Can Music Teachers Learn from Pop Stars? A Study on Branding Strategies

When you hear “I’m Lovin it” what do you think of? How about “Have it Your Way” or “Taste the Rainbow”? McDonald’s, Burger King and Skittles have all created and maintained a slogan that has embodied their brand identity for many years. According to the Business Dictionary, branding can be defined as “The process involved in creating a unique name and image for a product in the consumers' mind...with a consistent theme.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Successful food chains have been able to create unique brands that have lasted for many years. These recognizable slogans can be related to the iconic songs such as “Don’t Stop Believing” or “Billie Jean” through their name recognition. The artists who created these hits have received an extremely high amount of brand recognition through these songs.

In Arvidsson’s book titled *Brands: Meaning and Value in Media Culture*, he states, “Brands are a form of immaterial capital.”[[2]](#footnote-2) If branding is a form of immaterial capital, then how can musicians of all genres find a way to create brand recognition that will bring them the identity of successful musicians? While several pop stars do not control their branding strategies independently like most music teachers do, I argue that music players and studio teachers can learn from pop music stars of the past and present to determine successful branding techniques for their own careers in the music industry. Pop stars have gone through the difficult stages of rising to fame and have successfully accrued an engaged and interested audience. Music teachers are also trying to accrue an engaged and interested customer base of all ages who are intent on learning the piano. For music teachers to have students to teach, they must treat their studios as businesses and use business strategies such as branding to make their studios valid learning environments. Through an examination of how pop stars have branded over the years, music teachers will be able to better understand the music branding business and how they can apply certain techniques to their own businesses. Music teachers should be aware of the mindset required when pursuing a brand that will be as identifiable as “I’m Lovin it”.

Pop music stars may seem like they don’t have much in common with your neighborhood piano teacher, but both types of musicians are forms of entrepreneurs. Many pop stars begin their careers fighting for the spotlight and getting their voices known to their communities and others. They hope to slowly rise to fame through creating their own gigs, scheduling their own rehearsals and creating their own unique sound. Piano teachers also must schedule their own piano students, create their own spaces for teaching, and build social capital in their communities. Both types of musicians require independence that a salaried employee may not require. This independence can be found in ways they brand themselves. Pop stars have a wider fan base due to their vast number of listeners, but piano teachers can learn how to keep their students or “followers” interested in what they offer through practical branding strategies. Arvidsson states, “What people pay for, the idea goes, is not so much the brand itself as what they can produce with it: what they can become with it”.[[3]](#footnote-3) When followers of Taylor Swift listen to her songs, what do they become? Do they become inspired to write songs about love and relationships like Taylor Swift? When students listen to their music instructor's advice, where does it lead them? Are they inspired to become the next Lang Lang (Chinese concert pianist)?

While facing ever-changing and advancing technology, musicians must find a way to keep their brands available and easily accessible for all followers. One common way that many pop musicians do this is through selling non-music merchandise. Tad Lathrop explains that “Merchandise serves as both an important promotion tool and a source of money”.[[4]](#footnote-4) If pop stars can make supplementary income through non-music merchandise, then can piano instructors possibly do the same? Pop stars often sell merchandise such as t-shirts, sweatshirts, bumper stickers, buttons, stress balls, calendars, and more at their tours. If piano teachers adapted this idea to their studios then they could not only market their studios, but also create supplementary income through selling these products. David Cutler states in his book, “For prospective customers, the name creates a first impression....Names project an image, whether intentional or not, so reflect upon these implications”.[[5]](#footnote-5) A t-shirt may be the first time that potential customers see a piano teachers business advertised, so it must be well designed but also represent the implications that the teacher wants their students to know. One teacher who is already implementing this idea is Richard Antoine White, who is a professor at the University of New Mexico. He has created the brand of R.A.W. for his tuba studio and designed t-shirts that represent his logo and his studio. As students wear their R.A.W. t-shirt, White receives name recognition from potential customers. [[6]](#footnote-6)

Selling non-music merchandise may seem unprofessional in the high class western music society since it is taking the teacher’s mind away from purely teaching materials. However, if teachers want students to teach then it is often necessary for their businesses to grow. It is a common branding strategy for businesses to purposefully put their brands in unrelated spaces to draw attention to their business. For instance, many rising and accomplished musicians appear in commercials that have little to do with music. After viewers see the commercial, they may be interested in the musician and look up some of their music. Teachers can learn from this strategy by advertising and creating brands for themselves in unordinary spaces. A valuable and feasible source of advertisement for music teachers is business cards or flyers. These can easily be displayed at a golf course, local restaurant, movie theater or anywhere else that may bring in a variety of customers. One rising musician who has used this strategy is Daveed Diggs, who is a rising musician and recently played Lafayette in Hamilton. He was featured in a commercial advertising a new banking app called “Zelle.” While he is not a professional banker, he is gaining cultural capital through making his music and name recognizable with people watching the “Zelle” commercial.

Non-music merchandise can also be used for teachers interested in creating a limited time theme for their studio or a recital such as pop stars create a limited time theme for their tours. For instance, Beyonce and Jay Z are currently on a tour titled “On the Run II.” In teaching studios, a recital based on one theme can create a fun and unique environment for students rather than the traditional high-pressure environment that classical recitals often have. Through this theme, music teachers can design a t-shirt that would help each student feel a sense of inclusion and belonging in their studio as they prepared for their big performance, all while the teacher makes additional revenue. These t-shirts can be sold at the recital or in lessons prior to the recital. If teachers have the proper recording technology available to them, they can also record the recital and sell the CD to families just as pop stars sell CDs. The CD cover would be another great location to advertise the studio as well as the theme for the recital, and students would more than likely love to be featured on a CD.

In advice written to musicians beginning their own businesses, Lathrop states, “Remember: Selling a piece of merchandise bearing your logo boils down to getting paid to advertise yourself. Don’t let the opportunity slip through your fingers”.[[7]](#footnote-7) These advertising opportunities can be applied to the piano teacher as well as the upcoming musician. While music teachers may not be professional t-shirt designers, they can create a logo or slogan that encourages a positive image to their students and potential clients. There are many ways teachers can create these logos to look professional. Fiverr.com has professional logo designers that will design a logo for your company starting at only $5. There are also many other websites that have the same structure as Fiverr that teachers can utilize such as Logojoy and Freelogodesign. David Cutler relates the main ideas of marketing to the consumers through “directing their priorities and perceptions”.[[8]](#footnote-8) If music teachers can guide consumers (students and parents’) priorities and perceptions of music through a t-shirt, then they might attract more students as they build name recognition.

In the New York Times article titled “Classical Pianists Rock, In a Manner of Speaking” Allan Kozinn discusses various ways in which Chris Williamson advertised concerts in the form of rock concerts.[[9]](#footnote-9) Pianofest producer, Chris Williamson used nontraditional branding tactics to reconfigure the classical concert world and draw in a larger and broader audience for piano performances. Williamson believes that the amount of people who understand the beauty of a Bach aria is quickly diminishing so classical musicians must find a way to attract an audience. In the article, Kozinn quotes Williamson saying, “You see that skull in the ad? I’d put that in the paper with a date and not even list a band, and we’d sell out.”[[10]](#footnote-10) Williamson also organized classical concerts in the form of a rock concert. These concerts were a series of 20, 30 or 40 concerts where student performers were the opening act for the “head liners” or more well-known classical performers. This gave many students an opportunity to expand their performance horizons and professional performers would often use their personal students as their opener. Kozinn states, “He was intent on catching the attention of potential ticket buyers who are not normally drawn to piano recitals.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Williamson successfully created a brand that represented classical music in a different form through advertising with skulls and shaping his concerts as rock concerts. Piano teachers can utilize this branding technique to create posters that attract parents who normally don’t consider piano lessons. For instance, a piano teacher can incorporate sports into their advertisement to acknowledge the main competition for kids' time: sports.

In Tad Lathrop’s book titled “The Business of Music” he relates the importance of finding a creative way to expand your career. He states, “If you’re a musician planning to take your career into your own hands and use the tools of marketing to do it, keep in mind that you’re vying with thousands of others for the attention of the listening public. This means you need to be realistic, smart, and persistent”.[[12]](#footnote-12) Williams found a way to attract the nontraditional audiences to classical music through rock branding. He began this form of marketing through his realistic, smart and persistent approach to classical music. Music teachers need to also use this approach when marketing themselves. Do parents want their kids to become professional classical piano players? Do students want to take lessons from a teacher who focuses on Bach’s preludes and fugues? When a teacher brands him/herself, they must take these considerations into account.

Local successful piano instructor, Leila Viss, believes that your brand should align with your mission statement. For a piano teacher, this means that if you are a classical piano teacher only, then your brand should promote classical music but if you teach all genres, then your brand should represent that idea. When speaking with her, we discussed the idea of music teachers being compared to pop stars. She believes she relates with Taylor Swift because she has learned to morph herself into whatever her students are interested in, just like Taylor Swift began as a country star but slowly morphed into a pop star and geared her music towards those fans.[[13]](#footnote-13) Through morphing herself into a musician who can play all genres rather than only classical, (even though she is classically trained) she found her diverse identity that she now brands for her studio. Only after she was able to identify her personal strengths did she discover how to best market them and make them relatable and valuable to others. This idea can also be compared to Bruno Mars who represents his personal identity in his brand. Many may view him and his brand as a cool, groovy and upbeat performer and his music also represents this idea through his high-quality videos and smooth dance moves.

While interviewing a piano teacher based out of Colorado Springs and Professor at the Lamont School of Music, Chee-Hwa Tan, she stated the importance of knowing your personal identity before creating a brand. When asked the question, “What brand have you built for your piano studio?” She stated, “I have approached my studio by principles of what I believe in, what I want to give and what I stand for.”[[14]](#footnote-14) This is a different type of branding that should also be recognized in the teaching industry. Professor Tan has the privilege of automatically gaining social and cultural capital through associating herself with the University of Denver’s Lamont School of Music. So, her identity is not found on her logo or title that she has branded for her studio. Rather, it is focused on her teaching values which is portrayed through music that she composes, students she teaches at Lamont, masterclasses she coaches and performances she participates in. Through focusing on one's values, she believes the sustainability of a studio will be successful. In concluding our conversation, she stated, “Rather than building your brand and trying to fit your work into that brand, you need to build on your quality of work and what it says about you and out of that will come the type of work that you brand.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

In *Gender, Branding, and the Modern Music Industry,* Kristin Liebdiscusses various ways women have been labeled and treated by the music industry. Lieb states, “An artist must have an overarching brand theme that is consistent enough to be trustworthy to fans but open enough to let her live her life”.[[16]](#footnote-16) There are many musicians who have not taken the advice of Lieb and have lost fan support quickly. Lieb has created a common life cycle for female popular music stars. Included in the cycle is the temptress stage which is often simply the end of their musical career. As a female artist turns into a temptress, she often begins wearing more form fitting, body revealing clothing and begins an active seduction of her audience as she appears writhing in or on beds in her videos.[[17]](#footnote-17) Teachers can take these actions as a tool to learn what not to do. If women in the teaching industry begin acting similar to women in the pop industry in the temptress stage, then their musical career could take a turn for the worst. A famous female classical musician who can be classified as currently being in the temptress stage is Yuja Wang. While an extremely talented and accomplished pianist, she has created her identity in her femininity and wears revealing dresses while performing. This creates an identity for her that parents may not want their children’s teacher to have. If others label a teacher with a negative name such as temptress or irresponsible then parents may not trust them to properly teach their children.

Creating a personal brand can be very difficult for studio teachers since they are often solely responsible for their musical career. While it may be desirable for teachers to hire their own professional brander, as many pop star do, it is often not feasible for a music teacher. Therefore, teachers of all instruments can study the strategies that pop musicians and their professional branders use to discover branding techniques that might not be traditionally taught in the teacher world. It is valuable to observe these techniques because teachers must accrue students just as pop stars must accrue dedicated fans. These approaches include teaching different genres of music, creating a brand that is consistent with all students, receiving supplementary revenue from non-music merchandise or advertising in a risky form. Branding is a crucial part of all types of businesses and should be approached from many different angles, not just the traditional way.

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1. Businessdictionary.com, s.v. “Branding,” accessed November 7, 2018, http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/branding.html [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Adam Arvidsson, *Brands: Meaning and Value in Media culture.* (New York, Routledge, 2006), 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Adam Arvidsson, *Brands: Meaning and Value in Media culture.* (New York, Routledge, 2006), 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Tad Lathrop & Jim Pettigrew, *This Business of Music Marketing & Promotion.* Rev. & updated ed. (New York, Billboard Books, 2003), 224. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. David Cutler, *The Savvy Musician* (Pittsburgh, Helius Press, 2010), 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Richard Antoine White. “Store.” [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Lathrop, 225. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Cutler, 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Allen Kozinn , “Classical Pianists Rock, In a Manner of Speaking,” *New York Times,* October 24, 2002. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Kozinn, “Classical Pianists Rock.” [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Kozinn, “Classical Pianists Rock.” [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Lathrop, 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Leila Viss, interview by author, Denver, November 4, 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Chee-Hwa Tan, interview by author, Denver, November 6, 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Chee-Hwa Tan, interview by author, Denver, November 6, 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Kristin Lieb, *Gender, Branding, and the Modern Music Industry*. (New York, Routledge, 2018), 236. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Lieb, 124 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)