

CANVAS, CAMERA, CONCERT: THE IMPACT OF VISUALS IN MUSIC MARKETING

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ABSTRACT

“Canvas, Camera, Concert: The Impact of Visuals in Music Marketing” explores how visual elements, such as album artwork, music videos, social media aesthetics, and merchandise, play a key role in shaping an artist’s cohesive identity and success. This study examines how visuals create emotional, long-lasting connections with audiences, allow for emergence in global markets, and enhance storytelling in music. This paper analyzes various case studies of influential artists and their utilization of visual campaigns, showcasing how powerful visuals can elevate branding, expand fan engagement, and contribute to an artist’s cultural legacy.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

As one of the world’s largest and most influential markets, the music industry is a constantly evolving and expanding landscape. In 2024, U.S. Recorded Music Revenues totaled approximately \$17.8 billion from various selected formats as seen in Figure 1 (“U.S. Music Revenue Database – RIAA,” 2023). However, this success is not solely attributed to the auditory elements of music; the visuals used in music marketing play a key role in shaping an artist’s brand, identity, and long-term impact. From memorable album covers and cinematic music videos to social media aesthetics and immersive live performances, visual elements create deeper connections between artists and audiences. Through these meaningful connections, artists can contribute to cultural movements and expand their reach globally.

This study explores how visual elements in music marketing, specifically album artwork, music videos, social media presence, merchandise, and live performances, contribute to an artist’s overall branding and success. It examines historical and contemporary examples to understand the impact of visuals on audience perception, fan engagement, and commercial viability. The research spans multiple genres and eras, analyzing case studies of artists who have successfully utilized visuals to enhance their careers.

Visual elements in music marketing, such as album covers, music videos, social media accounts, merchandise, and live performances, play a pivotal role in shaping an artist’s identity, deepening fan engagement, and driving commercial success. By analyzing key examples from various artists, this study demonstrates how visuals create lasting emotional connections and contribute to an artist’s cultural and economic longevity.

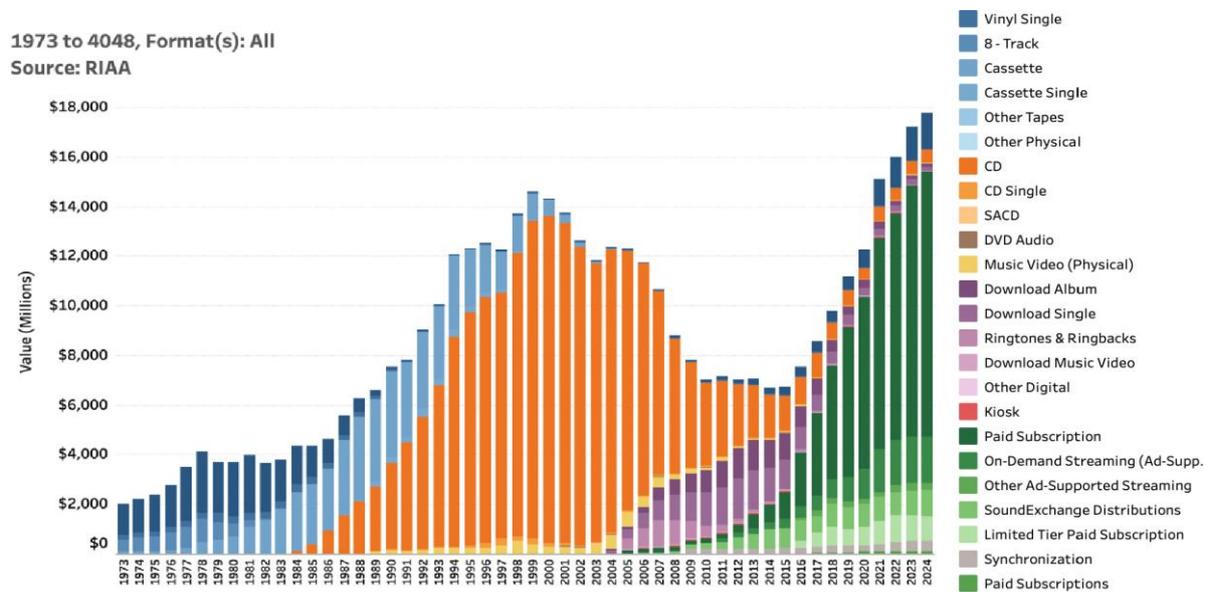


Figure 1: U.S. Recorded Music Revenues (“U.S. Music Revenue Database – RIAA,” 2023).

The Evolution of Music Marketing and Implementation of Visuals

For as long as humans have been around, music has been there in one shape or form. Used as both a method for expression and communication, music allowed early civilizations to tell stories and connect with their audiences through their emotions. In other words, emotions can be seen as the first music marketing tool. These musicians would perform with full intention of the emotions they wanted to convey; with this in mind, musicians would tailor their performance to specifically evoke that response (Ogden et al., 2011).

As music marketing developed so did the public’s appreciation of the artform. From religious chants and royal performances to secular music for the public, musicians began to earn money in the “first music industry” (Ogden et al., 2011). With the rise of sheet music distribution in the 18th and 19th centuries, and the use of “pluggers” by publishers to promote songs, music increasingly became a marker of social class. However, the invention of the phonograph in 1877 transformed the way people consumed music—making it more widely accessible across class lines and popularizing genres like classical, folk, and ragtime. This innovation began to replace sheet music as the dominant medium. In 1887, Columbia Records was founded, eventually becoming one of the most influential music labels in the world (“A Timeline History of Music,” n.d.). By the early 20th century, devices like the gramophone and Victrola accelerated the growth of the music industry, with record production booming. The record player soon became a household essential, laying the groundwork for the rise of broadcast radio (Ogden et al., 2011).

In 1930, the first commercial vinyl record was launched by RCA Victor (“A Timeline History of Music,” n.d.). Through the introduction of the radio, music improved in quality and accessibility, encouraging new genres. However, it was through the combination of film and music that music became a mass consumable product that now required promotional materials (Ogden et al., 2011). As technology advanced, there were more channels for artists to reach

new audiences as well as gain the public's interest in different music styles. From record players and radios to jukeboxes and television, music was in everyone's house. Artists began being featured on variety shows, such as the Ed Sullivan Show, putting a face to the voice (Ogden et al., 2011).

In the 1950s, an industry changing new genre was born: Rock 'n Roll. Many record companies were opposed to this music as it was "too different" to consumers, leading to the rise of independent music labels. The King of Rock 'n Roll, Elvis Presley, shook the music scene as an independent artist, later signing with RCA Records as he grew in popularity (Ogden et al., 2011). Radio companies began implementing charts to rank songs, such as the "Top 40" for singles. This not only increased awareness of single songs but also increased revenue as listeners were more likely to buy single records. This led to a new distribution channel of allowing consumers to order records through the mail, coined the "record club" (Ogden et al., 2011).

In 1971, U.S. Congress declared sound recordings as "worthy of copyright protection" (Taintor, 2015). In 1981, MTV launched the first all-music cable network, spurring the video market and creation of CDs (Ogden et al., 2011; Lawson, 2024). VH1 and CMT followed in the upcoming years, causing a large increase in music sales during the 90s. The first MP3 was created in 1989, allowing for a smaller music file with the same sound quality as previous mediums ("A Timeline History of Music," n.d.). In 1999, the first free, online MP3 file-sharing platform, Napster, curated millions of songs illegally. This allowed over 80 million users to download these songs for free, negatively impacting record sales until it is shutdown (Taintor, 2015). Apple's iPod further damaged the record sales industry, selling over 70 million songs at \$0.99 each. However, it opened a new channel for promoting music and bands to consumers as well as generating \$70 million in legal internet music sales (Ogden et al., 2011; Taintor, 2015). From in-store signings and television appearances to music videos, movie soundtracks, and branded merchandise, visual elements have long been essential in capturing public attention and shaping an artist's image. These components not only created memorable touchpoints but also allowed fans to connect with artists on a deeper, more personal level. The rise of digital platforms like Myspace, Facebook, and YouTube revolutionized music promotion by bringing artists directly to audiences' devices, democratizing access and reshaping how music was discovered and consumed (Ogden et al., 2011).

As smartphones and music streaming services like Spotify and Apple Music became widespread, the music industry's reach expanded exponentially. Fans could now engage with music and artists anytime, anywhere, allowing for a constant flow of visual and audio content. This shift not only changed how music was marketed but also emphasized the importance of maintaining a consistent and visually compelling online presence (Fountain, 2021).

Social media has dramatically reshaped how music artists promote themselves, connect with audiences, and build their careers. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and YouTube give artists direct access to global audiences, removing the need for traditional gatekeepers and allowing for more authentic, creative self-promotion (Iliev, 2023). From behind-the-scenes glimpses and personal stories to music previews and viral challenges, artists now have a new set of tools to engage fans daily. By curating a consistent and aesthetic presence, they can foster loyalty and relatability, turning casual listeners into dedicated supporters.

Each platform offers unique advantages. Instagram helps artists build familiarity and visual storytelling through reels, stories, and curated feeds. TikTok thrives on creativity and virality, making it ideal for sparking trends and user-generated content. Facebook, though older, is still valuable for reaching broader demographics and promoting events through targeted advertising. YouTube, meanwhile, remains essential for music discovery and deep fan engagement, especially when artists consistently share content and behind-the-scenes experiences. Ultimately, mastering social media strategy is essential in today's music landscape, where an artist's digital presence can make or break their success (Iliev, 2023).

This paper focuses on five main visual elements of music marketing: album artwork, music videos, social media presence, well-branded merchandise, and live performances. Album artwork serves as the first visual impression of a release, often conveying the tone or message of the music. Music videos bring songs to life through storytelling and artistic expression, helping deepen emotional connections with audiences. An artist's social media presence allows for continuous visual engagement, giving fans a glimpse into their personality, lifestyle, and creative process. Well-branded merchandise extends an artist's identity into fashion and everyday items, turning fans into walking brand ambassadors. Lastly, live performances combine music with visual spectacle, creating memorable experiences that strengthen fan loyalty and generate buzz. This paper explores and analyzes some of the most iconic or unique case studies for each category.

Key Visual Elements in Music Marketing

A. Album Artwork and Its Role in Branding

The first impression that an artist makes with a new single or album is through cover artwork. Whether through stunning photography, abstract elements, or interactive features, cover artwork influences how audiences perceive and remember an artist. Similar to logos and their branding ability, audiences create brand awareness, or "artist awareness," through the visual connection they form between cover artwork and an artist. The purpose of the design of an album cover differs from artist to artist. Some artists aim to grab the attention of the audience through bright colors and big font while others look to create a lasting impression with a unique photograph (Ogden et al., 2011).

Pink Floyd's *The Dark Side of The Moon* (1973) is one of the most iconic album covers to this day. It features a prism that refracts light into six colors of the rainbow against a dark background. The light beam, prism, and rainbow spectrum represent three aspects of the band: ambitious stage lighting, lyrics for the album, and the goal to create something bold but simple ("The 25 Most Iconic Album Covers of All Time," 2024). Notably, there is no mention of the band's name or the album title. This added to the mysterious appeal of the album that piqued the curiosity of listeners. There was no clear understanding of why the album was designed the way it had been (Deal, 2018). However, this was the point. Leaving the album's artwork up to interpretation not only attracted more listeners but created a personalized experience for each fan. The success of this album cover is still seen today when you show someone a prism and they immediately connect it to Pink Floyd.

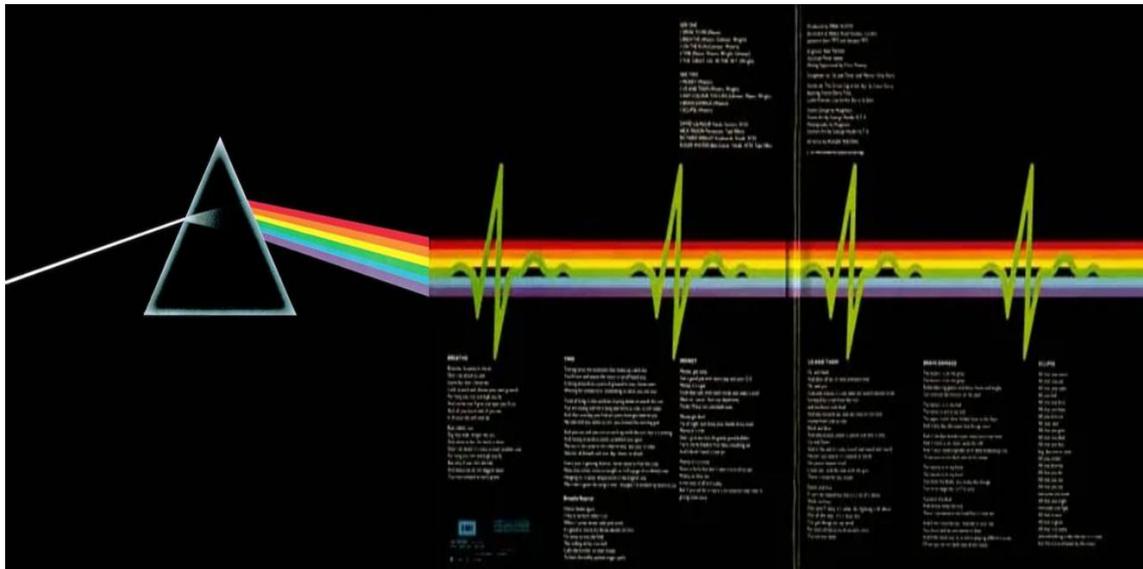


Figure 2: The Dark Side of The Moon by Pink Floyd with artwork designed by Hipgnosis (Deal, 2018).

Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp a Butterfly* (2015) is a powerful example of how artists use their album covers to create a lasting impression on the audience. In this case, Lamar was commenting on the political and social climate in the United States. Following his earlier album, *good kid, m.a.a.d city*, Lamar comments on his upbringing in Compton. *To Pimp A Butterfly* adds on to commentary as he is not only struggling with his newfound success but also the limitations that are put on him as a black man in America (Paul, 2022). The cover features a large group of black men in front of the White House with a judge laying down with his eyes crossed out. This album cover features a lot of symbolism. The White House not only represents the government, but it may also symbolize "White America" as all presidents, except Barack Obama, have been white (Paul, 2022). Through history, the black community has been marginalized by political power; therefore, this image shows a reclaiming of that power, especially with the planting of a black flag on top of the White House. The image also seems to touch upon the topic of women, especially women of color. Without looking closely at this cover art, it can be hard to spot the women at all as they are either pushed back or covered by someone's hand or face, highlighting the underrepresentation of women of color within both white and black America.

Despite being in black and white, which is another comment on both racism and the historic significance of race, the image also appears busy and noisy to represent the nature of street life (Paul, 2022). All the black men are depicted as shirtless holding money, alcohol, or gang signs, except for Kendrick who is carrying a baby. This represents the stereotype of black men, specifically from Compton, that are considered viceful and violent. Kendrick carrying a baby emphasizes two different sides: how children are exposed to gang life versus the future ahead. The fallen judge is someone who holds power within the American justice system, which is viewed very controversially by society. The crosses on the judge's eyes may represent how the justice system is blind to systemic racism and injustice against the black community (Paul, 2022). *To Pimp A Butterfly* is a great example of utilizing still artwork to represent an artist's background and perspective to create a lasting impact on viewers.

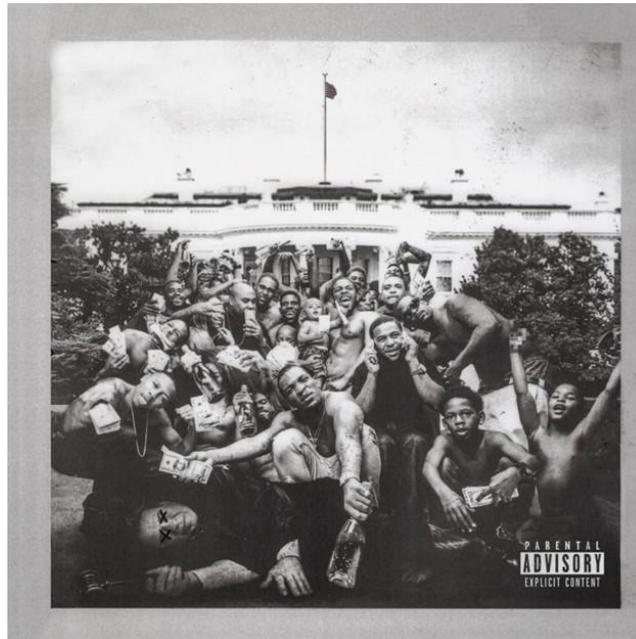


Figure 3: Kendrick Lamar's to Pimp a Butterfly (Paul, 2022).

Another iconic album cover is Aladdin Sane by David Bowie (1973). Bowie wanted to make an impact that evolved from his androgenous, intergalactic character, Ziggy Stardust ("The 25 Most Iconic Album Covers of All Time," 2024). This bold cover art was different from the typical music portraits at the time, making it a defining feature for Bowie throughout his career. This album was specifically targeted for his American tour, commenting on the country's chaotic energy and cultural dissonance during the 1960s-1970s; with this cultural split in mind, Bowie took the phrase "a lad insane" and transformed it to "Aladdin Sane" (Luntz, 2021). The lightning bolt makeup and red mullet created an instant connection between Bowie and this work.

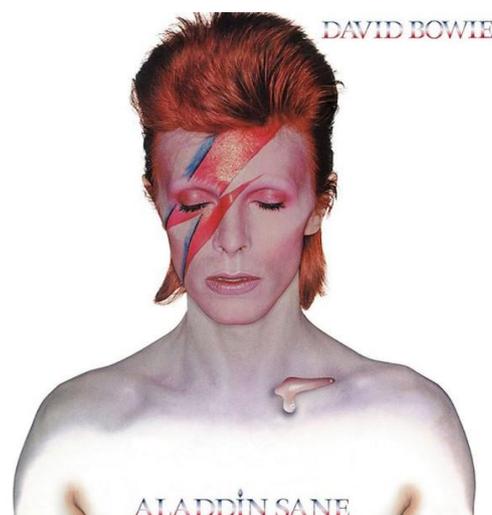


Figure 4: Aladdin Sane by David Bowie with cover photograph shot by Brian Duffy (Luntz, 2021).

B. Music Videos as a Storytelling Tool

With the launch of MTV, music videos became mainstream, changing the music marketing landscape forever. With unprecedented exposure, artists were able to reach new audiences and shape their brand identity through visual storytelling. An artist that captured the impact of music videos was Michael Jackson. Michael Jackson's music video, or "short film," for his song, "Bad," used 18 minutes to tell the story of Jackson's perspective on racial identity (Harris, 2012). Written and directed by Richard Price and Martin Scorsese, this short film has over 99 million views (Michael Jackson [@michaeljacksonVEVO], 2017). The story is depicted in black and white except for the 4 minutes of song that are shown in color. Jackson plays a student, Darryl, who is celebrating the end of the school semester at a primarily white prep school. When Darryl returns home to the inner city, his black friends tease him for going to this white school, accusing him of not being "down" or "bad." This question is actually asking if Darryl is "black" or white like his classmates. In 1987, Jackson had become controversial for his whitened skin and altered appearance, causing a huge debate over which community Jackson was loyal to, all of which is referenced in this short film (Harris, 2012). By the end of the video, Darryl comes to an understanding with his friends but is left alone, emphasizing how he does not fit into either community. Overall, Jackson highlights the process of making one's own place in the world instead of trying to fit in (Harris, 2012).



Figure 5: Michael Jackson's "Bad" with a hyperlink to the music video (Michael Jackson: Bad, 1987; Michael Jackson [@michaeljacksonVEVO], 2017).

One of this generation's most renowned artists, especially for her music videos, is Lady Gaga. From "Bad Romance" and "Poker Face" to "Telephone" and "Abracadabra," Lady Gaga's music videos have become symbols of artistry for years. One underrated video is for her song, "911" off her album, Chromatica. "911" tells the story of Lady Gaga's struggles with her mental health through surrealistic art, highlighting her need for antipsychotic medication and help from those around her (Van Paris, 2020). When watching the video, it can seem very disconnected; however, this is the point. Gaga says, "... it's because I can't always control things my brain does... and I have to take medication to stop the process that occurs" (Van

Paris, 2020). From being stranded in the desert with a blindfold on to a masked rider and woman holding a mummy, the entire video seems like a fever dream. In the end, it somewhat is. It is not until she is struck by two daggers that she awakens from this “dream state” into reality. The reality of the situation is that Gaga was in a car accident, causing her to lose consciousness. Hidden within these surrealistic elements are pieces of her reality: a bike lying on the ground, Armenian influences, a poster of the White Sands National Park in New Mexico, and more. In one part of the video, Lady Gaga is depicted as ascending to what can be interpreted as heaven until she is lassoed down. This scene represents the paramedics shocking her back to life. The lyric, “my biggest enemy is me... pop a 911,” highlights Gaga’s struggle to survive her internal battles, needing her medication and support system, which is depicted by the paramedics (Gillmer, 2020).



Figure 6: Lady Gaga’s “911” with a hyperlink to the music video (Gillmer, 2020; Lady Gaga [@LadyGaga], 2020).

Troye Sivan is a gay, Australian artist who uses his music to tell life stories and break barriers to LGBTQ+ people in the music industry. Sivan’s 2015 *Blue Neighborhood* album took a unique approach to using storytelling music videos by telling a continuous story throughout 3 separate videos, later put together as a “director’s cut.” Set in an Australian suburb, coined Sivan’s “Blue Neighborhood,” the three videos follow the story of Troye and his love interest, Matt. The trilogy begins with “Wild,” an upbeat song that showcases Troye and Matt’s childhoods together as best friends; however, it also sets the conflict for the following videos up as Matt’s father is an alcoholic who has a falling out with Troye’s father (Blackwell, 2024). The video ends with an older Troye and Matt kissing in the bedroom, which is where the video for “Fools” begins. “Fools” features tender music as Troye and Matt are caught kissing by Matt’s father, who forces them to stop seeing each other. The video follows the heartbreaking story as it transitions between scenes of Matt and Troye being intimate to Matt being abused by his father. Troye tries to visit Matt while he is working with his father, but Matt sends him away. Troye then sees Matt with a girlfriend and Matt ignores him completely. Troye reminisces on his childhood with Matt. The video ends with a horrific scene of Matt being verbally and physically abused by his father for being gay as well as threatening Troye and Matt’s life.

“Talk Me Down” has a sad beat as the video begins in a cemetery for Matt’s father’s funeral. Troye and Matt are grown men at this point. Matt is comforted during the funeral by his girlfriend, now presumed wife. Matt does not look up at Troye at all, causing Troye to walk off

dejected and searching his memories for where things went wrong. Matt falls to his knees at his father's grave, remembering the good moments they did have that his father's alcoholism could not take away from them. The video hits its peak when Matt approaches Troye and they embrace powerfully. However, Matt leaves when his wife comes, yelling at him. The final sequences of the video include the transition from the boys running as children to Matt running at the cemetery and then from the boys jumping into a pool to Matt jumping off a cliff to commit suicide.

The "Blue Neighborhood Trilogy" is an extremely powerful story of love being damaged by both internal and external homophobia as well as societal pressures. The trilogy explores the themes of trying not to fall in love with someone but failing in "Wild" to struggling with a broken relationship and regret in "Fools" to trying to let go and grieving what could have been in "Talk Me Down" (Blackwell, 2024). The aspect that the story does not end happily adds to a reality of a situation that so many LGBTQ+ individuals face to this day.



Figure 7: Troye Sivan's "Blue Neighborhood Trilogy" with a hyperlink to the music video (Blackwell, 2024; Troye Sivan [@troyesivan], 2016).

Though it is not explicitly a music video, Bad Bunny created a short film to highlight the poignant messages of his new album, *DeBÍ TiRAR Más FOTOS*. The album's name translates directly to "I should have taken more photos" (Sherman, 2025). Not only is this short film a love letter to his homeland, Puerto Rico, but it is also a call for viewers to sit back and think. The film follows the story of an older man who is telling an endangered toad, Concho, how he should have taken more pictures because although he wanted to live in the moment, it is getting harder to remember the past (Zubizarreta, 2025). The older gentleman then sets out to go to the bakery and on his walk, he passes very different homes playing rock and country music as well as featuring mainly white families speaking English. At the bakery, the cashier mainly speaks English but understands the older man's Spanish. The cashier asks the man a lot of questions about his order, like various types of bread and if he wants American cheese. The man struggles to explain how he wants a traditional pastrami sandwich until a cook understands him. However, the main tries to order a "quesito" which gets an abundance of questions, such as if he wants a vegan one, to which the man replies that he wants a traditional one. For his sandwich

and quesito, the total is \$30, a shocking amount for his small order. When the man tries to pay with cash as he did a couple of weeks earlier, the cashier explains how the corporate policy is now cashless. Despite knowing the original owner, the man is told he must pay with card, which he doesn't have. A fellow Puerto Rican pays for him, stating "we are still here" (Bad Bunny [@BadBunnyPR], 2025). Back at his house, the man is reflecting on his trip with his friend Concho about how he different his town is. He is happily surprised to see a car blast Reggaeton music, bringing back his fond memories of the past, until he goes inside to take a picture with his friend (Bad Bunny [@BadBunnyPR], 2025).

The main focus of this short film is the gentrification of Puerto Rico told through this story of the older man. As the man reminisces and struggles to remember the past, it mirrors the erosion of Puerto Rico's culture and identity (Zubizarreta, 2025). From the changes in music and demographics to the changes in the menu and corporate policy of the local bakery, this short film highlights the irreversible effects of time. Even the small inclusion of Concho the endangered toad shows how change affects the smallest of creatures who may be easily overlooked or forgotten (Zubizarreta, 2025). The songs that Bad Bunny includes on the album go further into these issues. The song, "TURISTA," highlights the negative effects of the tourism industry on the island's nature, and "LO QUE LE PASÓ A HAWAII" compares Puerto Rico to Hawaii as somewhere Americans have turned into a place that locals cannot recognize nor afford (Sayre et al., 2025). DeBÍ TiRAR MÁS FOToS is the perfect example of combining visual art and music to not only tell a story but preserve a culture and call others to do so too.

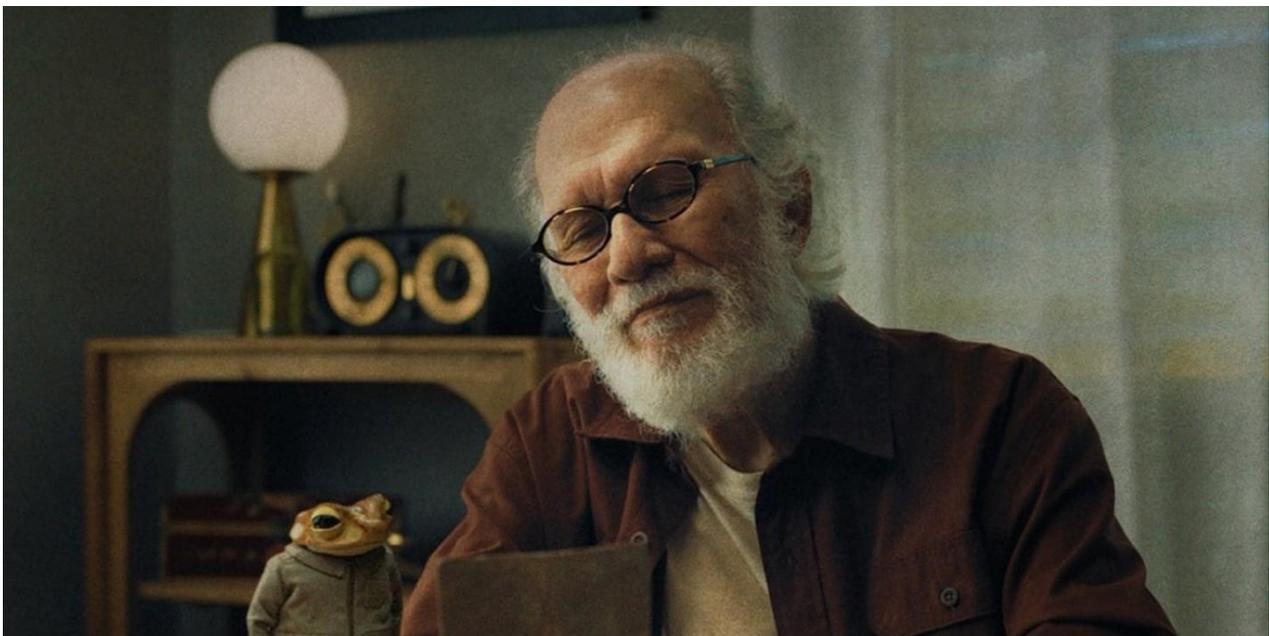


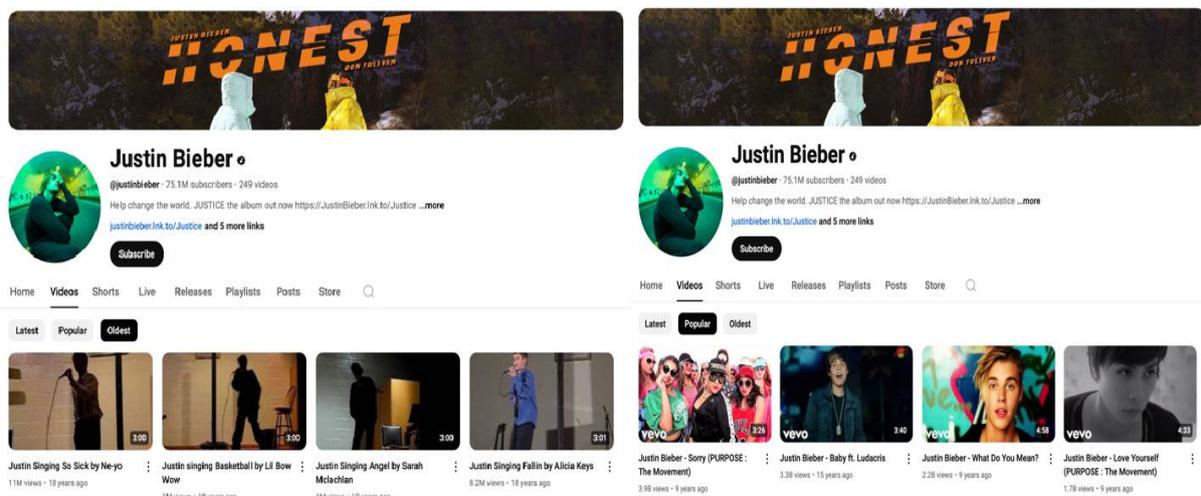
Figure 8: Bad Bunny's DeBÍ TiRAR MÁS FOToS with a hyperlink to the short film (Bad Bunny [@BadBunnyPR], 2025; Zubizarreta, 2025).

C. Social Media Aesthetics and Digital Presence

Social media has become one of the most prevalent ways that an artist is branded to an audience. Through social media marketing, artists can reach worldwide fans within seconds using photos, limited time stories, short-form content, and long-form videos. Not only has

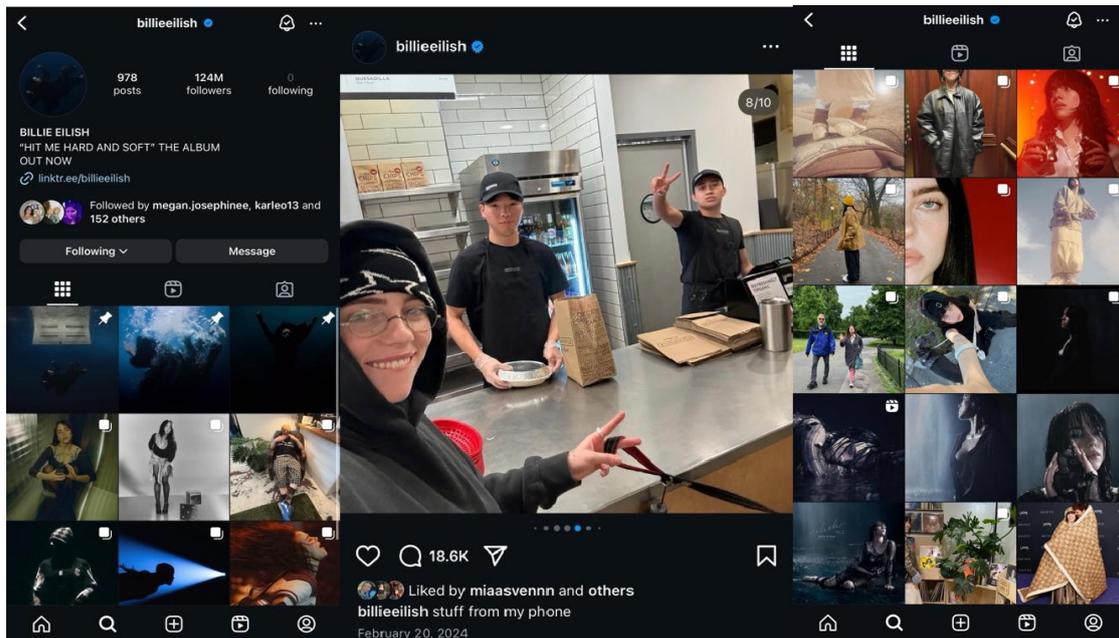
social media revolutionized the marketing industry, but it is also continuously evolving. From unknown artists being discovered on YouTube and Vine to viral TikTok sounds and trends, social media has expanded fan engagement and changed the game for creating meaningful relationships with fans (Ogden et al., 2011).

Justin Bieber is one of social media's biggest successes. After posting videos of himself singing at 12-years-old on YouTube, Bieber was discovered by Scooter Braun, So So Def Records' executive director for marketing ("How Justin Bieber Proved That YouTube Can Produce Pop Stars," 2019). Having predicted the growth of social media in music marketing, Braun was convinced Bieber would be a star. Usher and Justin Timberlake fought to sign Bieber until Braun and Usher teamed up to sign Bieber to Raymond Braun Media Group Records, a company under Def Jam Recordings and Universal Music Group ("How Justin Bieber Proved That YouTube Can Produce Pop Stars," 2019). Despite seeing Bieber's potential, it was a risk to produce an unknown artist from YouTube's music. However, Bieber's first EP, *My World*, in 2009 ranked number 6 on the Billboard 200 for selling over 137,000 copies, making it the strongest debut at the time ("How Justin Bieber Proved That YouTube Can Produce Pop Stars," 2019). Bieber has continued to use YouTube to promote his content, including his music videos, behind-the-scenes show, and live performances. As of April 2025, Justin Bieber has over 75.1 million subscribers on YouTube with his "Sorry" music video being his most streamed video with over 3.9 billion views (Justin Bieber [@justinbieber], 2025).



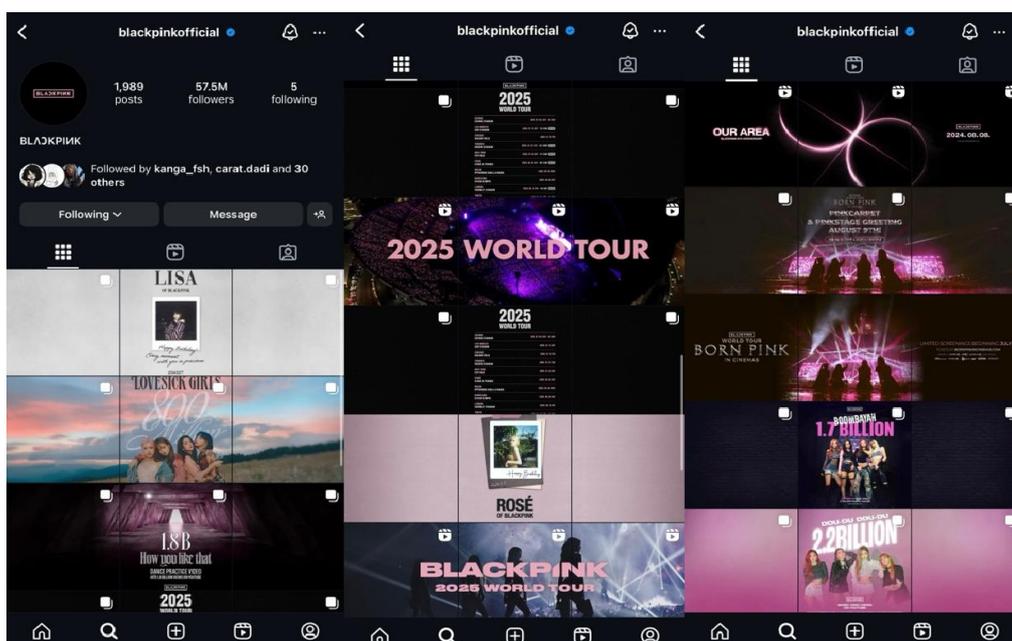
Figures 9 and 10: Justin Bieber's oldest and most popular music videos on YouTube (Justin Bieber [@justinbieber], 2025).

Instagram is another extremely popular social media platform utilized by artists. When it comes to posts and short-form content, aesthetics and comedy play huge parts in connecting to fans. Billie Eilish is one artist that has perfected her Instagram presence. By combining the perfect ratio of professional photoshoots, funny photo dumps, emoji captions, and live concert photos, Eilish gives a well-rounded view into her life as a superstar while maintain a down-to-earth feeling. This enables a variety of fans to connect with her in different ways. Whether fans follow her to see what music she is releasing next, or they are following to see more about her daily life, such as grabbing dinner as seen in Figure 8, Eilish has surpassed 124 million followers on the platform (Billie Eilish [@billieeilish], 2025).



Figures 11, 12, and 13: Examples of Billie Eilish’s Instagram feed (Billie Eilish [@billieeilish], 2025).

Although the Korean Pop (K-Pop) industry differs greatly from the American music scene, the social media marketing used for the groups and solo artists in South Korea is a great example of branding aesthetics. BLACKPINK, a 4-member girl group that debuted in 2016, use a multi-post strategy to maintain a visually cohesive feed. It is most likely that the page is run by their company, YG Entertainment, as the members have their own personal accounts. As Instagram positions its feeds in a 3-post grid, BlackPink uses all 3 of these posts to align a singular image or highlight the center post in a better way. This strategy has gained them over 57.5 million followers (BlackPink [@blackpinkofficial], 2025).



Figures 14, 15, and 16: Examples of BlackPink’s Instagram feed (BlackPink [@blackpinkofficial], 2025).

The newest social media platform that has taken the world by storm is TikTok. TikTok only showcases short-form content with the use of hashtags, catchy sounds, viral dances, and global trends. One artist that has captured TikTok’s virality is Chappell Roan. Although Chappell Roan has been producing music since 2017, she had a major breakthrough in 2023 with her song, “Hot to Go!” from her album, *The Rise and Fall of a Midwest Princess* (Caruso, 2023). Using TikTok’s platform, she created a “YMCA” styled dance, encouraging fans to learn it and perform it in the audience during her shows. The hashtag #hottogo currently has over 132.7 thousand posts with the original dance tutorial video from Roan amassing over 3.2 million views (Universal Music Indonesia [@universalmusicindonesia], 2024). Following her success on TikTok, Roan has gained a loyal following as she has continued to put out viral hits, such as “Pink Pony Club,” and she won her first Grammy this year for Best New Artist (Caruso, 2023).

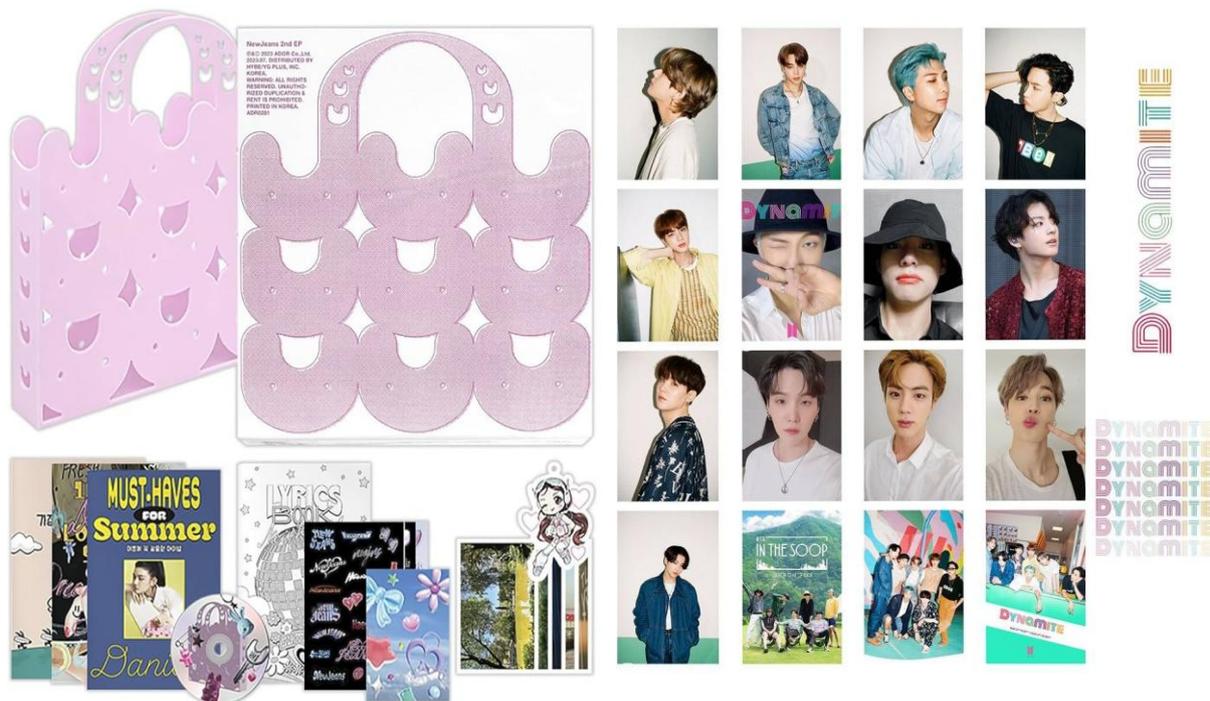


Figure 17: Chappell Roan’s viral HOT-TO-GO dance with a hyperlink to the original video (Universal Music Indonesia [@universalmusicindonesia], 2024).

D. Well-Branded Merchandise

The K-Pop industry has mastered branding and selling merchandise to fans. From intricate albums that feature a multitude of collectibles to group lightsticks and exclusive concert merch, there is something for every fan. A K-Pop album is not packaged as just a CD with a track list; it is often sold in multiple forms with differing themes and unique inclusions. One of the main inclusions in K-Pop albums is a photocard. This photocard is often of a specific member or the entire group. These photocards vary in rarity, allowing them to be collected, sold, and traded between fans. Aside from photocards, the inclusions can range from stickers, highlighters, and letters from the members to functional bags, DIY art kits, and perfume samples (Unusual K-pop Albums: From Weird to Weirdly Useful, 2025). The strategy of collectible inclusions has

managed to make physical album sales relevant and desirable in a digital world. Not only does this impact physical sales, but it helps with the social media world as well. Music influencers post “unboxing” videos of them on social media, including footage of them opening their albums to seeing what photocards and inclusions they got. This encourages more fans to go out to stores and post about their albums as well, promoting social media engagement.



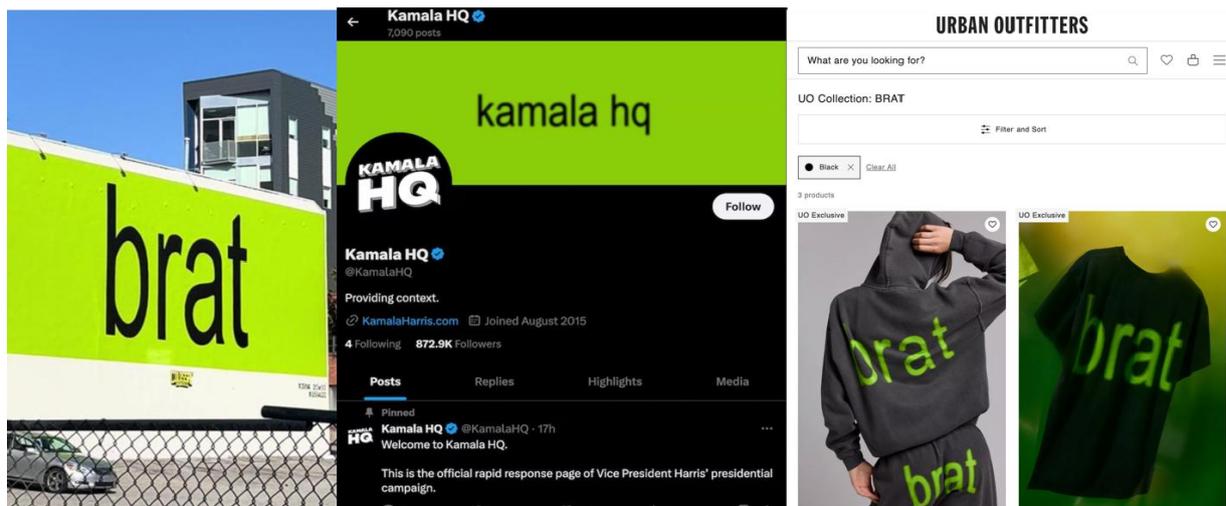
Figures 18 and 19: NewJeans’ 2nd EP with inclusions and BTS’ Dynamite Single Photocards (NewJeans - 2nd EP, 2019; Dynamite Photocard Collection - BTS MERCH SHOP, 2025).

Another unique feature to the K-Pop industry is the sale and use of a fandom lightstick. Lightsticks are illuminated devices that are designed to represent a specific musical group and are marketed to that group’s fans to use during live performances. In the K-Pop industry, lightsticks go beyond fan merchandise to represent community and fan solidarity. As K-Pop expands to more countries, lightsticks provide a way for fans to build connections and engage with artists despite cultural and language barriers. Lightsticks were introduced in 1997 for one of the first K-pop idol groups, H.O.T; the lightstick featured a white balloon-like device that lit up during concerts (T-Labs Team, 2025). As the years progressed, the designs of lightsticks evolved and became more group specific featuring elements of the group’s identity, fandom, and concepts. For example, BTS’ fandom is called ARMY so their lightstick is an “army bomb” while BLACKPINK’s lightstick is shaped like a hammer to represent their powerful music style (T-Labs Team, 2025). One of the biggest updates made to lightsticks was the introduction of Bluetooth technology. Lightsticks can now connect to concert venues to match with music and lighting in the venue. Bluetooth allows for multiple color options, sound reactivity, and custom programming that can all be controlled via a mobile app (T-Labs Team, 2025). The popularity of lightsticks in the K-Pop industry has inspired western artists to create similar light displays. Taylor Swift’s LED bracelets and Coldplay’s Xylobands both feature this light technology as shown in figure 22 (T-Labs Team, 2025).



Figures 20 and 21: Examples of K-Pop lightsticks (Light Sticks, n.d.; T-Labs Team, 2025). Figure 22: Example of Coldplay’s Xylobands (Xylobands | LED Wristbands for Events, 2016).

In 2024, Charli XCX’s *brat* became a marketing phenomenon. From its simplicity and relatableness to its virality and partnerships, *brat* Summer’s neon green was everywhere, especially on merchandise. Before the album’s release, walls and billboards in various cities featured the album’s shocking cover, a neon green background with the word “brat” in arial font (Worklife Editorial, 2024). From NASA posting a green image of a dead star with the #BratSummer to Kamala Harris’ X account featuring the words “kamala hq” on the same neon green background, it created a lasting impact (Worklife Editorial, 2024). One area that Charli XCX and her marketing team conquered was merchandise. Once the album was announced, Urban Outfitters released a collection of *brat* themed clothing as well as Charli’s official store sold hats, shirts, bags, and jewelry (Worklife Editorial, 2024). Other stores began selling hair accessories, phone cases, and even *brat*-themed food products. While *brat* summer may be over, it changed the trajectory of Charli XCX’s career forever.



Figures 23 and 24: Promotional activities for the album, including a mural and Kamala Harris’ X account (Worklife Editorial, 2024).

Figure 25: Urban Outfitter’s *brat* collection (UO Collection: BRAT, n.d.).

E. Iconic Live Performances

Live performances can make or break an artist. In 2018, Beyoncé was at the peak of her career with 22 Grammy awards and a Super Bowl halftime performance under her belt.

However, this was just the start as her headlining performance at Coachella would go on to make history. Beyoncé became the first Black woman to headline Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival since its beginning in 1999 (Chang, 2025). During her two-hour set, Beyoncé made sure to highlight her roots and showcase African American culture in a new way. From featuring performers and marching bands from historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) to surprise reunions with Jay Z, Solange, and Destiny's Child, her performance amassed 41 million live viewers from 232 countries, making it the most viewed live music festival ever on YouTube (Chang, 2025; Korosec, 2018). Coined "Beychella," this Coachella performance has set the standard for the ones that follow.



Figures 26, 27, and 28: Photographs from Beyoncé's Coachella performance with a hyperlink to video footage of the performance (Grady, 2018; Allaire, 2018; @thelanozvideocomeback, 2023).

In 2023, there was one artist who ruled the live performance scene: Taylor Swift. Taylor Swift's "Eras Tour" shattered concert sales, attendance records, craft material sales, concert film sales, social media engagement, and weekly music streams with just one tour (Barnes, 2024). As an artist that has been around since 2006, Swift's discography includes over 404 songs and live recordings with more than 81.7 million monthly listeners on Spotify and 72 million monthly listeners on Apple Music (Taylor Swift, n.d.; Worldwide Apple Music Song Chart Artist Totals, n.d.). Coined "The Taylor Swift Effect," Swift has not only impacted the music scene but also society as a whole. Swift's 3.5-hour show consisted of 44 songs from 11 different albums that she performed at 152 dates in stadiums across 5 continents (Barnes, 2023). To make her concert even more special, each date featured two surprise songs performed acapella as well as unique costumes for each era. The "Eras Tour" grossed over \$2 billion with over 10 million tickets sold, making it the highest-grossing tour of all time (Frankenburg, 2024). Not only did Swift perform a record-breaking concert at every date, but she also announced multiple albums throughout the tour.

Swift's fans, also known as Swifties, engaged in a fan project that defied continent lines.

The "You're On Your Own Kid" friendship bracelet fan project allowed fans to create unique bracelets to wear and trade with others at each concert date, causing a 300% sales increase in beads and jewelry sales with over 22 million bracelets having been made (Barnes, 2023). Swift

went on to partner with AMC and film “The Eras Tour (Taylor’s Version)” concert movie. The concert movie became the highest-grossing concert film of all time with over \$250 million in worldwide movie ticket sales and it was nominated for a Golden Globe (Barnes, 2023). The film was later released on Disney+ with extra added surprise songs. “The Eras Tour (Taylor’s Version)” film broke records with 4.6 million views within 3 days of streaming (D’Alessandro, 2024).

As Taylor Swift visited different cities along the tour, Swift was presented with something special. In Santa Clara, Swift was made honorary mayor while Minneapolis renamed the city “Swiftie-apolis” and Rio de Janeiro projected Swift’s junior jewels shirt from a music video onto Christ the Redeemer (Barnes, 2023). One of the reasons for these honorary changes is the boost that the “Eras Tour” had on the economy. One stop on the tour equated around \$1,300 spent per person in the city, which the U.S. Travel Association compared to having the Super Bowl happen 53 times across 20 cities (Barnes, 2023). In addition to the records broken above, Swift’s fandom even caused seismic activity. During Swift’s two nights in Seattle, there was a “Swift Quake” from the number of fans dancing during her song, “Shake It Off,” resulting in activity similar to a 2.3 magnitude earthquake (Barnes, 2023). As the tour continued, Taylor Swift’s following on social media and music platforms kept increasing. Swift saw up to a 79% increase in listeners after the first 10 weeks of the tour as well as a double in weekly streams for 23 out of 42 songs on the setlist (Barnes, 2023). This year, Taylor Swift was presented with the Tour of the Century Award during the iHeartRadio Music Awards to highlight her record-breaking success as a live performer (GMA Team, 2025).



Figures 29 and 30: Photographs from Taylor Swift’s “Eras Tour” with a hyperlink to the concert film’s trailer (Barnes, 2024; Taylor Swift [@TaylorSwift], 2023).

The Psychological and Cultural Impact of Visuals in Music

Not only do visuals in music make content more enjoyable but they also create lasting psychological and cultural effects. In a study done by Adrian Chețan and Ioana Iancu at Babes-Bolyai University in Romania, they how visual branding in the music industry influences listeners’ psychological responses and perceptions of music quality, likability, and emotional depth (Chețan et al., 2023). Visual identity is extremely important in today’s world as the digital music landscape is oversaturated with many different and emerging artists. By using logos, colors, promotional content, and live performances, audiences can create lasting connections

with artists. Through interviews with industry professionals, the study found that cohesive and authentic visual elements enhanced emotional resonance and even shaped perceptions of quality (Cheţan et al., 2023). For example, well-branded merchandise or compelling music videos may lead listeners to perceive a song or artist in higher quality, creating greater brand loyalty. In the case of some of the artists mentioned above, such as Charli XCX’s brat merchandise, new audiences were reached with visual imagery regardless of the music itself. Brat became a trend or summer lifestyle more than an album, all because the merchandise connected with audiences.

The research further highlights how visual congruence, meaning that the visual tone matches the emotional message of the music itself, strengthens emotional impact and audience engagement (Cheţan et al., 2023). An example of this would be Troye Sivan’s “Blue Neighborhood Trilogy.” The music for each video matched the tone of the story as it started out nostalgic and exciting and ended sad and reminiscent. Although Sivan was not well-known at the time, the director’s cut amassed over 34 million views on YouTube (Troye Sivan [@troyesivan], 2016). These views and growing fanbase can be accredited to Sivan’s visual congruence. Cheţan and Iancu noted that visual appeal often determined whether audiences explored an artist’s music at all and that poorly executed visuals took away from an artist’s credibility (2023). This study highlighted the importance of visual branding as not just an aesthetic but as a factor in shaping audience behavior, emotional interpretation, and cultural relevance and longevity (Cheţan et al., 2023).

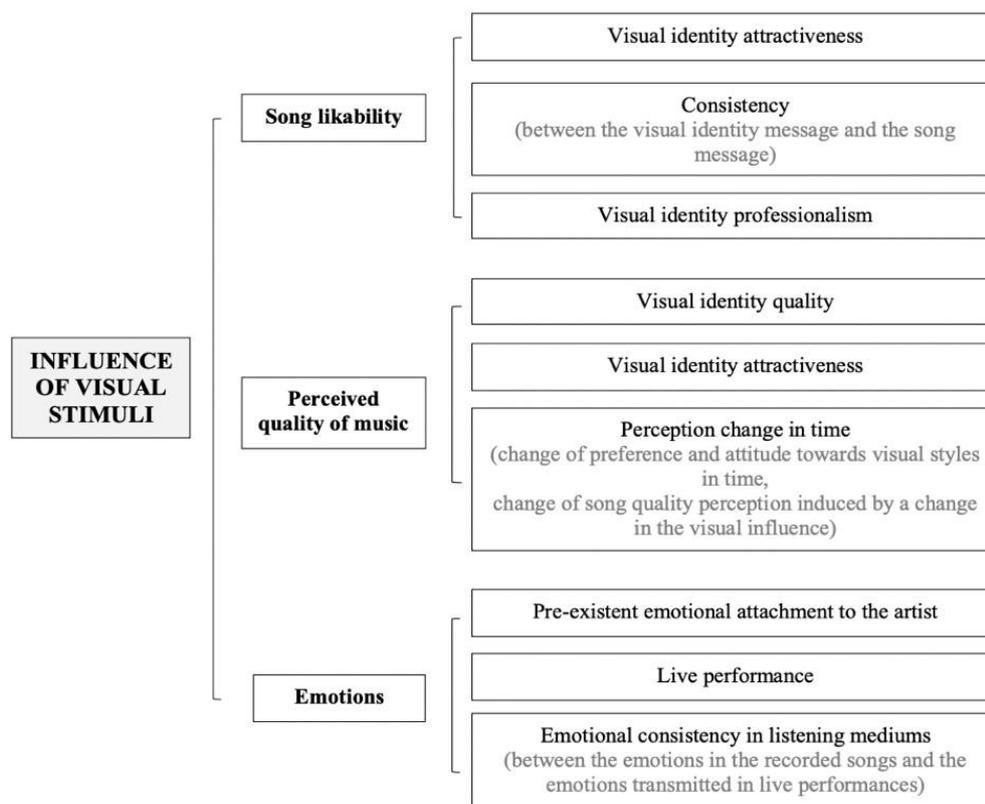


Figure 31: Influence of Visual Stimuli (Cheţan et al., 2023).

Challenges and Ethical Considerations

A rising issue in the music industry and art world is the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) technology. There is a massive debate over copyright and creative ownership when it comes to AI-generated music or artwork. The 2023 viral hit, "Heart on My Sleeve," convinced fans that Drake and The Weeknd collaborated on a new song; however, this was not the case. TikTok user, Ghostwriter 977, used AI technology to remake Drake and The Weeknd's vocals on the song (Rolling Stone Culture Council/Bold Branding, 2024). This song was the tip of the iceberg when it came to the blurred line between homage and unauthorized replication, introducing legal and ethical implications. Universal Music Group demanded the song be removed, raising the question of who actually held rights to the song (Rolling Stone Culture Council/Bold Branding, 2024).

Not only is AI impacting the music industry, but it is also shaking up the art world. When combined with music, AI creates hyper-realistic music videos, virtual influencers, and synthetic stages. In the K-Pop industry, there are entirely AI music groups, including MAVE. Launching their first music video in 2023, the girl group is made entirely from AI technology by Metaverse Entertainment (Cheetham, 2024). The group's concept is four girls from the future with perfect proportions, ideal visuals, and trendy fashion as seen in figure 31. There are other all-virtual groups as well while some companies have added AI members to existing groups, such as AESPA (Cheetham, 2024).



Figure 32: MAVE members of the all-virtual K-pop girl group (Cheetham, 2024).

While AI tools offer groundbreaking creative potential, they also raise concerns about authenticity, consent, and overbranding. When every piece of content feels overly curated or artificial, audiences may begin to question whether an artist's persona is genuine or just focused on business. This may cause a disconnect between the artist and fans, reducing the emotional impact. As the integration of AI in the music industry continues to evolve, the challenge lies in balancing the integrity of the artist with the innovations of technology.

CONCLUSION

In today's music industry where fans' attention spans are short and the market is fiercely competitive, visual elements are essential. From album covers and music videos to social media aesthetics, merchandise, and live performances, visuals are powerful tools for shaping an artist's identity as well as creating psychological and cultural impacts. However, as visual branding evolves along with technology, artists and industry professionals must navigate a growing set of ethical challenges. The rise of AI-generated music and visuals raises critical questions about copyright, ownership, authenticity, and the role of human emotion in creative work. While AI can offer new possibilities and improve efficiency, it can reduce music's impact to a formula and lead to over-branding, causing a detachment between artists and audiences. Industry professionals must strike a balance between the worlds of art and technology "Canvas, Camera, Concert: The Impact of Visuals in Music Marketing" reveals that visual elements are not merely accessories to music, but integral factors that change how it is perceived, experienced, and remembered. From Kendrick Lamar and Michael Jackson to Justin Bieber and Billie Eilish to BLACKPINK and BTS to Beyoncé and Taylor Swift, visuals create emotional, long-lasting connections with audiences, allow for emergence in global markets, and enhance storytelling. Just as music has been around since the first human civilization, its fusion with visual elements has shaped and will continue to shape artistic legacies that resonate far beyond the screen.

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