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Songs As Branding Platforms? A Historical Analysis of People, Places, and Products in Pop Music Lyrics

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Abstract

Artists have become decidedly more accustomed to partnering with product marketers. Typically, though, the relationships have involved tour sponsorships, endorsements, or the use of the artist's music in commercials. There are plenty of examples of using popular music in advertising. However, how often has there been *advertising in popular music*? Artists are in a sense "brands." Many of them appear to promote or acquaint audiences with their lifestyles through the music they create. Popular songs can serve not only as a mechanism for the subtle marketing of commercial consumer products, but also as a platform for marketing artists. Three types of branding devices are typically employed by songwriters: the mention of specific product brands, geographical places including cities and states, and well-known people (e.g., celebrities, cultural icons, and politicians). The aim of this study is to identify just how often these three types of lyrical references have occurred in popular songs through the years. How frequently have popular songs employed lyrics that may be serving the purpose of branding or advertising consumer products or the artists themselves, and are there observable trends regarding the practice over time?

Keywords: music industry, music marketing, branding, music lyrics, popular music, advertising, artist development, music promotion

Introduction

In 2012, Yankee Stadium was an appropriate venue for famed New York baseball legend Derek Jeter to speak to a group of beauty editors about the re-launch of his cologne line, Driven Black.¹ During the event, Jeter admitted that in his younger days he had used a popular line of cologne in the 1990s called Cool Water.² It's certainly not unusual for someone hawking his or her own brand to admit once using another. It's interesting, though, that Jeter said the only reason he tried that particular scent was because rapper Snoop Dogg referenced it in one of his songs.³

Cool Water wasn't the only brand referenced in Snoop's 1993 song "Lodi Dodi." Along with references to using Johnson's baby powder and Oil of Olay, he also included shout-outs to fellow rapper Slick Rick and locales such as the San Fernando Valley and Long Beach.⁴ Along with those apparent endorsements of specific consumer brands and places, consider other lyrics in the song, including "for all my Doggs," "my brand new Doggy underwear," and "Doggy Doggy...your words just hypnotize me," and one could argue that the hip-hop legend was also promoting another product: himself.⁵

Artists have become decidedly more accustomed to partnering with product marketers.⁶ Typically, though, the relationships have involved tour sponsorships, endorsements, or the use of the artist's music in commercials.⁷ There are plenty of examples of using popular music in advertising. However, how often has there been *advertising in popular music*?

Artists are in a sense "brands." Many of them appear to promote or acquaint audiences with their lifestyles through the music they create. Through his lyrics, Snoop Dogg certainly informed listeners about his inspirations, what he liked, and the places he frequented. Popular songs can serve not only as a mechanism for the subtle marketing of commercial consumer products, but also as a platform for marketing artists.

Three types of branding devices seem to be exemplified in the lyrics of "Lodi Dodi": the mention of specific brands (Cool Water, Oil of Olay, etc.), places (the San Fernando Valley and Long Beach), and people (Slick Rick and Snoop Dogg). The aim of this study is to identify just how often these three types of lyrical references have occurred in popular songs through the years. How frequently have popular songs employed lyrics that may be serving the purpose of branding or advertising consumer products or the artists themselves, and are there observable trends regarding the practice over time?

A Study of Words in Pop Song Lyrics

This particular research was one segment of an analysis of the words used in the lyrics of the most popular hit songs each year over the course of more than five decades. In this segment, the intent was to identify the frequency of words that fell into the three specific categories: product brand names, specific locations, and names of artists or well-known persons. These three types of word usage were determined to be the most indicative of potential branding activity at work. Prior investigations have focused

strictly on consumer product mentions in hit songs. This subsequent research is relevant in that it also involves two other analyses and quantifies additional potential branding activity. These additional criteria may provide further knowledge as to how popular songs are transforming in terms of their lyrical content. An understanding of these changes and their implications would be helpful to practitioners, educators, and students of the craft as they navigate both the creative and entrepreneurial arenas of the music business.

Advertainment

Perhaps the most recognizable type of marketing through song lyrics occurs when consumer product names are used. A new term has been used to label this type of activity. “Advertainment” has been defined as “the merge of entertainment programming with brand messaging, direct promotions, and public relations.”⁸ Patrizia Musso, an Italian professor of brand communication, first used the description in 1999.⁹ Utilizing product placement in television shows or movies, where a specific product may be used as a prop or mentioned by name in the dialogue, is one example. The *New York Times* 2011 article “That’s Advertainment” referred to a music-related use of the practice. In the video for her song “Telephone,” pop artist Lady Gaga checked her messages on a Virgin Mobile phone in one scene and in another she made a sandwich. It was more than clear to the viewer that it was prepared with Miracle Whip dressing and Wonder bread.¹⁰ Later in the video she took a photo of duet partner Beyoncé. An ironic zoom-in toward the camera emphasized it was a Polaroid product.¹¹ Shortly after that a close-up shot focused once again on the word “Polaroid,” clearly for added impact.

Interspersed product close-ups in music videos are one form of advertainment, but the equivalent activity in the recording of the song itself, as inclusions in the title and/or lyrics, could be perceived differently. Product placement in songs has also been described as “brand dropping,” and could potentially call into question artistic integrity and the motive of the song or artist.¹²

Mentions of popular brands in songs or their titles are not necessarily a recent invention. In fact, one could go back over a century, to when “In My Merry Oldsmobile” and “Budweiser’s a Friend of Mine” were hit songs in 1905 and 1907, respectively, to find early examples of so-called “promotional songs.”¹³ More than a half-century later singer-songwriter

Paul Simon recorded the hit song “Kodachrome.”¹⁴ Though Eastman Kodak Company might have appreciated the plug for its photographic film, it went so far as to require a registered trademark symbol to be included after the song’s title on the album, and a similar message had to be imprinted on the 45 rpm single.¹⁵ Ironically, the song could not be played in the United Kingdom, where songs aired on the radio at that time could not include brand names.¹⁶

Simon’s prominent use of a brand name wasn’t necessarily intended to advertise the product or gain sponsorship funding. In fact, he has said his original chorus used the words “going home,” but the word “Kodachrome” simply sounded better to him as he sang.¹⁷ That comfortable rhythmic fit could be the simple reason for many of the uses of brand names in song lyrics today. On the other hand, in the last few years at least, some artists or their handlers have indeed pursued opportunities to benefit financially from product mentions in songs.¹⁸ A leaked email from the Kluger Agency in 2008 revealed how a certain brand of jeans could, for the right price, “find its way into the lyrics of an upcoming Pussycat Dolls song.”¹⁹ To preserve credibility, many of these deals are kept under wraps.²⁰ When addressing the placements of brands into lyrics of rap songs, for example, William Chipps, senior editor with the IEG Sponsorship Report, commented that “corporations want consumers to assume that rappers name-dropping hamburgers, cell phones, or cars wrote the brands into their lyrics because they love them, not because they were paid.”²¹

Name Checking

Another type of brand dropping in song lyrics doesn’t inherently involve payments or endorsements. The practice of “name checking” (sometimes known as “name dropping” in everyday language) in order to portray a desired image can also be applicable when blending an artist’s or public figure’s name into song lyrics.²² To at least some degree, the practice has been around for a long time. In 1927, for example, songwriter Irving Berlin included the line “trying hard to look like Gary Cooper” in the classic song “Puttin’ On the Ritz,” later recorded by Fred Astaire, Harry Richman, and others.²³ There have also been instances of dropping one’s own name into a song, as Archie Bell and the Drells did at the beginning of their 1968 number-one hit “Tighten Up.”²⁴ In prior years, rock and roll pioneer Bo Diddley had several hits in which he went so far as to use his name in the actual titles of songs that were literally about him.²⁵ Songs such as “Bo

Diddley,” “Bo Diddley Is a Lover,” and “Bo Diddley Is a Gunslinger” are a few examples.²⁶

The mention of someone else’s name in a song can create an association and identification for the listener. For the same reason that someone at a dinner party might subtly brag that he or she just so happens to be a friend of a particular celebrity, the inclusion of someone’s name in lyrics might give the performer a higher degree of credibility or hipness, or at least create a desired image or theme. It could also be a way to call to mind a particular era, as was probably the case when Madonna mentioned Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich, Ginger Rogers, and others in her song “Vogue.”²⁷ A songwriter might simply include names to pay homage, as Stevie Wonder did in “Sir Duke,” a nod to jazz legend Duke Ellington.²⁸

The insertion of one’s own name into a song could involve anything from a simply practical purpose to sheer ego. When artists mention their name in a song, particularly at the beginning, they can in effect be accomplishing what many radio deejays stopped doing some time ago: front- or back-announcing the name of the artist performing the song.²⁹ Basically, singers may simply be ensuring that listeners know who they are. On the other hand, it could be pure self-promotion, whether for marketing purposes or self-indulgence.

Whatever the intent, the mention of a well-known person or icon can tell the listener more about the artist performing it, whether it is intended or not. Singing about, or referring to, oneself in a song, especially repeatedly, ensures name recall and awareness—a chief goal of advertising. In several ways, and at various levels, name inclusion can serve the purpose of branding the artist.³⁰

Locations

Mentions of locations in lyrics might also be a mechanism to promote the image of an artist or a song. Specific cities, regions, and hot spots can call to mind certain attributes. A reference to spending a weekend in Las Vegas, Nevada, can suggest hipness and wealth much more than a reference to time spent in Toad Suck, Arkansas. The use of locations in song lyrics can serve the same purpose as the names of popular products and people in that they communicate an image of the performer as well. Identifying where an artist is from or where he or she spends time further informs the listener about the artist’s persona.

As with products and names, locations can be included in lyrics for

many reasons other than branding. Mentions of real places add color and texture to lyrical descriptions, for example. It can help the listener more easily associate with the song. Or the geographical reference might simply fit the point or theme of the track. Waylon Jennings immortalized the town of Luckenbach, Texas, with a hit song by the same name in 1977.³¹ The small town seemed to simply be a metaphor for an escape from the hustle and bustle of life.

Regardless of the purpose, the inclusion of specific places and locations in lyrics can provide more information about performers, or associate them with a certain lifestyle or demographic. In that sense it can at least, in some cases, be recognized as another form of branding at work.

It is worth mentioning that there is an additional practical advantage, in terms of marketing, for dropping the names of cities—especially if presented in “call out” fashion, as rapper Tupac did in 1995’s “California Love.” Giving shout-outs to specific locales can influence radio or club airplay in those markets.³²

Data Collection and Analysis

To identify the occurrences and trends in these three categories of lyric usage in pop music, the top thirty pop songs, according to *Billboard* magazine, for each of the years 1960 through 2013 were analyzed. For obvious reasons, songs classified as instrumentals were removed from the sample. They were not replaced with lower-ranking songs that did include lyrics. After removing the instrumentals, there were a total of 1,583 songs utilized for the study.

Lyrics for many popular songs, past and present, can be found online. However, most of the companies that host such material offer the lyrics purely to draw traffic to paid advertisements.³³ The content is consistently fraught with errors and misspellings and there is little incentive to correct this.³⁴ Therefore, every sample song had to be listened to personally and a great deal of manual correction was necessary to ensure the accuracy of the corpus of song lyrics built for the analysis.

More than 510,000 words were visually reviewed and identified as to whether they fit the criteria. There are software programs that will, in seconds, count the number and frequency of words in text. However, the problem with using such software in this case was the issue of context. For example, the word “fifty” would normally be accumulated with all other uses of the word as an identifier of quantity. The word “cent” would

likewise be included with all of the other uses of that word to identify a monetary value. However, both of those categorizations without reference to context would prevent the proper identification of instances in which the artist 50 Cent's name was mentioned in a song.

Classification of Words

To identify lyrics pertinent to the research, certain criteria had to be applied in order to attribute words consistently and correctly into the three categories.

Regarding the use of locations, the specifications were quite simple. Most importantly, the place had to be used as a proper noun. For example, use of the word "south" in the context of a direction one travels was not counted, whereas when someone sang that he or she was from "South" Carolina the words were counted as a location reference. The place or region also had to exist geographically. "Heaven" was not, for example, considered a place for the purposes of this research.

The criteria for names were a bit more complicated. Much like locations, a person referred to must exist, or have existed, in order to be counted. "Susie" in the Everly Brothers' hit "Wake Up Little Susie" is presumed to be a fictional character and thus not included. On the other hand, references to gangster legends Bonnie and Clyde were counted as name checks, because they did exist at one time. When the lead singer of the glam band The Sweet roll-called his band mates ("Ready Steve? ... Andy? ... Mick? ...") at the beginning of the 1974 hit "Ballroom Blitz," it was also categorized as such, since they could be reasonably verified as real people and as public figures since they were members of a popular band.³⁵ Self-references, as was the case when artist Lil Jon shouted out his name at the beginning of pop star Usher's 2004 hit "Yeah," were considered name checks as well.³⁶ On the other hand, mentions of well-known fictional figures and icons like Spider Man or Mr. Clean were counted as product brand names, rather than celebrity or public figure mentions.

Identification of product brand names in lyrics was a little more straightforward. References to iPods, Lehman Brothers, Geico, and other such monikers were placed in this category. Subtle hints at brands, however, were not. For example, in Chris Brown's 2008 hit "Forever" he sings the words "double your pleasure, double your fun."³⁷ Some might recognize that as a reference to a classic marketing slogan for Wrigley's gum. But since the brand name was not specifically stated, the words were used

regularly in pop songs with other contexts, and most listeners would likely not recognize the connection, those words were not classified as brand mentions.

Sometimes judgment calls had to be made for certain nebulous uses in order to classify words and lyrics. Some decisions could certainly be questioned. Nonetheless, the rules and methodologies were applied consistently throughout the project.

Findings

The analysis of more than half a million words from the top hits of 1960 through 2013 did indeed provide insights as to the frequency of use of the three types of words in popular songs of the period. There was an observable trend in all three cases. Figure 1 shows the number of mentions of locations in the sample songs by year.

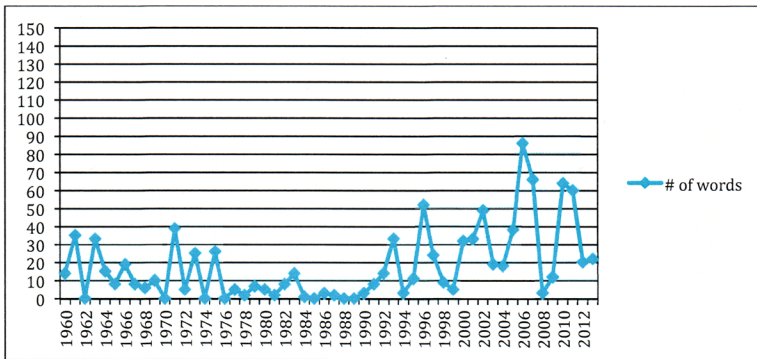


Figure 1. Number of words in the top thirty songs of each year that reference locations/places (total words by year).

The use of location names was in many cases seemingly innocuous. In 1961, when the vocal group The Dovells sang about the Bristol Stomp, a dance that was popular at that time in Bristol, Pennsylvania, the songwriters' intent was simply to write about a dance craze that happened to become popular in a town outside of Philadelphia.³⁸ There was no apparent connection between the group and the city.³⁹ When Madonna and her co-writers referred to Paris in "Justify My Love," they were probably using that city in order to add to the sensuousness and romanticism of the song.⁴⁰

However, there still exists a clear increase in the number of mentions of places and locations in hit songs over the period reviewed, especially

from the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s. Such mentions were found to be relatively infrequent in the 1960s and 70s. In most cases during that period the total instances were heavily concentrated in only a couple of songs. For example, in 1963’s “Surfin’ U.S.A.,” the Beach Boys named various surf spots in Southern California.⁴¹ There were enough to constitute more than half of the location mentions for that year’s sample. Curiously, in the 1980s—particularly the latter portion—it became far less common to mention proper locations in lyrics. But in the 1990s the practice re-emerged with a much greater frequency than ever before. In the 2000s, the use of place names increased even more, with usage peaking in 2006. Over the years, there were 976 total location mentions. That peak year of 2006, with 86 references, represents almost nine percent of all the inclusions. After a precipitous drop in 2008 to hardly any use, there were 12 in 2009 and 64 (the third highest amount of any year) in 2010, before the frequency declined.

Figure 2 is a summary by year of occurrences of names (first and/or last, or nicknames) of recognizable and real (living or dead) individuals in the top-thirty songs of each year.

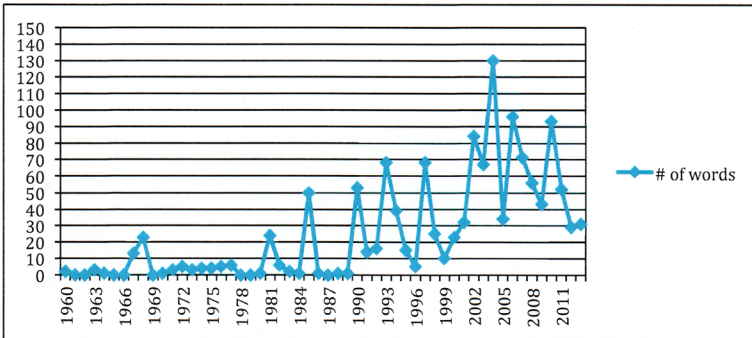


Figure 2. Number of words in the top thirty songs of each year that reference specific people (total by year).

The increase in the frequency of usage of people’s names in the sample songs over time is clearly evident. While barely used until the early 1980s, the practice markedly increased in the early 90s and continued an up-and-down trend, all the while increasing to levels not seen in the prior decades. Observations peaked in 2004 with 130 words making such reference, as compared to 39 in 1994, 1 in 1984, 4 in 1974, and 1 in 1964.

The totals and trending patterns for the occurrence of product mentions in pop lyrics are somewhat similar to the findings for mentions of people. References to products have clearly increased significantly over the past fifteen to twenty years, peaking in 2004. There were 1,544 total brand-referencing words in the sample lyrics. More than half of them occurred from 2000 to 2010. The figures for each year are represented in Figure 3.

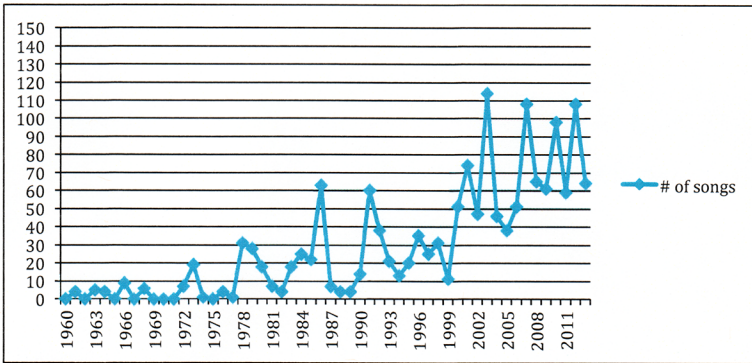


Figure 3. Number of words in the top thirty songs of each year that reference product brands (total by year).

Automobiles were far and away the most referenced product classification. Mercedes-Benz, Bentley, Corvette, Cadillac, and Chevrolet were among the most mentioned brands. These findings were fairly consistent with research published in 2008 in which brand names were counted among a database of U.S. hit songs drawn from an entirely different source.⁴²

There has been a general increase in the frequency of references to specific and well-known places, people, and products in the lyrics of pop songs since 1960. Figure 4 displays the trend when the total instances of all three classifications are combined for each year. Viewed in such a manner, the general trend is apparent.

Though there has been a general increase in the quantity of uses of these types of words in the top pop songs over the last several decades, it should be noted that there has also been, in general, an increase in the total number of words used in those same songs. This study found that, for example, the average number of words in a top hit in 1960 was 185. That's

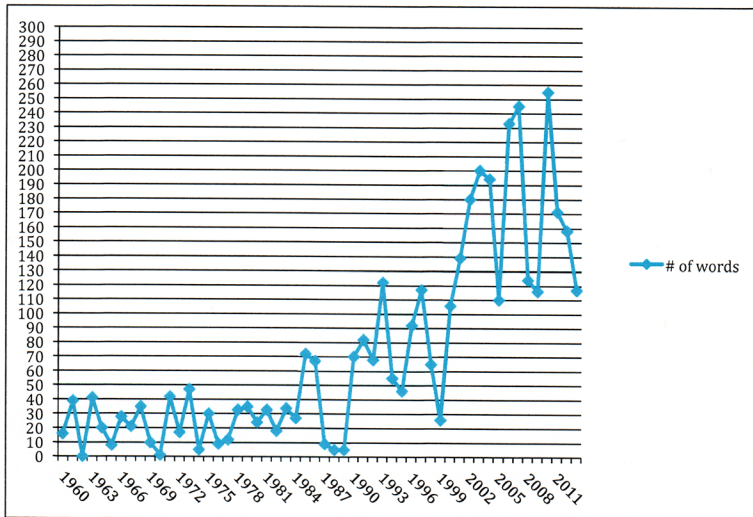


Figure 4. Number of words in the top thirty songs of each year that reference well-known people, places, or products (total by year).

fewer than half the average number of words in the top hits of fifty years later, 2010, when the average number of words was 489, a 164% increase.

There is no direct correlation to the duration of the songs, though songs from more recent years are typically longer than hits from earlier decades. For example, using those aforementioned years as comparisons, data gathered in this study found that the hits of 1960 were an average of 2 minutes, 36 seconds in length, whereas in 2010 they averaged 3 minutes, 53 seconds—a 49% increase. Findings indicate that the number of words used in pop songs has grown at a faster rate than the duration of songs. That observation will be further explored in a separate analysis. With it in mind, though, Figure 5 graphically represents the use of the three types of words through the years as a percentage of the total words in all of the songs each year. Though the peak in 2010 (where 1.8% of all words used represent potential branding) may seem insignificant, in relative terms it is more than double the use of these words twenty-five years earlier, in 1985.

Finally, the presence of these words in pop songs can also be presented in terms of the actual number of songs out of the sample populations that contain at least one instance (Figure 6). In 2006, for example, twenty out of the top thirty, or two out of every three, of the top songs included at least one reference to a person, place, or product.

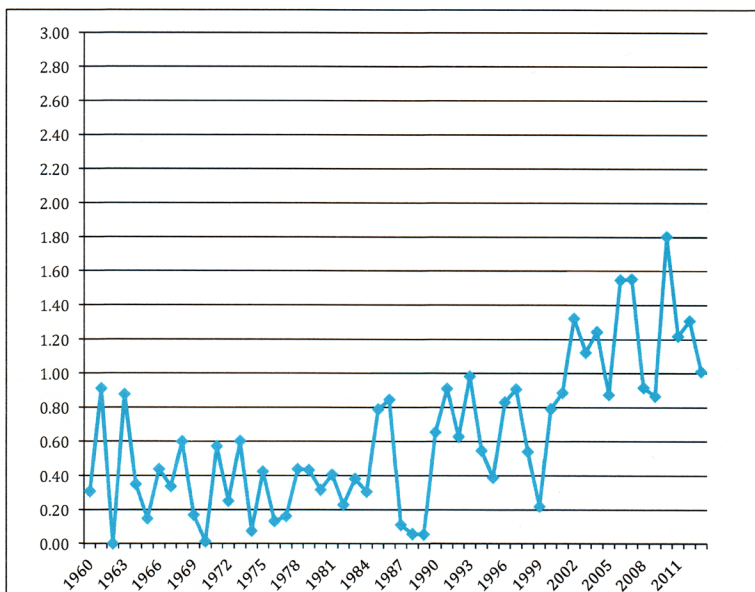


Figure 5. Percentage of total words in the top thirty songs of each year that reference well-known people, places, or products (percent by year).

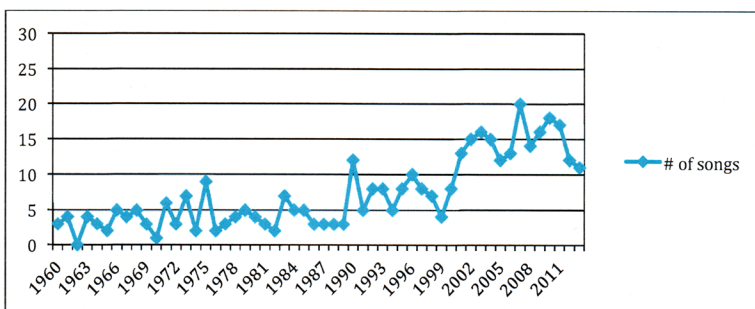


Figure 6. Number of songs out of the top thirty songs of each year that have at least one reference to personal, location, or product brands.

Viewed even from these alternative perspectives, a general trend of increasing occurrences of lyrics used as potential branding messages in pop songs remains apparent. However, there are certainly fluctuations, both up and down, from year to year.

Possible Causes and Implications

What might explain the trends in each of the three categories of word usage in pop song lyrics? What are the implications? Short of surveying the top songwriters and performers who have taken such liberties, there are at least a few points to consider.

For one, in today's music business, artists and their stakeholders have had to take non-traditional approaches in navigating the marketplace.⁴³ It has become increasingly important to emphasize marketing the artist as a brand rather than focusing so much on the sale of recordings.⁴⁴ A recent case study focused on CeeLo Green. His record sales have been relatively low for an artist of his profile, yet he had revenues of over \$20 million in 2011, with the "smallest slice of the pie" coming from actual music sales.⁴⁵ The report further explains that "Green and his publisher/management team...have realized that the modern music world has huge opportunities in changing the marketing equation, rather than focusing just on music sales." It adds that, "The company has focused on building up Green as a brand in and of himself, which has opened up all sorts of opportunities..."⁴⁶ Perhaps this new direction in the industry has influenced the use of music (particularly pop songs) to be more of a branding platform that includes—along with all of the other elements of a hit song—more information about the artist as well. Artist and music business mogul Jay-Z has been specifically pointed out as someone who uses mentions of brand names "as a way of marking his authenticity as a self-made businessman."⁴⁷

Another possible factor is the increased competition for the attention of consumers. With the click of a computer mouse or the button of a mobile device, music fans can easily skip past music that's not maintaining their interest. Mentions of products, people, or places to whom they can relate might increase the chances they'll keep listening. This consideration may be motivating songwriters and artists to adopt the practice of incorporating branding into lyrics.

The trend of popular artists including more references to themselves, where they're from, or where they travel, and the practice of name-dropping, might be somewhat explained by psychological shifts in our society as well. The aim of one previous study of popular music from 1980 to 2007 was "to determine whether lyrics changed over time in a manner that mirrored documented psychological changes across the same time period."⁴⁸ In their research paper, "Tuning in to Psychological Change: Lin-

guistic Markers of Psychological Traits and Emotions Over Time in Popular U.S. Song Lyrics,” C. Nathan Dewall, Richard S. Pond, Jr., W. Keith Campbell, and Jean M. Twenge found a direct correlation between indexes that identified an increase in narcissism in U.S. culture and self-focused pronoun use in song lyrics during that same period.⁴⁹ The increased self-focus in our society has apparently been reflected in the lyrics of our pop music. Indeed, the lyrics utilized for the study presented here were processed through the same Linguistic Inquiry Word Count program utilized in that study and an increased use of self-referencing words, particularly since 2001, was observed.

Beyond societal influence, another factor mentioned earlier may help explain an increase in the tendency of artists to drop names, particularly their own, into pop songs. The need for artists to make it absolutely clear to a radio audience who is performing the song (for the purpose of branding and to influence record sales) could be affecting the practice. Perhaps the perceived need by artists to make such communications themselves, instead of depending on radio personalities, explains at least part of the increase. Separate research to identify the point in time at which U.S. radio deejays in general ceased mentioning the names of artists before or after the airing of songs would be helpful in determining the extent to which this might be a factor.

In regard to consumer brands in song lyrics or titles, one reason the activity may have increased might be observed success in increases in sales or awareness for products mentioned in pop songs. According to reports, after Busta Rhymes had a hit single with “Pass the Courvoisier” in 2002, sales increased ten to twenty percent that year, and Run DMC’s top-five hit “My Adidas” had a similar effect on sales for that shoe company.⁵⁰ Sister Sledge’s 1979 disco smash “He’s the Greatest Dancer” brand-dropped Halston, Gucci, and Fiorucci, and awareness of those brands “skyrocketed.”⁵¹ Notable successes such as these, and likely many others, could certainly have motivated product marketers to seek more partnerships with artists.

Artists might be attracted to such partnerships and be increasingly willing to include such placements in their songs. This could be affecting the increase to some degree. Since the details and the extent of those deals are quite difficult to learn, as mentioned earlier, just how much of a factor they are playing is difficult to determine. Some of the partnerships have indeed been made public, or they’re at least quite obvious. The

aforementioned subtle reference to Wrigley's gum by Chris Brown in his song "Forever" was in fact taken from an actual commercial he did for the Doublemint product line.⁵² In his 2004 hit "Freek-a-Leek," Petey Pablo sang, "Now I got to give a shout out to Seagram's gin, 'cause I'm drinkin' it and they're paying for it."⁵³ In general, though, the details or existence of such transactions would likely not be made public. Whereas some advertising media (magazines, for example) are required to identify any text that is paid advertising, songs are not required to do so.⁵⁴

Perhaps pop songs are simply a reflection of the culture and the times in which they are created, and the transformations observed are indicative of the trend in recent years of increased emphasis on brand identity. Lucian James, founder of brand consultancy Agenda, Inc., stated in 2006 that, "Contemporary culture defines itself through the brands that we associate with."⁵⁵ Robert Passikoff, president of Brand Keys, a brand and customer loyalty consulting company, said that same year, "It's the way the world is moving, to an ultra-capitalist marketing environment," in regard to the trend of mentioning brands in music.⁵⁶

One might attribute increases in the frequency of name checking brands, people, or locations to an increased presence and influence of hip-hop among the most popular hits. In this research there were more instances found among songs from that genre than any other. A study of college student consumers' attitudes toward brand placement in songs found that respondents identified this genre as particularly appropriate for brand placement.⁵⁷ Jonah Disend, president of consulting firm Redscout, once referred to a focus group he led in which the participants were asked how to make a brand popular. Their response was overwhelming: "Put its name in a rap song."⁵⁸

Additional research for this study, though, found that the use of brand names in lyrics is not entirely a rap/hip-hop phenomenon. Brand Channel is a website that annually features the Brandcameo Product Placement Awards. In 2011 an award for the song that best incorporated a brand went to rock/pop chanteuse Lana Del Ray, whose "Diet Mtn Dew" song included the verse "Diet Mountain Dew baby New York City, never ever was there a girl so pretty."⁵⁹ A review of the lyrics of the Billboard Top 30 country songs of 2002 versus 2011 found that in the former year there were five songs containing any references that fit the criteria of this study. By 2011 there were twelve, with six out of the top ten containing mentions.

What is the future of the practice of including mentions of brands,

people, and places in popular songs? This research has identified a growing acceptance of music as a branding platform. Many other forms of entertainment have also seemed to find it more acceptable. Jonah Disend, the aforementioned president of Redscout, stated that, “People understand the machine, and even when they know they shouldn’t buy into it, they do.”⁶⁰

There are certain risks involved with dropping name brands and other mentions into pop songs. The most obvious is perhaps the possibility of the artist being labeled a “sell out.”⁶¹ But there is at least one additional consideration for the long term, particularly where opportunities for licensing music in film and television are concerned. Though it is not so much the case with places or locations, mentions of people and products in a song can tend to date or time-stamp a song, especially if what or who is mentioned loses relevance or gains a negative connotation in the following years.⁶² On the other hand, music from a particular period might just be what’s desired. According to Justin Kalifowitz, Senior Director of Spirit Music Publishing, “Period music is often requested, which may make these songs more appealing.”⁶³ He also mentioned a case in which a song was sonically perfect for a film, but it referenced some bands from the 80s, which “killed the use.”⁶⁴ There might be other valid reasons to be careful regarding the use of songs as branding platforms.

Conclusion

An empirical analysis of more than five decades of popular song lyrics found that there has been a general increase, with fluctuations from year to year, in the use of words relating to specific people, places, and products. There are a number of possible explanations for the trends observed. Songwriters over the past few years might simply have preferred to use more specific language when crafting a potential hit, choosing to use “I hopped in my Mercedes” rather than “I hopped in my car,” for example. The practice might be purely a reflection of the times in which the songs are written, or a trend among artists and songwriters who observe their contemporaries doing the same thing.

“Brand dropping,” mentioning famous people, or referring to popular locations might simply be a very effective way to build or increase consumer appeal. However, the mentions, specifically in regard to consumer brands, could be the result of a monetary deal. Employing “advertisement” in song lyrics can be lucrative.⁶⁵ Is that a bad thing? Should real estate in the lyrics of pop songs be for sale to a sponsor? That question

is a matter of larger debate beyond the intent of this study. Many artists already align themselves with brands through tour sponsorships, product endorsements, and other associations.⁶⁶ Doing so with the creation of their musical works, especially in volatile economic times, might be viewed by some as necessary.

The findings presented here are relevant in that they inform us as to the prevalence of these uses and how they relate to the state of popular music. Today's songwriters, musicians, their stakeholders, and educators can utilize this information as they help shape the business of popular music.

Words like "Snoop Dogg," "Long Beach," and "Cool Water" might have greater impact on a listener than "a rapper," "a nice place I visited," and "my favorite cologne." They obviously did in Derek Jeter's case. This study found that the use of more specific, branding-related words has increased, but it still constitutes well less than two percent of all the verbiage utilized in any portion of five decades of pop music. Moreover, it was also observed that there are an abundance of pop songs that don't include such words.

In fact, even the most prolific users of advertainment in other types of music performance (music videos, live concerts, etc.) might have their limits when it comes to brand involvement in their recorded songs. Lady Gaga, whose music video was used earlier as an example of blatant product placement, also had her last tour sponsored by Virgin Mobile. She would even call someone in the audience during the concerts and mention the brand as a sort of commercial between songs while the company's logo adorned the video screen. Advertainment seemed to be a non-issue for her. So it is both telling and perhaps ironic that among all of her hit songs analyzed for this study she only mentions one brand (herself) and does not include references to any commercial products.

Whether intended for profit, self-branding, or simply to enhance or improve the song, uses of the names of specific and well-known people, places, and products in lyrics will always be the decision of songwriters and performers. Ultimately, listeners will decide whether or not it's a good idea. The marketplace, as usual, will determine whether, and to what extent, the practice will continue.

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