

Analysis of 50 years of hit songs yields tips for advertisers

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Marketing researchers found specific themes in hit songs that resonate with audiences, highlighting the importance of emotional content. Credit: Marc Hall, North Carolina State University

Researchers from North Carolina State University have analyzed 50 years' worth of hit songs to identify key themes that marketing professionals can use to craft advertisements that will resonate with audiences.

"People are exposed to a barrage of advertisements and they often respond by tuning out those advertisements. We wanted to see what we could learn from hit songs to help advertisers break through all that clutter," says Dr. David Henard, a professor of marketing at NC State and lead author of a paper describing the research. "We also wanted to see if there were specific themes that could help companies engage with [consumers](#) in a positive way via [social media](#)."

"Our work shows that there is a limited range of widely accepted themes that get at the heart of human experience and resonate with a large and diverse population of consumers," Henard says. "We're not saying that every marketing effort should center on one or more of these themes, but the implication is that efforts incorporating these themes will be more successful than efforts that don't."

The researchers began by compiling a list of every song that hit No. 1 on Billboard magazine's "Hot 100" song list between January 1960 and December 2009. The tracks ranged from "El Paso" by Marty Robbins on Jan. 4 and 11 in 1960 to "Empire State of Mind" by Jay-Z and Alicia Keys in the last five weeks of 2009.

The researchers used computer programs to run textual analysis of the lyrics for all of those songs and analyzed the results to identify key themes.

The researchers identified 12 key themes, and related terms, that came up most often in the hit songs. These themes are loss, desire, aspiration, breakup, pain, inspiration, nostalgia, rebellion, jaded, desperation, escapism and confusion. But while these themes are common across the 50-year study period, the most prominent themes have varied over time. "Rebellion," a prominent theme in the '60s and '70s, did not break the top 10 in the '80s – and was in the middle of the pack in the '90s and '00s. The themes of "desperation" and "inspirational" leapt to the top of

the list in the '00s for the first time – possibly, Henard notes, due to the cultural effects of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

"These themes overwhelmingly reflect emotional content, rather than rational content," Henard says. "It reinforces the idea that communications centered on emotional themes will have mass audience appeal. Hit songs reflect what consumers respond to, and that's information that advertisers can use to craft messages that will capture people's attention."

More information: The paper, "All You Need is Love? Communication Insights from Pop Music's Number-One Hits," is forthcoming from the *Journal of Advertising Research*: davidhenard.com/Landing_Page/C...o_Research_files/JAR%2054%281%29.pdf . [DOI: 10.2501/JAR-54-1-000-000](https://doi.org/10.2501/JAR-54-1-000-000)

Abstract

In response to calls for further investigation on the role of music and advertising, the authors of the current study analyzed popular music's most successful songs over a 50-year period (1960 to 2009). The current paper uses a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches to uncover communication themes from nearly 1,000 songs that best resonated with mass audiences. The study identifies 12 communication themes and finds that they are used repeatedly over time; are largely emotional in nature; appear congruent with contemporary societal and environmental influences; and help predict a song's chances of commercial success. The results provide advertising professionals with a repertoire of themes for consideration in advertising and other marketing communications for mass audiences.

Provided by North Carolina State University

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