



Popular Music in U.S. Presidential Commercialsⁱ

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A. Slide 1: (Title Slide)

1. The *Trax on the Trail* article you read for today, “Political Pop and Commercials That Flopped: Early Lessons from the 2016 Presidential Race,” gives some background on how the music used in a candidate’s commercial can affect the public’s perception of the candidate’s campaign. It also discusses how national brand advertising relates to political commercials.ⁱⁱ
2. Music can be used in many different campaign contexts, including rallies, conventions, radio spots, television commercials, and on the Internet.
3. Today’s lesson will focus on how popular music is used in television commercials, as well as in other media formats, including the radio and Internet.
4. We are used to hearing popular songs in commercials. Can you name a song from a commercial that you heard and liked?
 - a. What was the commercial about?
 - b. Why did you like it?
 - c. What message did the images convey?
 - d. How did the music complement the message?

B. Slide 2: Popular Music in American National Brand Advertising

5. Advertising has evolved over the years, especially post-WWII with the baby boomer generation because:
 - a. this demographic made up a significant portion of the population.
 - b. post-war financial prosperity put spending money for leisure activities in teenager’s pockets.
 - c. technological advances allowed rock and roll music to become a mainstream phenomenon, and many industries saw financial possibilities in its popularity with the boomers.
6. In the 1960s, national brand commercials—along with the entertainment industry (movies, music, etc.)—sought to specifically capture the “youth market.”ⁱⁱⁱ
7. This era became known for a proliferation of “segmentation marketing”—targeting specific groups based on demographics (age, race, region, gender, etc.) and psychographics (lifestyles).^{iv}
8. In the 1960s, some brands relied on popular music licensing to capture the youth market (i.e., they paid to use a preexisting pop song in their commercials). Sometimes marketers circumvented the need for permissions from well-known artists and labels by creating commercial sound tracks that sounded similar to hit popular styles.



C. Slide 3: “Pop” Licensing

9. The presence of preexisting popular songs in television commercials was not common until this landmark 1984 commercial campaign. As you watch this, answer the questions provided on the slide (Play Video):
 - a. Who is the artist and what is the product? Does this artist seem like a good match for this product? Why or why not?
 - b. What is the genre of this song? Can you name the song?
 - c. How does the version of the song in the commercial differ from the original version typically heard on the radio?
 - d. What is the commercial’s message?
 - e. To whom is this commercial targeted? How do you know?
10. This commercial became so popular that the audiences demanded to see it over and over. After it aired, Pepsi sales outnumbered Coca-Cola’s for the first time in history. This commercial is a testament to the power of popular music in advertising and remains the industry standard for commercials today.^v
11. By the end of the 1980s a substantial number of preexisting songs were being licensed for major corporations’ commercials, especially newer songs by young artists. By the end of the 20th century, new music actually started to *premiere* in commercials—changing the paradigm from just recycling older tracks or relying on those receiving current radio play like “Billie Jean.”^{vi}
12. Today’s *political* commercials borrow some of the strategies deployed in national brand advertising, but the creators of political advertisements have been slow to use pre-existing popular music for various reasons.^{vii}
 - a. Take a moment to consider what some of these reasons might be. Think about how national brand commercials and ads for politicians compare. How are they the same or different? (Discuss)
 - i. Possible answers:
 1. They are similar in that they both are selling “products,” ideas, and beliefs.
 2. They are similar in that they may target specific groups based on demographics or psychographics.
 3. Political commercials have higher stakes. Fewer commercials air in a smaller time frame, meaning musical choices have to work well.
 4. National brand advertising avoids being political for fear of alienating audiences. Ads for politicians need to be direct in their agendas.

D. Slide 4: Popular Music in Political Advertising

13. Popular music and preexisting songs are intended to be *recognized* in campaigns, unlike classical scores or background music (underscore) that is meant to heighten the mood or emotions on the screen but remain unobtrusive in the background.^{viii}
14. The majority of political commercials rely on background music for its ability to create an emotional affect. Take for example this commercial that was released the same year as Michael Jackson’s Pepsi campaign. It does not use popular music, but rather uses classical instruments to effectively communicate the candidate’s ideologies.



- a. “[Morning in America](#)” was created for the re-election of President Ronald Reagan. As you watch/listen consider the following:
 - i. What genre/type of music is being used? Name some of its characteristics.
 - ii. How does the music support the images?
 - iii. Taking the music and images together, what does this commercial say about the candidate?
 - iv. What values does this commercial communicate about the Republican candidate?
 - b. (Play Video/Discuss)
15. For comparison, watch this contemporary commercial for 2016 Republican candidate Marco Rubio. Rubio’s “[Morning Again](#)” commercial re-created Reagan’s 1984 commercial with similar music, but how does the new dialogue change its meanings in this context? (Play Video/Discuss).
- E. Slide 5: Popular Music and the 2016 Presidential Race
16. Popular music carries a lot of meaning for audiences.
- a. Its characteristics both appeal to and signify the demographic and psychographic markers of its audiences.
 - b. Choosing the right song is imperative because audiences are *invested in and familiar with it*.
17. In the 2016 presidential race, licensing debacles for campaign events—mainly rallies and conventions, not ads—have dominated the media.
- a. Famous among them are artists like Adele, The Backstreet Boys, and Brian May (Queen) who have publically spoken against Donald Trump for using their music at his events.
18. One recent and successful licensing of a preexisting popular song occurred when Democratic candidate Bernie Sanders used Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel’s 1968 song “America” in a commercial.
- a. Audiences responded well.
 - b. It was reported that the artists were enthusiastic about Sanders using their track in his commercial.
19. Before watching this commercial, let us consider the three lessons outlined in today’s reading: Lesson 1) The Music Should Match the Candidate; Lesson 2) Bad Music Kills the Buzz; Lesson 3) Audiences Resent Pandering and Essentialism. Following these lessons, we can ask the following questions when considering how popular music functions in a political commercial: (The points enumerated here can be read aloud to elaborate on each question.)
- a. 1) To whom/what does the music match and is it convincing?
 - i. Does it match the candidate?
 - ii. Or does it more accurately match the audience?
 - iii. Does it match both?
 - b. 2) What are the qualities that we hear within the music itself and how do these tropes work with the images and onscreen dialogue?
 - i. Consider musical terminology learned in class:



1. Genre, artist, instrumentation, melodies, harmonies, key, tempo, timbre, climax, etc.
 - ii. Who is the creator/performer of this music?
 - iii. Who is the typical audience for this music?
 - iv. What are the genre's historical roots?
 - v. What are its contemporary uses/meanings?
 - vi. What/where is the commercial's setting?
 - vii. Who is represented onscreen?
 - viii. What do the images suggest about demographics or psychographics?
 - ix. Do the images match the music? If so, how?
 - x. Is there any dialogue and how does it fit with the music and images?
- c. 3) What is the message/intent of this commercial?
- i. Who is the commercial's intended audience? Is it effective in reaching the right audience?
 - ii. What demographic/psychographic situations does the candidate intend to reach?
 - iii. What is assumed about the viewer?
 - iv. What does the commercial tell us about the candidate?
20. Let's now watch Sanders's "[America](#)." Try to answer as many of these questions as you can.^x (Play video and discuss)
- a. Possible topics:
 - i. Nostalgia.
 - ii. Optimism of commercial vs. disillusionment in original lyrics.
 - iii. Sanders' agenda/approach compared to other candidates.
 - iv. Ideals of authenticity (pertaining to both the music and candidate).
 - v. Folk rock norms, ideologies, characteristics, demographics.
 - vi. Appeal to the counterculture: yesterday's boomers and today's millennials.
 - vii. Acoustic guitars and roles in civil rights/resistance.
 - viii. Effectiveness.

F. Slide 6: "Freedom" and "Stand with Hillary"

21. Circling back to today's reading, let's listen to two commercials that caused controversy early in the 2016 presidential race. The first, a radio spot, endorses a Republican candidate, Ben Carson, and the other, a music video created by the Stand with Hillary Super PAC, promotes Democratic nominee, Hillary Clinton.
22. Based on what we know about the musical and political origins of hip hop, what makes Ben Carson's radio commercial, "Freedom," unconvincing?^{xi} (Play Video)
- a. Possible Topics to Discuss
 - i. Elements of hip hop: flow, rupture, layering.
 - ii. Other musical elements: sampling looping, rapping, delivery.
 - iii. The lyrics and embedded campaign speech.
 - iv. Historical oppression of African Americans (racism, regional confinement, poverty).
 - v. Stereotyping vs. authenticity.
 - vi. Political content of other rappers tracks, past and present (e.g., Public Enemy, Kendrick Lamar).

- vii. Carson’s own experiences and platform.
- viii. Republican agendas.
- ix. Comparison to the “Yes We Can” song/video made for President Obama.
- x. The commercial’s effect on Carson’s campaign.



- b. As we view “Stand with Hillary,” think about the three lessons and accompanying questions posed earlier. Be prepared to discuss which category you think the commercial most obviously fails meet and why. To review:
 - i. Lesson 1: The Music Should Match the Candidate
 - 1. Ask: To whom/what does the music match and is it convincing?
 - ii. Lesson 2: Bad Music Kills the Buzz
 - 1. Ask: What are the qualities that we hear within the music itself and how do these tropes work with the images/any onscreen dialogue?
 - iii. Lesson 3: Audiences Resent Pandering and Essentialism
 - 1. What is the message/intent?
- (Play Video)

G. Slide 7: Your Turn!

- 23. Finally, find a partner and take a moment to talk about what a convincing commercial for the current nominees, Hilary Clinton and Donald Trump, would look and sound like.
 - a. What is the perfect genre or piece of popular music that would effectively communicate their agendas and convince audiences? Why?
 - b. Which demographics/psychographics would you target?
 - c. What would the message be?
 - d. What lyrics would you include?
 - e. Would there be onscreen dialogue?
 - f. Would the candidate appear in the commercial?
 - g. Explain your musical choices.
- (Discuss/Share)

Commercials

“America | Bernie Sanders,” January 21, 2016. Video clip. YouTube.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2nwRiuh1Cug>.

“Freedom” (Ben Carson Radio Ad). SoundCloud, November 5, 2015.
<https://soundcloud.com/abcpolitics/ben-carson-radio-ad>.

“Morning Again | Marco Rubio for President,” February 14, 2016. Video clip. YouTube.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lp80DfHgJ8k>.

“Ronald Reagan It's Morning In America 1984,” June 10, 2012. Video clip. YouTube.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fa8Qupc4PnQ>.

“STAND WITH HILLARY Music Video,” February 5, 2015. Video clip. YouTube.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xJJoJWY1VEM>.

ⁱ This lesson was developed for a small classroom environment that includes discussion. However, these materials can be adapted to accommodate a larger lecture format. It is assumed that this lesson will be used in a course that has previously covered some aspects of popular music, American music and/or music and media for either general education students or music majors. I have provided further readings so that portions of this lesson can be expanded upon or cut to fit the needs of a variety of classroom settings. Materials developed by Joanna Love, Assistant Professor of Music, University of Richmond, 2016 for *Trax on the Trail*.

ⁱⁱ Joanna Love, "Political Pop and Commercials that Flopped: Early Lessons from the 2016 Presidential Race," *Trax on the Trail*, January 14, 2016, <http://traxonthetrail.com/artide/political-pop-and-commercials-flopped-early-lessons-2016-presidential-race>.

ⁱⁱⁱ For more on advertising and the youth demographic, see Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

^{iv} For more about marketing and target demographics, see Richard S. Tedlow, "The Fourth Phase of Marketing: Marketing History and the Business World Today," in *The Rise and Fall of Mass Marketing*, ed. Richard S. Tedlow and Geoffrey Jones, 8–35 (London: Routledge, 2015).

^v For more on Pepsi's successful marketing campaign in the 1980s, see Joanna Love, "From Cautionary Chart-Topper to Friendly Beverage Anthem: Michael Jackson's 'Billie Jean' and Pepsi's 'The Choice of a New Generation' Television Campaign," *Journal of the Society for American Music* 9, no. 2 (2015): 178–203.

^{vi} For more on branding and advertising strategies, see Timothy D. Taylor, *The Sounds of Capitalism: Advertising, Music, and the Conquest of Culture* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

^{vii} For more on musical branding in the 2012 elections, see Joanna Love, "Branding a Cool Celebrity President: Advertising with Popular Music in the 2012 Election," *Music & Politics* 9, no. 2 (2015), <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/mp/9460447.0009.203?view=text;rgn=main>.

^{viii} For more on the use of underscore in 2012 and 2016 presidential campaign ads, see Travis Ridout, "The Use of Background Music in Political Advertising," *Trax on the Trail*, June 19, 2016, <http://www.traxonthetrail.com/artide/use-background-music-political-advertising>.

^{ix} For more on the role of music in Reagan's "Morning Again" ad campaign, see Paul Christensen, "'It's Morning Again in America': How the Tuesday Team Revolutionized the Use of Music in Political Ads," *Music & Politics* 10, no. 1 (Summer 2016), <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/mp.9460447.0010.105>.

^x For a discussion of the "America" commercial's effectiveness, see Paul Christensen, "Musical Yearning in Bernie Sanders's Presidential Primary Ad 'America,'" *Trax on the Trail*, February 2, 2016, <http://www.traxonthetrail.com/artide/musical-yearning-bernie-sanders%E2%80%99s-presidential-primary-ad-%E2%80%9Camerica%E2%80%9D>.

^{xi} In addition to the sources cited in the reading, see Tricia Rose, "A style nobody can deal with. Politics, style and the postindustrial city in Hip Hop." In *Popular Music: Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies*, ed. Simon Frith, 341–59 (London: Routledge, 2004); and Loren Kajikawa, *Sounding Race in Rap Songs* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015). For more on the response to Carson's ad, see Issie Lapowsky, "Twitter Reacts to the Ben Carson Rap That Shouldn't Exist," *Wired*, November 2015, <http://www.wired.com/2015/11/twitter-reacts-to-the-ben-carson-rap-that-shouldnt-exist/>; Leslie Larson, "Ben Carson Blasts Hip-Hop for Hurting African-American Communities," *Business Insider*, April 6, 2015, <http://www.businessinsider.com/ben-carson-blasts-hip-hop-2015-4>. Oh, Inae. "Ben Carson's Rap Ad Is Here to Ruin Your Day," *Mother Jones*, November 5, 2015, <http://www.motherjones.com/mojo/2015/11/hate-listen-to-ben-carsons-new-rap-song>.