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St. Vincent’s “Equal-Opportunity” Guitar

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St. Vincent’s “equal-opportunity” guitar

By Lexi Foldenauer, Public Relations J480, Senior Seminar, Winter 2017
Nominated by: Brian J. Bowe

To add to her dynamic career, St. Vincent (Annie Clark) released a customized signature guitar in 2016, in collaboration with legendary California-based instrument manufacturer Ernie Ball Music Man. Clark is the first female musician to release her own customized signature electric guitar that she had a lead role in designing and engineering. She recently released 4 additional colors, complementing the color scheme of her latest album, Mass Education.


Main claim: Ernie Ball Music Man’s Signature St. Vincent guitar filled a need for an inclusive guitar in the music industry and their promotional materials reflected this.

In what ways did Ernie Ball music man use a third-wave feminist framework in its media materials surrounding the release of St. Vincent’s guitar?

Inquiry question:

SUB-CLAIMS

● Original engineering of the electric guitar historically excluded women, and also did not account for the female body or smaller physical frames.

● “Technophallus” describes the phallic association with the electric guitar that is signified through its performative nature. Think Jimi Hendrix, David Bowie, and Prince.

● The term “guitar hero” has mostly been associated with men, and in semiotics is considered a cultural ideology.

● Discussing female guitarists under the umbrella of “women in music” puts them in an ‘othered’ category

Main claim: Ernie Ball Music Man’s Signature St. Vincent guitar filled a need for an inclusive guitar and their promotional videos/text on Ernie Ball’s St. Vincent’s guitar are filled a need for a gender-inclusive guitar and their promotional videos reflected this.

SUB-CLAIMS

Promotional videos/text on St. Vincent’s guitar filled a need for a gender-inclusive guitar and their promotional videos reflected this.

Main claim: Ernie Ball Music Man’s Signature St. Vincent guitar filled a need for an inclusive guitar in the music industry and their promotional materials reflected this.

Sub-questions:

1.) Positive representation

2.) Embraces multiplicity and contradiction

3.) Advocates a pro-feminist stance

4.) Embraces multiple femininities

Population of content: 18 promotional videos/text on Ernie Ball Music Man’s website. Only 5 of the videos could be coded for content analysis. The other 13 videos only denoted and talked about the design and technical features of the guitar.

Qualitative content analysis is coded by inferred and explicit communication.

Coding strategy:

- What does this indicate for the cultural ideology surrounding the electric guitar?

Semiotics & feminist theory in advertising

Factors meeting third-wave feminist criteria:

1.) Positive representation

Overall implication: St. Vincent was in charge of disseminating the desired message around her intent for inclusivity with the guitar. Her musical talent and expert technical knowledge was placed at the forefront of the campaign. Less focus on her sex appeal and performative persona & more focus on connection with the instrument and creative sound.

2.) Embraces multiplicity and contradictions

Overall implication: The predominance of male idols mentioned and used in the inspiration for design/making of the various guitar models signifies the ways in which St. Vincent applies masculine influence with her own feminine/queer influence to create a unique instrument. This is an example of multiplicity.

3.) Advocates a pro-feminist stance

Overall implication: Rejects stereotype of female guitarists using sexuality to market themselves. St. Vincent asserts her sexuality in the Guitar World interview in a way that signals asserting the collective power for the female (or non-binary) musician.

4.) Embraces multiple femininities

Overall implication - The discussion of femininity in the interview presents the heteronormative cultural ideology surrounding what a “woman’s guitar” is perceived as, and the way in which the design features are implemented and discussed creates space for femininity to co-exist in a male-dominated landscape. St. Vincent “debunked” the myth.

Findings:

Third-wave feminist criteria in advertising:

1.) Promotes positive representations of women and feminism
2.) Embraces multiplicity and contradiction
3.) Advocates a pro-feminist stance
4.) Embraces multiple femininities

Semiotics & feminist theory in advertising

Content analysis in semiotics(stokes):

Content analysis (semiotics) (2013)

"Technological "translations" of system of belief - cultural meaning

Subcategories:

- mention/use of term “women in music”
- mention/use of term guitar heroes (How does that reflect the masculinized identity of the guitar? How does St. Vincent challenge the implicit ideologies through verbal & visual communication?)

Findings:

Overall implication:

St. Vincent “debunked” the myth.