview guide, all mentions regarding local or national industries have been avoided.

Some of the interviews were conducted orally, on Zoom or Skype platforms, depending on the respondents' preference, and some of them were conducted by email, supported by the Google Forms platform. This was necessary due to time zone discrepancies among certain responders, three of whom were from the United States of America. In addition, some of them directly expressed their desire to answer the questions in a written form.

This form of written interview retains its validity if specific criteria are met (Hunt & McHale, 2007). First, in this case, the face-to-face social cues do not provide additional information in the current case, and the e-mail method offered the possibility to access a larger pool of specialised people. Second, from a scheduling point of view, a written approach, in comparison with an oral conversation, is not influenced by time zone or live availability. Finally, considering the interviewees' expertise in fields such as advertising, journalism or coaching, their written communication skills are guaranteed (Opdenakker, 2006). In addition, in both oral and written interviews, respondents received follow-up questions, either live or through email, mainly in the case of incomplete answers or clarification requests.

The interviews were conducted over five months' timeline, from May to September 2021. Depending on the respondent and the supplementary questions addressed, the oral interviews lasted between 30 to 50 minutes. Responses to written interviews were received within 3–7 days from the request and took, on average, another two days if follow-up questions were required. The respondents have been informed that the completion of the interview is voluntary and anonymously and the data is used exclusively for the research purpose. No questions about particular artists under their professional or legal tuition have been asked, neither questions about any internal procedures that would violate any confidentiality agreements. The research has obtained the ethics approval from the Scientific Council under the reference number 44TT/1.03.2022.

Measurements

The questions from the interview guide are theory-based and have been grouped into three categories: success, branding and visual stimuli. The interview questions are generated by transposing the concepts from the research questions obtained from a review of the specialised literature into discussion topics. Music (Beeching, 2010; Morris, 2015; Meier, 2017), branding (Morris, 2005; Lieb, 2018; Johnson, 2019), and visual influence (Gillespie, 1997; Boltz, Ebendorf & Field, 2009; Platz & Kopiez, 2012; Waddell & Williamon, 2017) literature represents the basis of these questions. Regarding the first category, the main emphasis is on the definition of success in the music industry and

the challenges faced in achieving it. The second dimension relies on the importance of branding and visual brand identity in the music field, on the brand communication tools, and on the emotions an artist transmits. Finally, the largest importance has been given to the role of visual stimuli, assessing opinions on how song likability, the perceived quality of the song, and the emotional reaction may be influenced.

Results

Operationalising the contemporary music industry success and music branding usefulness

To better operationalise and contextualise the understanding of the present music industry, explanations about what success means in the music business as well as branding and its relevance for artists were collected from the music professionals.

Regarding success, the respondents suggest that success is many-sided, and is characterised by quantitative increases in money, listeners and distinctions, by public appreciation, achieving a professional image, the possibility of making a living from music, as well as personal or creative success, defined by personal satisfaction, creating an effective relationship with fans, and achieving a high level of originality and authenticity. The professionals emphasise the fact that success also depends on how good the music is and how pleasant the artist is, both of which are defined by them through a high degree of emotional connection between them and the audience. Success also comes with overcoming challenges. On the one hand, the challenges are financial, from the point of view of creating, distributing and promoting music, challenges regarding the market oversaturation, as well as personal challenges, when artists do not realise the importance of communication and advertising activities when they want to achieve success.

“A successful music artist is one who is able to connect with their audience, consistently puts out good music and is able to do it as a career without supplementing income from other sources” (R12 – Artist Advertising and Management Executive).

Regarding the second aspect, that of branding, the professionals believe that branding is important because it offers differentiation capacity, memorability and clarity on the market. It is pointed out that all public artists have brands whether they want it or not, but they have the freedom to choose how they interact with the public and how they choose their directions and tone in terms of promotion and communication. Likewise, there must be a balance between contouring the brand identity and preserving the artist’s authenticity, so that the promotional processes do not alter the creative product, in this case the music. The professionals mention elements such as the internet, social media, streaming platforms, live performances and media appearances as brand communication tools, and they believe that consistency is vital in achieving the objectives.

“Branding is essential, whether it’s a logo, styling and appearance (outfits, hairstyle, makeup and so on), a consistent style of videos etc., it improves awareness of the “brand” (the artist) and makes them more recognizable” (R11 – Musician and Digital Concept Development Specialist).

These explanations regarding success in the industry and the usefulness of branding make it more apparent how essential is that the shaping and promotion of the artist through branding and visual identity are analysed, as it is done in the following sections. The way in which these visual elements contribute to success through effective branding can provide valuable experimental research suggestions and hypotheses regarding today's music listening and appreciation behaviour.

The visual influence on music perception

Song likability

First and foremost, some of the specialists suggest that the artist's appearance might contribute to people's knowledge of their music and their desire to learn more about it. It might lead to people being fascinated or interested in discovering that artist's music if they see a consistent visual presence, especially in the internet environment, as well as a pleasing classical visual identity, where a high degree of authenticity is notable. This authenticity, in terms of visual cues, is useful in the respondents' view, because as an artist, "if you present yourself as you are in front of the public, the public understands you, they are more lenient with the way they perceive your music, even if they may not particularly like it" (R6).

Regarding the influence itself, it is suggested that visual stimuli should be able to positively affect the way music is perceived, when they coincide in terms of tone. If the audience first comes in contact with the visual elements of the artist, appreciates their tone and message, later on, when they discover the music and if it conveys the same messages, it is suggested that the chances are that it will be equally appreciated. For example, it is stated that, as an artist, when "a potential new fan sees your profile before hearing the music, it's vital that your image is the way you want to be remembered" (R14). The respondents point out the implications of the lack of consonance between the tone of visual identity and that of music, suggesting that it can lead to confusion but is generally counteracted when the music itself compensates by a high degree of likability, regardless of the visual side. It is also suggested that sometimes, if the image and communication are efficient and consistent, people might be more indulgent with the music: "No matter how hard we try to separate the person from the music, if we find something irresistible or repulsive about the artist, the music will be perceived in the same way" (R10).

Specialists also refer to the attention that artists should pay to visual elements, because "the image must reflect the artist's work" (R9), and if it is of poor quality or not liked by the public, it can influence the song likability when the audience listens to the artist's music. A repulsive identity or lack of a visual identity might block music from reaching the audience at all, which practically prevents the analysis of visual influence since the music is not even listened to.

Perceived quality

In the case of quality, almost all specialists suggest that the visual can have an influence on aural, sometimes because “people are often driven by prejudice and music is no exception” (R10). For example, as it is suggested by an interviewee’s personal experience with band management, the audience may not want to listen to a song, or challenge its quality simply because the artist or band’s pictures are very amateurish: “The public did not listen to the music in order to have a proper opinion, or even if they listened to it, they did not take it seriously, because the pictures were amateurish” (R1). Further analysing this, it suggested that in the case of a lacking visual identity, the audience might not be able to mentally associate this visual identity with that of some great artists or bands whose music they consider to be of high quality and whose visual identity is well defined.

In respect to positive influence, it is suggested that beautifully packaged music can be perceived as having a higher quality in some cases. It is pointed that visual can play an important role and, in some cases, people tend to be guided by prejudices or to transfer attributes from the visual dimension to the musical one. Listeners might tend to project opinions regarding an artist’s personality, which can be transmitted visually, to the music and its quality: “A part of it has to do with projection, because people are projecting their feelings towards the artist as a person into the art they make. Thus, the artist’s general image can greatly influence the quality perception, be it positively or negatively” (R16).

However, specialists believe that some people later manage to transcend this visual stimulus influence, and on the long run, once the visual part is no longer of interest to them or is no longer consistent with the artist’s current personality, they can revise their assessments in terms of music quality. This mention seems notable and motivated, as both market trends and listener cognitions can change. The quality perception shift does not have just a visual motivation (people can simply get bored of music or change their preferences) since “music is always perceived differently in retrospect” (R13) and the artist’s image might change over time.

Emotions

Considering the influence of the image and the visual elements on the emotions felt when listening to music, the opinions of the specialists are more complex. On the one hand, experts suggest that the image and the visual can potentiate the emotions transmitted through music, especially when the emotional attachment to the artist and relatability are already high. Sometimes, “people tend to get drawn towards artists that reflect either who they are or who they want to be; and having someone reflect that in their image can help connect with the music’s emotions more” (R14) or to feel them stronger in general. On the other hand, some believe that visuals can influence the intensity of emotions rather in the case of videos and live performances, than in the case of listening to music on smart devices or on the radio, thus when one actually sees the artist or interact with a visual stimulus: “They are useful in conveying the artist’s message; colours of music

videos help convey moods for example, same when performing – stage setup, outfits, etc.” (R11). What the respondents suggest is that if what the artist depicts physically or through visually exposed narrative does not coincide with musical emotions, people may lose confidence that the emotions the artist conveys through music are authentic.

As in the case of the influence on other variables, the specialists claim that the emotions transmitted through branding and brand communication, implicitly also through visual materials, should be synchronised with those transmitted by music. Accordingly, some artists already “turn to specialists in order to combine and synchronise all these elements harmoniously” (R7). Pictures, vlogs, music videos, social media pages, physical appearance and live appearances are some of the elements and channels suggested by the professionals where emotions might be most effectively expressed visually: “Clearly, the role of the visuals, videos, and storytelling, is to enhance the music. They enhance the message of music and yes, you can get a complete experience of that art, that music. It’s one thing when you just listen to the song and another thing when you also see the video or the pictures. They show you the vision of the artist and take you in the right direction to understand the intended emotion and message” (R6).

Figure 1 presents, in a summarised manner, the potential role of visual stimuli in the music industry, the way the experts have mapped it. Overall, it is emphasised and suggested that visual elements can consistently impact the song likability, the perceived quality of music and the emotional reactions.

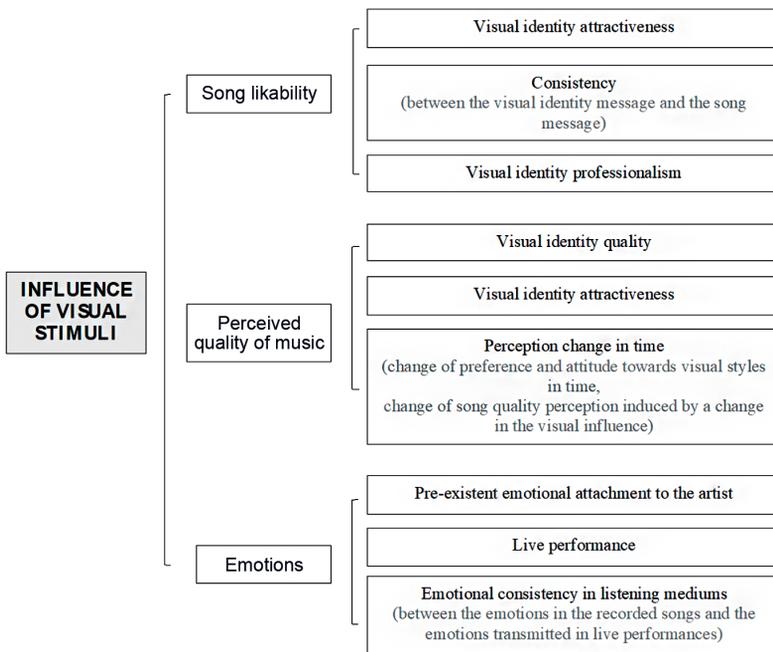


Figure 1: A conceptual schema on the role of visual stimuli in the music industry
Source: Compiled by the author.

Discussions and conclusion

The purpose of the current study is to thoroughly investigate how music industry professionals view the usefulness and influence of visual components in the music business. The results of the semi-structured interview validate that appreciation of music and success are both subjective concepts that are susceptible to a variety of internal and external influences, and that visual elements, specific to a conventional brand identity, might influence how music is perceived, which in turn, can influence the artist's success.

The first research question (RQ1) aims to provide a better understanding of what success means in the industry, as well as how branding is useful for an artist today. Regarding success, the music professionals summarise the fact that it can represent the achievement of some indicators in terms of popularity and money earned, but it can also be a personal one, which refers to personal satisfaction related to maintaining the creative spirit, authenticity and of a strong relationship with fans. In addition, it is suggested that an agreeable personality and good music are also part of success and can be characterised by a strong emotional impact and originality. Finally, a factor in achieving success is overcoming some challenges, and these are mainly related to money and the oversaturation of the market. The results are in line with the existing literature (Landa, 2006; Beeching, 2010; Aaker, 2014), meaning that the claims that success has different meanings and "making it" in the music industry is many-sided, still apply to this day.

In terms of branding, music industry professionals view it as crucial since it provides market differentiating capability, memorability, and clarity regarding the brand's values and characteristics. To prevent the promotional activities from changing the creative product, in this case the music, a balance must also be maintained between developing the brand identity and maintaining the authenticity of the artist. Among the most useful brand communication tools, intended to help the efficient transmission of brand identity today, the respondents mention the Internet, social media, streaming platforms, as well as live performances. The obtained data on the characteristics and processes of branding and communication in the music industry offer valuable insight from the music industry and are supported by the literature as well (Morris, 2015; Meier, 2017; Lieb, 2018), with the general conclusion that communication processes and brand identity communication are often responsible for at least part of the success achieved by artists. The interviewees assert that visual cues might have an impact on song appreciation, perceived music quality and emotions, which were all noted as indicators of success, but also a general influence on the overall image, as branding can aid in market distinction and help authenticity in standing out.

The second research question (RQ2) addresses the role of visual identity on the way music is perceived, in terms of song likability. It is suggested that if the tone and personality transmitted through the visual materials are congruent with the music, they might manage to enhance the latter and increase the appreciation of the listeners. However, due to the complexity of humans and the artistic domain, this cannot always be ensured. The way the artist is displayed from an emotional or personality point of view can sometimes differ quite a lot from what the artist's music conveys, a situation that is often balanced

out when the music already has a very high level of public appreciation. Although this information cannot be generalised to all cases due to the complexity of the industry and the individual and subjective experiences of the interviewed professionals, it can offer useful suggestions, provide help in operationalisation and serve as a starting point for experimental research or a content analysis on a large number of cases in the music industry. While the data from the current research offers particularities specific to branding in the music industry, the influence of visuals on song likability in some particular contexts is supported by experimental efforts as well. Studies such as ones of Boltz, Ebendorf & Field (2009) and Ellis (2013) suggest that visual stimuli might indeed influence the general likability of a song, but it is important to mention that these experiments have mainly used videos as stimuli. This fact can offer a useful suggestion in terms of choosing the type of stimuli that could be used for experimental research, in order to see if this influence would rather occur with a video stimulus, and not with a somewhat more static visual one, which is specific to a conventional brand identity.

The third research question (RQ3) addresses the influence that the visual could have on the perceived quality of the music. The specialists suggest that low quality visual materials may discourage the audience from wanting to discover the artist's music, or even influence the perceived quality of the music. Contrary, if the music and the artist are beautifully packaged, people may tend to attach to music a higher degree of quality. This might be due to the fact that they sometimes tend to be guided by prejudice and project the positive qualities of promotion and communication on how they perceive the music. This phenomenon is also supported by the Halo Effect Theory (Thorndike, 1920; Nisbett & Wilson, 1977), which suggests that the perception, of a brand in this case, can be influenced by a pre-existent perception of other characteristics of the same brand. At the same time, it is suggested that the perception on the quality of music might be influenced by other variables, sometimes longitudinally, and that the visual impact on the perception of quality may change over time due to evolutions or psychological changes of listeners. Iwamiyia (1994) conducts an experiment with a more literal approach of the concept of quality, more specifically sound quality, and it suggests that visual stimuli can compensate for a lower degree of quality. Moreover, the work of Gillespie (1997) further emphasises that the quality of some musical characteristics can be improved when there is a visual stimulus, while Waddell & Williamon (2017) suggest that the assessed performance quality might get a higher score in the presence of such visual cues. However, it is very important to mention that even in these cases, the visual stimulus in the experiments is a dynamic one, more precisely video, stage presence, mimics, or gestures. Only future experimental efforts can provide specificity to the information suggested by the interviewees, more precisely to find if this influence happens only with video stimuli, or it is notable as well in the context of a visual brand identity characterised by static elements, such as a website, a logo, or pictures, devoid of visual contact with the artist via video or live.

Finally, the fourth research question (RQ4) addresses how visual stimuli could influence the perception of the emotion conveyed by music. Emotions and emotional attachment, according to experts, can be influenced by visual elements. However,

additional conditions are being emphasised. The elements and visual exposures related to brand communication can influence the emotions felt when listening to music, but primary when there is already a strong emotional attachment to the artist. In line with the literature on video stimuli influence (Moore, 2010), it is also considered that such emotional influence happens mainly in the cases where the public sees the artist, such as videos, and especially, live performances. It is also suggested that if the artist is personally present when the listening process happens, physically or virtually, communication, personality and behaviour must be congruent with what the artist transmits through lyrics or what the song conveys emotionally. Otherwise, the perception on the artists' authenticity and sincerity may be affected. This effect of congruence is also supported theoretically and empirically by the literature, suggesting that emotions, particular characteristics or values used in branding and brand communication, should be convergent with those expected or with personal characteristics (De Chernatony, McDonald & Wallace, 2010; Boltz, Ebendorf & Field, 2009; Turri, Smith & Kemp, 2013; Trevor & Plazak, 2016). In this particular aspect, our interviewed professionals have successfully emphasised the dynamic visual aspect, such as music videos, vlogs, stage presence and performance. These suggestions are in line with what the literature says about stimuli effectively influencing the perception of music (Adams, 1994; Thompson, Graham & Russo, 2005; Moore; 2010). Even though compatible, these suggestions deviate from what a brand identity means in a typical way, therefore it is something that should further be analysed through an experimental investigation.

Besides filling a literature gap by approaching the topic of visual identity and visual brand communication importance and symbiosis in the contemporary music field, the present study has profound implications at the business level. The interview-based data offers a concise but comprehensive summary on the main elements the music specialists should consider when building a consistent and long-lasting artist's image. The weight of the paper comes from the industry-realistic variety of specialists approached in the analysis, professionals covering a wide number of music industry subfields: music producer, artist advertising executive, artist manager, music web designer, radio director, music journalist, music consultant, music career coach or music video producer. Additionally, this paper offers updated directions, information and understandings on the role of visuals on music perception to both communication specialists and artists. The data can serve to build communication strategies that are both effective and that do justice to the music product.

Applying a qualitative method, the main limit of the paper is that of subjectivism. However, by consistently relying on variables already approached by the theory and on permanent validation of the results with the existing literature, an objective perspective has been offered. Moreover, due to time and location obstacles, contacting the respondents was performed considering their availability, and not being able to fully respect a clear direction in terms of their occupations in the music industry. However, an advantage of this situation is materialised through a high level of answers' diversity, in line with the interviewees' previous distinct experiences. By increasing the number of interviews, the results could present an even stronger argument and add perspectives that have not yet been covered.

The present paper is built on specialised literature, enriched and adapted through the interviews with specialists who actually work in the contemporary music industry. Thus, from the point of view of future research endeavours, the acquired exploratory information can serve as a baseline for future variables' operationalisation in the field of music branding and brand communication. Likewise, the concepts discussed can help in building experimental designs that verify causality, either in natural or controlled environments, between the use of branding specific visual stimuli and music perception, in a practical and commercial music industry context, a relationship that has not been researched in depth so far.

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