Consumer Perceptions of Background Music in Team Highlight Videos: A Case of Branded Music Versus Popular Music

Khalid Ballouli, University of South Carolina
Michael Hutchinson, Coastal Carolina University
Todd Koesters, University of South Carolina

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Over the years, the nature of branding has evolved and become more sophisticated, shifting its focus from tangible aspects, such as name and logo, to intangible elements, such as personality and image (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 1998). As such, marketers have been able to establish a stronger emotional connection with consumers by using highly developed forms of brand communication. Evidence of this is found in the sport and entertainment industry where many college and professional sports teams have adopted marketing strategies built solely around the integration of brand identities into places of consumer culture where sport and entertainment converge. The outcome is a concept that scholars in the field are calling “branded entertainment” (Grainge, 2008). Hudson and Hudson (2006) define branded entertainment as “the integration of advertising into entertainment content, whereby brands are embedded into storylines of a film, television program, or other entertainment medium” (p. 492). The concept was formerly used by scholars to explain how product placement generated public exposure for brands and increased sales for their products (Karrh, 1998; Karrh, Mc Kee, & Pardun, 2003; Lehu, 2007). More recently, however, branded entertainment has expanded from its novel origins into modern forms of new media, including video games, mobile applications, and interactive audio (Lehu, 2007). The latter seems particularly promising in the context of the sport industry, as sport teams are beginning to integrate their brand identities into custom proprietary music using “sonic branding” strategies (Jackson, 2003).

Recently, the prevalent use of music in the marketplace has become an increasingly important aspect of brand communication (Lusensky, 2010; Treasure, 2007; Lindstrom, 2005). Researchers have coined the term “sonic branding” to describe this emerging field of study and practice (Fulberg, 2003; Jackson, 2003; Treasure, 2007). Sonic branding involves the strategic use of music, sound, or voice within the framework of brand communication to create an authentic brand identity through audio (Jackson, 2003). Much like visual branding, sonic branding synchronizes brand identities into an aural form that is both distinct and recognizable to the brand. More important, however, researchers observe that aural forms of branding can often create more memorable brand experiences and longer lasting brand impressions in the minds of consumers (Fulberg, 2003; Jackson, 2003; Lusensky, 2010; Treasure, 2007). As a result, firms are developing innovative and integrative “sonic languages” devoted solely to the communication of brand messages across marketing channels (Jackson, 2003, p. 124). Despite the increased scholarly focus on the effects of music in recent years, there remains “a certain lack of confidence and methodological clarity in dealing with sound within professional communication” (Bronner & Hirt, 2009, p. 19).

To this end, relatively few studies in consumer research have featured audio branding as a key focus (see Lusensky, 2010; Fulberg, 2003). Meanwhile, scant research in the area of sport marketing has addressed the influence of music in sport settings, and known research on audio branding in sport contexts has yet to be undertaken. This gap in the literature is both interesting and significant, as previous researchers have observed the prevalent use of music in the marketing of sport products and services (Bennett & Lachowitz, 2004; McLeod, 2006; Wakefield, 1994). Further, research in the field of sport marketing has largely gone without the attention of researchers where team highlight videos are concerned. Current studies indicate that online video entertainment is the fastest growing medium through which people intend to spend their time (Forsythe & Shi, 2003). Thus, research designed to explore this realm of consumer behavior is necessary. The purpose of this study was to investigate the effects of branded music on consumer perceptions and attitudes using a marketing tool used widely by sports marketers during game day events.

This research is based on the theoretical perspectives of semantic relevance. The principles of semantic relevance suggest that the effective use of semantics (e.g., song lyrics) may enhance an individual’s overall recognition and processing of specific concepts (e.g., brand) when they are congruent and predictable with the context setting. Sartori and Lombardi (2004) define semantic relevance as the extent to which a semantic feature (i.e., a word or
combination of words) contributes to an individual’s overall recognition and understanding of a particular concept. The central claim of semantic relevance is that certain semantic features are considered more important in relaying concept information. Grimes (2008) notes that semantic relevance “is likely to be enhanced by the inclusion of context information that facilitates identification of the brand and therefore increases the likelihood of associations being activated in memory” (p. 79). Hence, it is assumed that sport brand music can have a formative role in priming team-related concepts in the minds of sport consumers while at the same time embodying brand attributes and characteristics.

This quantitative research examines sport consumers’ perceptions of different team highlight videos that featured either popular sports music or branded music. Participants (N=97) were comprised of undergraduate students enrolled in sport management courses at a major Division I university located in the Southeastern region of the United States. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions (i.e., popular music video or branded music video) and were asked to watch the highlight video and rate their responses based on the following constructs: musical fit (5-item scale, based on Maclnnis & Park, 1991), video likability (3-item scale, based on Maclnnis & Park, 1991), and brand attitude (4-item scale, based on MacKenzie & Lutz, 1991). Scales measuring each construct demonstrated sufficient reliability scores (α > .90). Marketing personnel in the university’s athletics department produced the videos shown to participants in both conditions. The videos were identical save for differences in background music. The background music for the popular condition was a top single from Billboard’s Hot 100 music chart. The background music for the branded music condition was a song written and produced for the sole purpose of the university in question (i.e., song lyrics were reflective of the university’s brand).

ANOVA results indicated significant differences between the two groups relative to all three constructs. Participants in the branded music condition reported more positive perceptions of musical fit (F = 23.24; p < 0.01), video likability (F = 12.53; p < 0.05), and brand attitude (F = 14.32; p < 0.05) than did those in the popular music condition. The results provide valuable insights into the effects of branded music on sport consumer behavior. More generally, the findings speak to the increased understanding and enhanced use of music by sport organizations in the design and development of team highlight videos. In addition, the results provide new discussion on how the theoretical perspectives of semantic relevance might relate to the influence of song lyrics in sport consumer settings. In addition, given the shortage of research on music in sport marketing and management literature, the findings presented here provide new discussion on how music affects consumer perceptions of visual marketing tools. Further implications and conclusions, as well as study limitations, will be discussed.