

# STREAMED, SHARED, LIKED: POP MUSICIANS, PERSONAS, AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN TRANSMEDIA

STEFFEN JUST  
UNIVERSITY OF BONN

PASCAL RUDOLPH  
UNIVERSITY OF COLOGNE, UNIVERSITY OF POTSDAM & NUREMBERG UNIVERSITY OF MUSIC

## MUSICAL PERSONAS IN TRANSMEDIA WORLDS

The performance, marketing, and staging of pop musicians are intricately intertwined with the creation of images and personas across a wide variety of media platforms. Whether on TikTok, Instagram, in film, on television, on music streaming and (live) video platforms, (micro)blogs, or in magazines, 21<sup>st</sup> century popular music makes use of a densely saturated landscape of media genres and formats that facilitate this phenomenon. The interconnectivity of today's media through the internet and digital devices arguably binds these diverse media formats closer together than ever before. Consequently, pop musicians frequently appear or are heard across multiple genres or formats. Undoubtedly, cross-media marketing and staging of musicians have been integral to the modern star system since the first half of the twentieth century (Dyer 1979), but the connectivity inherent in today's digital media has imparted a new dimension to these processes. Contemporary media and music scholars discuss this development under the term "transmedia" (Jenkins 2006; Ryan & Thon 2014; Ryan 2015; Thon 2016; Boni 2017; Schiller 2018; Summers 2018; Burns 2019; Freeman & Rampazzo Gambarato 2019; Hansen 2019; Mendes & Perrott 2019; Chaplin 2020; Tosca & Klastrop 2020; Vernallis, Rogers & Perrott 2020; Watson 2022; Dalby & Freeman 2024).

The use of the prefix "trans" is intended to underscore the interconnectedness and fluidity of contemporary media. In detail, however, its meanings fluctuate in various directions. A closer examination of the field of transmedia studies reveals that the concept of "transmediality" is approached through various disciplinary lenses, leading to a situation where "the very definition of transmediality might remain decidedly in flux, meaning different things to different people at different times" (Freeman & Rampazzo Gambarato 2019, p. 2). In the realm of music research, transmedia is similarly broadly defined, but as Paola Brembilla argues, a "key requirement for music to be transmedia is that a music project must become a spreadable concept" (Brembilla 2019, p. 83), allowing the music project (such as an album, a song, a music video, or a persona) to operate across multiple media formats and platforms. In this Special Issue, we adopt this broad and inclusive conceptualization of transmedia as a general phenomenon involving the crossing of boundaries between conventionally distinct media. Transmedial phenomena emerge when multiple media contents converge within a common frame of reference. In popular culture, songs or personas frequently establish such a frame. As the individual contributions to this Special Issue demonstrate, transmediality may be better understood as a method rather than a theory, specifically as a perspective that looks at the

connections between different media artifacts while acknowledging their unique media characteristics.

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, musicians crafted their images and personas across various audiovisual media. They might have featured in films, on radio broadcasts, on records, on television, whilst also gracing the pages of magazines and other print media. However, the development of their images and personas did not necessarily involve cohesive methods of storytelling, marketing, or world-building. Transitions between these different media platforms were often abrupt, and marked by distinct boundaries. Transmedia theory asserts that these boundaries between different media have become increasingly permeable, affecting both the production and reception sides of media cultures. Platforms like YouTube, Spotify, Instagram, and TikTok are typically just a click or tap away from each other since they can be accessed on the same digital devices such as smartphones, smart TVs, tablets, and laptops. For media producers or content creators, moving between different media platforms, products, and applications has become a fundamental and sometimes obligatory practice to succeed in the internet's attention economy. Media users, in turn, derive pleasure from navigating through diverse and seemingly endless streams of digital content, often closely interconnected with one another via hyperlinks, hashtags, or feeds. It is important to note that transmedia effects are not limited to digital platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok; rather, "new" digital media also influence "old" media and vice versa (Evans 2015). Given that all types of audiovisual media in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, including traditional television and magazines, are interconnected, transmediality emerges as a significant analytical concept and a valuable heuristic.

In transmedia contexts, it is often challenging to pinpoint where meanings, contents, and forms of specific pop cultural products first originated, or as Henry Jenkins puts it: transmedia has no "single source" (Jenkins 2007). Because transmediality flourishes in a (hyper)connected world or "networked society", the emergence of meanings, contents, and forms, including personas and star images, cannot be attributed to one specific origin. From a historical perspective, the evolution of such transmedia staging might be described as a mix of technological and cultural transformations. Since the 1980s, transmedia phenomena have shaped the media-saturated postmodern pop culture. A notable example is Madonna, who reproduced her music videos during her live tours, merging the TV screen with the concert stage (Auslander 2008, p. 34). With this in mind, transmedia staging and performance should not be solely viewed as an expression of the "digital age", although on a technological level, digital media have certainly facilitated the spotlighting of transmedia effects. It could even be argued that transmedia effects are inherently "built" into the architectures and interfaces of digital media. Audiovisual web platforms and the devices used by audiences and creators to navigate them enable and amplify modes of media perception that are constantly evolving: they have no clear beginning or end. Practices of browsing through social media and the internet generally lack a uniform route. Instead, these practices are shaped through various hyperlinks, hashtags, memes, clips, texts, images, and sounds, presenting a world abundant with references. Each encountered reference has the potential to pave a new path. This mix of cultural and technological ingredients has inspired scholars in recent decades to increasingly draw on concepts related to transmedia.

This Special Issue aims to scrutinize these assumptions by examining various transmedia contexts to elucidate how the transmedia staging of personas and star images operates and how it impacts media audiences. The articles delve into specific cases of contemporary pop culture and artists, exploring the phenomena that unfold when musicians appear in Hollywood movies, take on avatars in video games, or act and perform in clips on YouTube or TikTok. How can the relationships and dynamics between different audiovisual

media products be comprehended? How do transmedia performances in a TV show, a movie, on YouTube, or in a TikTok clip differ from one another? The authors demonstrate how the two pivotal concepts of persona and image can serve as innovative lenses through which to understand the central dynamics and processes of transmedia. By contextualizing their findings within broader cultural and social issues, the authors also reflect on how the exploration of pop personas and star images in transmedia realms offers valuable insights into the construction and negotiation of cultural identities, as well as the role of affect, meaning, power, and desire in contemporary society.

## IN THIS ISSUE

The Special Issue commences with Kai Arne Hansen's contribution, which combines transmedia narratology and musicology. Through an examination of Justin Bieber, Hansen explores pop personas as continually reconstructed and renegotiated entities. According to Hansen, this process is transmedial, involving materials such as music videos, interviews, promotions, and social media posts. To illuminate these transformations, he introduces the concept of a "personal storyworld", characterizing it as "expansive networks of interrelated narrative and aesthetic elements that are generated through and across multiple points of contact between artists and audiences" (in this issue, p. 8). As a transmedial phenomenon, these storyworlds emerge when numerous texts from different media converge within a unified frame of reference. Using this concept, Hansen analyses how Justin Bieber's past was leveraged during the release of his album *Justice* (2021) to reshape the present, thereby demonstrating how pop personas are shaped through various cultural artifacts, discourses, and narratives.

While Hansen explores the comprehensive array of artifacts contributing to a pop persona, Pascal Rudolph sheds light on the interplay between music, cinema, and artists' on-screen personas. Due to their off-screen musical persona, pop musicians in narrative cinema frequently evoke a pronounced transmedial network. Rudolph analyses the distinctions between film acting and musical performance while exploring the defining characteristics of pop musicians' performances within the narrative cinema context. Drawing upon ideas from performance studies, media studies, literary studies, and film studies, Rudolph introduces the novel concepts of "metaperformance" and "intramedial transmediality". "Metaperformance" refers to the doubling of the act of performance, whereas "intramedial transmediality" is characterized by the coexistence of diverse media texts within a single media text. In comparison to film actors, music stars in films often engage in metaperformances, embodying not only fictional characters but also performing their "real" musical persona within them. Through the examination of pop performances in three films – The Beatles in Richard Lester's *Help!* (1965), the Spice Girls in Bob Spiers's *Spice World* (1997), and Ed Sheeran in Danny Boyle's *Yesterday* (2019) – Rudolph's article not only provides an analytical toolkit but also presents distinct case studies showcasing the potential of his analytical concepts.

Transitioning from film to video game culture, Andra Ivănescu explores the virtual pop group K/DA in the next contribution. Comprising four characters from the world's largest esports game, *League of Legends*, this girl group is a creation of game developer Riot Games, which has established a complex transmedia ecosystem around this multiplayer online game. This ecosystem includes a TV series, webcomics, additional games, and music. Notably, K/DA's virtual band members performed at the *League of Legends* World Championship Finals in 2018. Ivănescu illustrates how K/DA draws significant inspiration from K-pop girl bands such as Blackpink. Her analysis of the opening ceremony unveils a complex interplay of performers, personas, and characters, where fictional figures perform alongside real performers. By critically examining the relationship between virtual stars and the real performers behind their personas, Ivănescu raises concerns about the commercial and political interests of transnational corporations such as Riot Games and Tencent, which wield control over these virtual stars and influencers.

Rudolph and Ivănescu concentrate on pop stars within specific media contexts, such as narrative cinema and video games. In contrast, Christoph Jacke adopts a broader perspective. According to Jacke, stars “cannot be viewed in isolation but are always the focus of different highly complex transmedia systems of reference” (in this issue, p. 64). In his article, he delves into transmedia stardom in pop music culture by developing a typology of different types of popular music and media culture personalities: “stars” who achieve economic success, “anti-stars” who lack economic success and challenge existing values, and “anti-star stars” who achieve economic success despite violating societal norms. His article illustrates how celebrities can be understood as “seismographs” of socio-cultural change.

Barbara Hornberger shifts the focus to the transformative impacts of “new” digital media on “old” established genres and formats. In her article on the German 2021 ESC participant Jendrik Sigwart, she discusses how contemporary television shows attempt to integrate or adapt to aesthetics and formats that have flourished on the internet, particularly on social media and video platforms. However, as Hornberger elucidates, in Sigwart’s case, the transition from TikTok to television encountered difficulties. His TikTok video clip aesthetics – and thus his TikTok persona – did not seamlessly translate to the ESC stage. She argues that the connectivity of today’s media does not guarantee smooth transitions between different media platforms and/or formats. Transmedia transitions can also serve as “potential breaking points” (in this issue, p. 82). Thus, transmedia effects do not occur spontaneously. To be successful, they must be subject to meticulously crafted strategies.

These strategies are investigated in the article by Christofer Jost. In his case study on YouTube drummers, Jost explores the phenomenon of drum performances to playback versions of well-known songs. Through their play-along practices – which are not traditional song covers but rather re-enactments or imitations of historical drumming styles – YouTube drummers have established a popular format that typifies the internet’s proliferation of user-generated audiovisual content. By closely examining the case of German YouTube drummer Sina Doehring, who curates the channel “sina drums”, Jost illustrates how persona construction within the YouTube microcosm of drumming channels is shaped by distinct media strategies in terms of “expertise and self-presentation”, “repertoire”, and “audiovisual production”. These strategies establish specific rules for authenticating oneself as a YouTube drummer. Jost contends that, unlike YouTube influencers or other non-music-related YouTube personalities, YouTube drummers serve as musical intermediaries and experts who specialize in curating and presenting materials from the history of popular music to a broader audience. By performing and re-enacting the songs and styles of renowned drummers, they publicly embody and mediate specific forms of knowledge about popular music.

The final article of this Special Issue explores how transmediality can have specific effects on entire genres and the types of stars represented within these genres. Investigating pop-punk, Nicolas Ruth and Christoph Jacke trace the evolution of this genre from the 1990s to the 2020s to demonstrate how the industry and marketing of pop-punk have increasingly shifted media attention from bands to solo artists. While bands such as Green Day or Blink-182 dominated the genre in the 1990s, social media platforms such as Instagram or TikTok have now propelled solo artists like Machine Gun Kelly and Youngblud into the spotlight. Ruth and Jacke observe that solo artists significantly benefit from the rise of newer internet platforms and cultures, as social media logics streamline the focus on individuals. The attention economies of Instagram and TikTok enable individual stars to establish direct connections with their audiences, which explains the recent upsurge of solo acts in pop-punk. In contrast to bands, solo artists have the advantage of capitalizing on the desire of social media users to constantly and directly engage with their idols.

With its seven contributions, this Special Issue aims to address a gap in existing scholarship. It builds upon previous studies that have analysed the construction of personas and images in popular music (Meyers 2009; Fairchild & Marshall 2019; Auslander 2021) and

extends these analyses through a transmedia perspective. To date, there has been limited effort in popular music and (trans)media studies to integrate transmediality with persona/image construction in (popular) music. By bringing together multiple perspectives from various authors, we hope this Special Issue serves as an insightful resource for those interested in gaining an overview of specific research paradigms, identifying differences, and drawing connections between different cases and approaches. Through combining persona studies, popular music studies, and transmedia studies, we also aim to contribute to the establishment of new epistemic focal points for future research in related directions.

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