Research In Practice: ADAD5004

Proposal Essay

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My proposal for Research in Practice will explore the intersections and meaning of Branding, Music, and Streetwear in relation to graphic design. Instead of beginning this essay with a conventional fixed question, I will build towards one by analysing how visual communication is represented across these overlapping cultural topics. The three individual areas I have chosen are all deeply connected through identity and creativity, while maintaining unique entry points into how visual communication is a core aspect of each.

Within The proposal, I will first begin to navigate branding and will investigate its emotional and conceptual meaning, while considering its role in creating identity. I will refer to the work of Naomi Klein, who explored the idea of brand culture in the book *No Logo* (1999), which highlights the shift in the branding world. The next topic is Music, which is a culture heavily influenced by design. I will use insights from Sarah Thornton, who's book *Club Cultures* (1995) discusses how music scenes generate identity through visual culture. Within this section, I'll focus on examples such as festival environments. Finally, I'll cover Streetwear which will link to the Theorist Dick Hebdige. Their work on subcultures explores how style operates as a form of communication and resistance, I will investigate how nostalgia and recycling in streetwear is used to maintain brand integrity.

This proposal will cover areas which raise questions about the importance and involvement of visual communication amongst the topics I've chosen. By exploring the overlaps between branding, music and streetwear, my proposal will end by coming to a focused research question which may guide a decision for my final year project.

Branding

In recent times branding has become more than solely identifying a product or service and differentiating one product from another. Instead, it constructs a sense of purpose, identity and ideology. These feelings are shared between both the brand itself and the consumers, as a brand "encapsulates both the tangible and the intangible" (Davis, 2009, p.12). This demonstrates that the term 'branding' shares a duality between what we see and feel, the tangible being a logo or product, while the intangible being the values or cultural associations we have with it. In a society which gravitates towards visual consumption, graphic design plays a central role in how a brand can express personalities and create an emotional connection with people. This is achieved through visual language, such as colour and typography, which is used in the branding world to either empower or manipulate.

From the Clothes that we wear, to the phones in our pockets, everything we own and consume is branded. But how we interact with each brand is accumulated by a mixture of feelings and emotions. Branding affects how we as people align ourselves socially, this is notably evident with teenagers as around this point in life, most people enter a "key period" where we discover our own identities (Buckingham, 2007, p.26). This supports the idea that the youth look for belonging and influence at this age, and brands offer this curated sense of belonging, building a bridge between a creator and consumer. A great example of this is the brand Supreme, which is notable for its exclusivity amongst youth communities. Supreme aligns itself with the skateboarding

and hip-hop culture, both of which are massively idolised by today's youth. The brand Supreme doesn't just sell clothing and other products, it sells an experience and community which people want to be a part of, thus separating itself from similar brands. According to Hammond (2011 p.18) "preference has materialized out of an emotional driver, not just a rational one." This demonstrates how Supreme is an example of brands functioning as a cultural statue, where visual communication and brand association can create a lifestyle that people want to be a part of.

The emotional influence of brands like Supreme is something Naomi Klein speaks about in her book *No Logo* (1999). The Theorist argues that although branding was once about selling a product, modern branding focuses on selling ideologies and lifestyles, mostly aimed towards young people. From this perspective it suggests that brands like Supreme have engaged with the aesthetic of rebellion and non-conformity, capitalising on authentic subcultures that need a voice. This reflects Klein's idea that we live in a "corporate climate obsessed with finding the secret recipe for cool" (Klein, 1999, p.111). Supreme is just another brand that embodies this narrative, originally a brand supporting many "countercultures" (Klein, 1999, p. 316), it has now become a mainstream symbol which is well-known within youth cultures. Reflecting on Klein's ideas, I believe that branding can be viewed as both empowering and manipulative. The use of visual communication within branding can be used for good, giving people a sense of identity but also has the capability of driving over-consumption.

Paula Scher is a designer who's impact on branding demonstrates how it can be used for good by embodying identity and purpose. A specific example is the branding work

that Scher did for The Public Theater in New York, which featured bold and chaotic typography alongside vibrant colours. Paula Scher described The Public Theater as being somewhere which is “Artist-driven, radically inclusive, and fundamentally democratic” (Scher, 2020, p.23). This is emphasised in the branding Paula Scher made, (fig. 1) this image illustrates the chaotic nature of New York, while infusing an aspect of the energetic street culture the city is known for. The use of bold colours and playful text communicates the flow and style of music it’s promoting, further demonstrating how branding can evoke a sense of identity through graphic design.

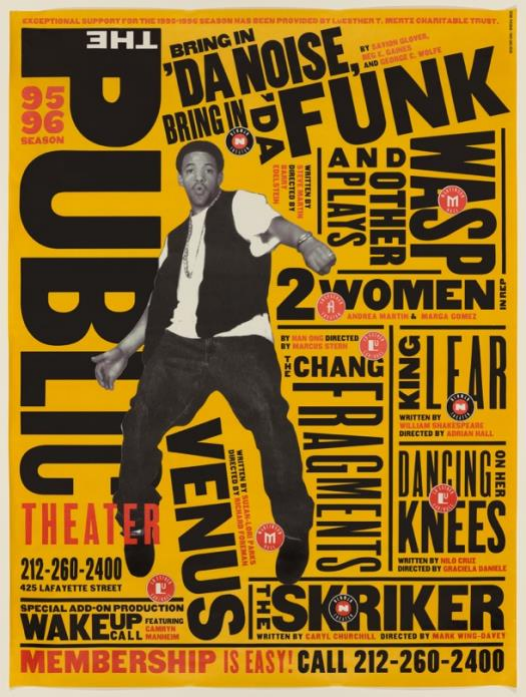

Fig 1. The Public Theater, 95-96 Season (Paula Scher, 1995)

Exploring branding has shown me how identity and emotion is deeply intertwined in the purpose of design. From brands like Supreme to designers like Paula Scher, it is evident that brand design is more than selling a product, it is creating a story. These ideas carry

across to music, where visual communication is used as an asset to illustrate physical identity and emotion across all areas of the industry.

Music

For many people, music is much more than background noise to fill empty spaces. Music is a universal language which is infused with all aspects of our lives, from setting the mood at a bar to triggering "non-physical interactions such as desires or memories" (D J Huppatz, 2019, p.101), it is a connection wired between people and emotions. For me, music has been a massive influence on my perspective of graphic design. How music is represented visually has always been an interest of mine, from album covers and merchandise to festival designs, the use of visual communication has been utilised to shape musical experiences into something physical. I've always been fascinated how graphic designers present the way that people can feel music, collaborating multiple senses into something that is visible which consumers can identify themselves with. This idea that music can be seen and not solely heard, demonstrates the emotional power of design. In a similar way that a song can remind us of specific memories or feelings, visual elements like stage graphics, music videos, or album covers can set a scene which connects the consumer with the music in a deeper way. So, it begs the question, how can something visual capture the essence of rhythm, emotion or genre?

As already mentioned, music creates spaces, communities, and feeling, with design being a leading role in how this is achieved. Scholar Sarah Thornton supports this idea in her book *Club Cultures* (1995), which investigates how clubs create a new reality for music lovers. This theory aligns with festivals as well, with both music scenes being a

“subcultural capital,” this supports the idea that scenes like festivals and clubs invest in their visual identities to connect people to the music through style, space, and culture. Sarah Thornton’s concept is an interesting perspective as it helps us understand why festivals are designed so intentionally, everything from the branding and stage layouts to signposting and wristbands must be meticulously thought out. This is because, these visuals signal the kind of audience the festival is for and the experience it promises.

With majority of festival attendees being young adults, it’s important that music related branding is designed in synchronisation with the change in music culture “in order to appeal to an ever-shifting market of youth” (Thornton, 1995, p.90).

Fig 2. Coachella Festival (Rich Fury, 2019)

Fig 3. Coachella Line-Up (Coachella, 2025)

This idea of design becoming a cultural signifier is evident when examining how real-world festivals create their identities. Coachella is a great example of a festival which has been curated to fit a certain demographic. From the photo inducing art installations (fig. 2) to the trendy promotional materials featuring famous “pastels and palm trees” (Branding Los Angeles, 2018) (fig. 3), Coachella isn’t only aesthetically pleasing, it is a statement. The festival communicates exclusivity, popularity, and trend-consciousness, which attracts an audience of young people heavily engaged in social media, who align themselves with the festival’s ethos. The space in which the festival takes place has clearly been constructed to cultivate style, atmosphere and belonging, which supports Thornton’s (1995) idea of music venues becoming a “scene” which elevates the musical experience.

Fig 4. Glastonbury Festival (Dave J Hogan, 2022)

On the contrary, Glastonbury Festival demonstrates a sense of authenticity through its grassroots inspired visual identity. Being a long running festival in the UK, Glastonbury's identity has maintained an eclectic and vintage look, featuring hand painted signage, recycled art installations and unusual stage areas (fig. 4). This festival "has attempted to maintain its non-commercial roots" (Flinn and Frew, 2013, p. 421) to preserve its long history as an event built upon counterculture. The evidence of Glastonbury rejecting modernity and polished branding for authenticity is why it is still successful. Similarly to Coachella, Glastonbury Festival exemplifies how design is used not just as a function, but as an important tool to communicate values and identity which resonates with the audience.

Comparing the two festivals, it shows how graphic design has become a bridge between music and the audience, constructing a sense of identity and belonging, through visual elements. Using Thornton's (1995) ideas, we can begin to see design not as decoration but infrastructure in the music industry.

Streetwear

Streetwear has never been just about clothing. Similarly to music, this "contemporary look" (Shukurova, 2018, p.17) acts as a visual language for identity, societal movements, and even rebellion. It is for many people like me, a way to express yourself which allows you to use a form of fashion to represent personality. Originally emerging from subcultures like hip-hop, skateboarding, and punk fashion in the 1980s/90s, streetwear has now transformed into a worldwide interest which still maintains its original codes of authenticity and individuality. These cultures which streetwear represents have always had strong visual identities, and streetwear reflects this by embodying personal belonging and beliefs. For many young people, wearing certain brands isn't about the fashion or popularity, it is a form of social communication. Similarly to wearing your local football team's shirt, representing a home grown brand holds a stronger connection within the local communities. Graphic design plays a huge role in how streetwear brands show their individuality, with logos, typography, and unique illustrations becoming tools for signalling "a combination of attitudes, aesthetics and activities that binds a group of people with similar interests together" (Vogel, 2007, p.9). Furthermore, this point is supported by Dick Hebdige's theory in his

book *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979), which states styles engaged with subcultures are “pregnant with significance” (Hebdige, 1979, p.18). This statement gives a great perspective as to how visual elements in streetwear aren’t just aesthetic materials, but in fact symbolic codes of identity which connect with the audience. Streetwear bands such as Stussy and Palace use this idea, to create brand dynamics which are unique and authentic. Using bold recognisable designs, the brands align themselves with certain cultures which builds emotional connections with people.

One notable area of streetwear which is very popular amongst brands, is the recycling of trends. As mentioned before, streetwear is heavily influenced by subcultures like retro sportswear, skateboarding, and rave culture, and these nostalgic influences are commonly reframed into a new, marketable way. Stüssy is a brand which demonstrates a clear example of recycling aesthetics. Founded in the early 1980s, Stüssy blended surf and hip-hop culture to create something that has authenticity and personality. Even today, Stüssy has continued to keep to its original aesthetics by recycling styles from their own brand archives which in return continues to revitalise the vintage and retro style which is desired by the new generations. This method strengthens brand identity and consumer connection by offering more than clothing, it offers a sense of historical significance within fashion cultures.

Contrary to this, some believe that streetwear is beginning to lose its authenticity. The original messages of rebellion and individuality has begun to be overlooked, this is due the rise of “*hypebeast*” culture. This term describes individuals who chases clothing drops and collaborations “to showcase their wealth, connections, and social status”

(SpeakingofStyle, 2019). These people tend to value the brand on their prestige rather than its cultural roots. Hypebeast culture has begun to shift the focus of streetwear from self-expression to status driven consumption, and some streetwear brands like Supreme have bought into this culture which has tarnished their recognition, as "*hypebeast*" culture ruins the authenticity of brands who were built on subcultures. This example relates back to Naomi Klein's theory in *No Logo* (1999) which suggests branding is more important than the product's authenticity, demonstrating that graphic design has become a tool in fashion for manufacturing identity through visual desirability rather than promoting pure cultural expression.

Conclusion

In conclusion, graphic design in streetwear has both positive and negative impacts. It fosters the opportunity for creativity, community and authenticity. However, it also has potential to commodify culture and turn authentic brands into a marketable product.

To conclude the proposal, the key words branding, music, and streetwear all explore individual and distinct areas of design, yet they intersect in their collided ability to shape identity and influence culture in design. Branding focuses more on creating emotional connections and loyalty within communities, which was demonstrated by Supreme, where design sells not only a product, but a lifestyle. Music design demonstrated how through festival visuals and branding can transform sound into a visual experience, which strengthens the connection with their audiences. Finally,

streetwear which is a collaboration of fashion and subculture, uses design to shape youth identity which turns clothing into a symbol of authenticity and personality.

The key words I chose differ in their structure as branding is more commercial and corporate, while music and streetwear are tied to youth culture and identity in design. However, all the keywords overlap in their connection to build and communicate identity. Each areas gives insight as to how visual communication promotes belonging, community, and status.

The relationship between the three key words all point to the role of design in shaping cultural trends and consumer behaviours. This leads me to consider the potential area of study for next year: How the branding of music and streetwear contributes to the shaping of global cultural trends. I plan to explore how visual communication connects these areas and understand the role of a graphic designer in building communities.

So, considering all I have covered in this proposal, the final question is: How does the branding of music and streetwear contribute to the shaping of global cultural trends?

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Figures

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Fig 3: Coachella. (2025), Coachella Line-Up, Available at: https://www.brandvm.com/post/coachella-2025-marketing-details-success

Fig 4: Hogan, D,J. (2022) Glastonbury Festival, Available at: https://www.somersetlive.co.uk/whats-on/music-nightlife/glastonbury-festival-long-term-future-8311801