Enjoying Virgin’s V festival

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Abstract

This article examines Virgin’s V festival as a mediated brandscape in which live music, mobile media practices and brand building strategies converge. The V festival is a social space in which Virgin engage the audience in the co-creation of the Virgin brand. Virgin deploy the performance of live music as an authentic cultural ritual around which mediated and social brand building practices unfold. Audience members take a range of savvy and cynical stances toward the space and the rhetorical claims about interactivity and participation that Virgin make.

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The V festival is a live popular music festival run by Virgin Mobile (and other corporate partners) in the United Kingdom, USA, Australia and other nations. This article examines the V festival in Australia, which Virgin Mobile has run since 2007.

Mobile phones are a significant brand building device. They translate social life into branded texts. To understand this compulsive mediation of social life we must emplace mobile phones within the economy of the brandscape. In this paper I examine how mobiles are interwoven with people’s experience of popular music culture and corporate branding. To this end, I engage three significant and interconnected issues.

Firstly, the V festival represents a contemporary intersection of live music and mediation. This intersection heightens the need for analysis of how the live performance is ideologically constructed as the authentic core of popular music culture. In particular, I focus on the interconnected processes of branding, performance of live music and device use. The mediation of the live, I argue, takes place in brandscapes (Sherry 1998, Thompson and Arsel 2004, Goldman and Papson 2006). Brandscapes refer to experiential spaces where cultural practices craft brands and situate them within webs of meaning.
Secondly, I examine the way the V festival audience members engage with the festival and rhetorical claims it presents. Audience members use devices like mobile phones and digital cameras to mediate their live experiences. These practices of mediation contribute to the construction of the Virgin brand and a deeper interconnectedness between communications devices, mediation and the experience of live music. I record audience members’ perceptions of the Virgin brand and live music to illustrate how they negotiate and present their subject positions in terms of live music and the brandscape.

Thirdly, I consider how Virgin construct the V festival as a brandscape that uses the performance of live music to authenticate the Virgin brand and engage the audience in the construction of brands as reflexive mobile media objects.

The V festival is an important site to study because it represents an intersection between branding, popular music and communication devices like mobile phones and digital cameras. In this intersection we can examine the way the live is mediated in order to construct discourses of authenticity, and social responsibility that build valuable brands. I situate this examination within the context of the history of live music and emerging critical perspectives on branding (Arvidsson 2005, 2006; Auslander 1999; Frith 2007; Gracyk 1996; Lury 2004), and the construction of brands within the brandscapes of popular culture (Goldman and Papson 2006; Moor 2003; Sherry 1998; Thompson and Arsel 2004). The V festival is a space where both popular music and brands are constructed symbiotically to produce discourses of capital that are mobile and reflexive. These discourses present savvy rhetorical claims to authenticity, social responsibility and empowerment, that attempt to legitimise corporate brands as interwoven with authentic cultural experiences. I avoid the simple critique that brands feed off, poach or coopt some essential authentic essence, and instead consider the way that brands and notions of authenticity are constructed simultaneously as an ideological effect of capital (Auslander 1999, Frith 2007, Holt 2006).

This study of the V festival is drawn from a broader research project examining the use of popular music culture in the construction of corporate brands (Author 2007). I employ participant observation, textual analysis and interviews in a critical ethnographic approach (Alvesson 2000; Lalander 2003; Moor 2003; Thompson and Arsel 2004). In this article I draw on participant observation fieldwork at the V festival in 2007 and 2008, textual analysis of the V festival screens, artefacts, media and website, and interviews with V festival audience members. In the week following the festival I dialogued, via email, with ten people who had attended the V festival. I used their perceptions and impressions of the festival to
inform my own interpretations of the space. Through this process I am able to map out a variety of interpretive stances being taken toward the V festival brandscape. Brands produced within traditional mass media channels offer linear brand monologues. In contrast, the brandscape does not necessarily produce monolithic brand meanings; rather, it manages and harnesses a variety of interpretations and appropriations constructed by its subjects. This variety of interpretations makes the brand mobile, flexible, authentic, and consequently, more valuable (Arvidsson 2005; Goldman and Papson 2006; Lury 2004; Thompson and Arsel 2004; Sherry 1998).

**Live music and the ideology of authenticity**

The V festival embodies the mutual relationship between the live and the mediated in the use of amplification, lights, and video screens; and also, by encouraging the audience to use their mobile phones and cameras to capture content and distribute it through communication networks. This use of devices to mediate the live event in multiple forms will be examined in the next section, before examining these practices though, I will examine how the ‘authentic’ core of the V festival is located in ‘this’, ‘that’ and the ‘other’ stage. The performance of music on stage, I contend, is the key act from which discourses of authenticity, social responsibility and empowerment germinate.

Philip Auslander (1999), in his examination of ‘liveness’ within mediated culture unpacks the ‘common assumption that the live event is ‘real’ and that mediatised events are… somehow artificial reproductions of the real’ (Auslander 1999: 3). ‘Liveness’ is a ‘product of media technologies’ (Auslander 1999: 24). The audience can only ever experience the live or real performance via the mediatised. The live cannot remain outside of the ideologies of capital, even if the audience act ‘as if’ it does. Within popular music culture authenticity is ‘performative’ and consequently only live performance can ‘certify it’ (Auslander 1999: 72-76).

Frith (2007), like Auslander (1999), explains how the aesthetics of popular music operate as an ideology. Frith’s question is whether judgements of taste are ‘spurious, a way of concealing from myself and other consumers the ways in which our tastes are manipulated’. Audiences fashion an aesthetic framework, and draw on acquired cultural capital, to make distinctions about music regardless of its conditions of production. In this article, I examine how the brandscape establishes spaces where music can be made authentic in conjunction with the production of corporate brands. That is, an aesthetics is formed which functions within the sociological framework of the brandscape. In this way, even if the brandscape
cultivates forms of taste which are the effects of ‘social conditioning and commercial manipulation, people still explain them to themselves in terms of value judgments’ (Frith 2007: 259).

Participants in the brandscape don’t operate from an overt aesthetic framework of critical judgments, but rather an aesthetic framework of enjoyment, and so, critique is inflected with irony and savviness. The implicit aesthetic position alters the stance of enjoyment – do I ‘really’ enjoy it, or do I enjoy it ‘ironically’? Subjects in the brandscape, I argue, tend to mix and match between ideologies (following Ang 1985). They reflexively form themselves under either an ideology of mass culture, or a populist ideology, depending on the musical moment they are engaging with (Andrejevic 2004, Zizek 1989, 1999). To Frith then (2007: 261), studying popular music doesn’t reveal the essence of the audience’s aesthetic value, but rather demonstrates how popular music constructs the audience in the first instance. Popular music is popular not because it reflects some intrinsic, essential, aesthetic value but because it cultivates the audience’s understanding of what popular music is in the first place. The authentic then, is an eternally ungraspable, absent object. The brandscape, explored in this article through the V festival, is a particularly intense, mediated articulation or redefinition of the aesthetic standard of popular music, one that obfuscates the conditions of production by enjoining audiences to enjoy.

Frith claims that, ‘we enjoy popular music because of its use in answering questions of identity’ (Frith 2007: 264). The brandscape cultivates an aesthetic framework which uses popular music to link the discourses we use to construct our own identity with those used to construct brands. Having an authentic sense of self, becomes embedded in our investment in the brandscape. We feel a sense of ownership over the popular music we enjoy, we use it to ground ourselves socially, to construct our own identities.

As a result of investing this important aesthetic value in music, we are moved to participate in obfuscating its industrial production, its exploitative aspects, and in this study, its role in validating the brandscape. We cultivate forms of practice, interpretation and aesthetics that enable us to obfuscate the fact that music ‘reaches us via an elaborate industrial process and is tied into a complex system of money making’ (Frith 2007: 93). In the case of the brandscape this system of money making extends beyond the production of just musical commodities, to include the role these commodities play in legitimising other forms of commodity production, brand building and capital accumulation. ‘The industrialisation of music can’t be understood as something that happens to music but describes a process in which music itself is made, a process that fuses (confuses) capital, technical and music arguments’ (Frith 2007: 93).
The live music brandscape is a particular formation of communicative capitalism where the always already commodified live performance is invested with authentic meaning by the audience. The brandscape is a space that sets out to cultivate and control ‘fans’ and musicians’ ideology of art’ (Frith 2007: 278). The V festival is a new mode of music production that is historically grounded in preceding modes of music production. The V festival cultivates new forms of revenue, and responds to new audience practices, following the decline of the traditional music business and the rise of new device-centric communication practices. The V festival continues the history of constructing discourses of authenticity within always already commodified brandscapes.

The stages at the V festival serve as a quilting point which both constructs and connects the festival to the audience’s notions of authenticity and enjoyment. The action on the stage ensconces the audience in the production of brand equity and information commodities which they distribute through their peer networks and the interactive spaces of web 2.0. Nightingale (2007) observes that mobile phones ground web 2.0 within everyday life. This offers both opportunities for content creation and surveillance within previously inaccessible spaces. At the V festival, the live performance is positioned as an authentic cultural experience which the audience mediatise in a variety of ways. Understanding the centrality of live performance within the V festival brandscape enables us to examine how the Virgin brand is built in relation to live music performance and how mobile phones and digital cameras are engaged in the construction of the brand.

Nostalgia, the bittersweet longing for a former time, has two distinct inflections at the V festival. Firstly, a reverent nostalgia for bands whose influence in the development of authentic and meaningful popular culture is reserved for bands such as The Pixies, New York Dolls and Jesus and Mary Chain. Secondly, a savvy and ironic nostalgia comes into play around bands such as the Pet Shop Boys and Duran Duran who embody the excess, perceived ‘bad’ taste and hyperreality of 80s and 90s synth-pop. In each case, nostalgia serves to evoke notions of authentic and enjoyable music culture; and audiences deploy discourses of nostalgia to communicate their savvy symbolic capital within their peer network. Being able to use nostalgia ‘correctly’ illustrates a person’s understanding of the historical canon that shapes popular music. The presence of bands that evoke nostalgia at the V festival empowers peer leaders in the V festival audience to validate the festival’s claims to authenticity. The Virgin brand aligns itself with opinion leaders in popular music culture.
Regardless of whether the bands perform well, participants suggest that they enjoy seeing musicians that evoke the romantic ideal of a lost and eminently more real and enjoyable musical past. Even if their present performance doesn’t match their preconceived ideal, they tend to fill the performance in with meaning anyway. One participant explains that the older bands at the V festival, ‘are really only seen due to the hype… in their ‘hey day’ they would have been brilliant but now most people just see them because of who they are and not how they perform’. Audience members also actively reinterpret performances, filling them with ironic and savvy inflections.

Older bands can also evoke reverence and respect. While bands like Duran Duran and the Pet Shop Boys are open to savvy and ironic enjoyment, other bands like the Pixies and the New York Dolls evoke a period, politics and ideal that appears incorruptible within the brandscape of the V festival. At the 2007 V festival, seminal 1970s punk bank the New York Dolls took to stage and appeared unaware, not only of what festival they were playing, but also what city they were in (“Hello Sydney!” frontman David Johansen shouted to the Gold Coast audience). These bands are viewed as if they are still in the space within which they first created their meaning. They aren’t ‘selling out’; their values aren’t denigrated by performing at the V festival. At least, the audience don’t see them this way.

The audience view these nostalgic performances not as performances to be judged in the present moment, but to be read in relation to their ‘creation myths’. While one participant thought that the Jesus and Mary Chain were ‘disappointing’ and ‘lacked enthusiasm’ they were still ‘in awe the entire time to hear some of (their) favourite psychocandy tunes live’. Without exception audience members displayed reverence for what these bands ‘mean’ within the archive of popular music. Their meaning was so attached to a mythical musical past, that the V festival had no effect on whether their music was ‘authentic’ or not. In fact, even the bands themselves could have no impact on the interpretation of their performance as ‘authentic’. It was always-already authentic, because the audience were deploying the archive of popular music to say so. Even if these older bands show up and put on a poor performance the audience still revel in the chance to see them ‘live’.

Several audience members could connect the V festival’s interest in these bands to strategic imperatives. Virgin acquires cultural capital simply by booking these bands. The audience see Virgin as having a finely cultivated sense of taste. ‘Perhaps, Sir Richard is a fan?’ one of the audience members suggested when I asked why they thought these bands had been booked. The older bands are seen to ‘give (the festival) a sense of depth and more credibility than bands that are up and coming or having their ‘day in the sun’’. This sense of depth and
credibility draws an audience who are fundamentally interested in the music; they invest in the music with their own identities, ethics and worldview. By going to the V festival they seek to, ‘experience something that so many people talked about in the past’. Bands which evoke these complex nostalgic feelings form an incorruptible bedrock for the Virgin brand.

Authentic brands have a finely cultivated sense of taste. They both emulate and attract individuals who make finely tuned distinctions. While Virgin chooses bands that evoke strong feelings of nostalgia, they also book bands that capture the present moment. These bands contribute to the festival’s allure as one which implicitly understands both the history of popular music, and its present moment. The Virgin brand has ‘good’ taste. Audience members recognise the V festival for securing bands from overseas, ‘that don’t normally come to Australia. The Pixies, Beck, Jarvis Cocker and Smashing Pumpkins are all very rare to tour here’. All of these bands were either touring Australia for the first time ever, or the first time in many years. Some audience members make a link between the bands, the audience and the Virgin brand. ‘Virgin have good taste’ and must have ‘someone really cool on their team’ an audience member remarks. The line up builds symbolic capital by appealing to the audience’s sense of distinction (Bourdieu 1984, Frith 2007, Regev 2002, Auslander 1999).

The V festival line up is notably apolitical. While New York Dolls, Pixies and Jesus and Mary Chain, still reference musical moments (punk, indie etc.) defined by their politics, in the context of the V festival they are completely de-politicised. The V festival space is strategically formulated around enjoyment. These nostalgic bands aren’t performing to continue, or revive, the political projects that underpinned their music in the 1970s and 1980s. Rather they are performing for the enjoyment of an audience who want to display their fine sense of taste and distinction by either; reverently enjoying the performance (in the case of Pixies, New York Dolls, Jesus and Mary Chain), or by ironically enjoying it (in the case of Duran Duran or Pet Shop Boys). Bands evoke their subversive, underground or fiercely independent history as a lapsed (and therefore apolitical) authentic ideal. In contrast, all of the contemporary bands who play the festival do not come from a subversive, underground or independent background. None of the performances at the V festival fundamentally disrupt, or seek to resist, the underlying strategic logic of the space. The audience interact with these performances as a source of enjoyment, whereby they derive a sense of empowerment and authenticity.

The live performance and the audience’s enjoyment of it are the necessary ingredients for the practice of mediation. The audience mediate these performances, turning them into
information commodities that create brand value. The mobile phone (along with the digital camera) is the communications device that enables the audience to mediate social life. It is central to the experiential production of brand value. It creates modes of enjoying popular culture that simultaneously produce brand value.

**Cameras and screens**

As mobile phones, digital cameras and web 2.0 become embedded parts of youth culture, then the ideology of authenticity moves to integrate these practices into the enjoyment of popular music. In this process of mediating live music experiences, young people create information commodities as mediated texts that simultaneously construct their recollections of the event alongside the construction of the Virgin brand as a mobile media object. Devices enable audience members to mediate, capture and preserve the authentic enjoyment of their social worlds.

Mobile phones and digital cameras play a key role in the translation of live performances and social experiences into both information commodities and brand equity. These forms of device use are also entwined with the development of savvy identities. Audience members ironically refer to the narcissistic culture of ‘Myspace’ or ‘Facebook photos’, that is, ‘holding the camera out and trying to get people into the frame’. At the V festival, Virgin harness the audience’s use of mobile phones and digital cameras by encouraging audience members to take photos and make videos of themselves, the bands and the action on site. They are encouraged to place this content online in both their own and Virgin’s spaces, such as social networking and user generated content websites. Virgin also encourage the audience to send content directly to the big screens at the festival via Virgin’s ‘foto the fest’ promotion. One participant described how the use of cameras at the V festival constituted a form of advertising work, ‘with the amount of advertising around the (festival site) that is sure to be captured in a number of photos. If those photos are then shared or loaded onto Myspace it’s like product placement advertising’. By uploading content they capture at the V festival to their own social networking spaces they embed the brandscape organically within their peer networks.

Audience members create images that align their authentic enjoyment of the festival with corporate images embedded in the space (Virgin wristbands, blow up chairs, drink holders, glasses, stickers, badges, banners, screens, promotional staff and so on). Moor (2003), in her analysis of music and branding noted how the body is used as a brandscape. Virgin promotional staff distribute many artefacts which festival punters carry around the site. The
festival goers carry the brand around the site. The brand drinks, dances, takes drugs, wrestles in the mud, takes photos of itself and distributes these photos online. These artefacts move throughout the site, being carried by individuals, bounced across the audience and so on. While this creates a visual effect on site, of seeing the brand logos moving throughout the space, the effect is also visible on YouTube, Flickr, Myspace and Facebook, where festival goers upload content captured of their festival experience these branded artefacts are highly visible. The audience’s authentic experiences get labelled with brand logos. But more significantly, the brand becomes a mobile and reflexive object, taking on a life outside of the merely visual. It becomes discursively embedded within cultural practices that reach beyond the visual connotations of the brand logo. These images are arguably more authentic than advertisements. Rather than appearing to have been constructed as persuasive instrumental texts, they appear to capture natural and authentic enjoyment within branded space. Virgin’s harnessing of ‘natural’ content producing practices within web 2.0 spaces is more effective than attempting to explicitly brand or advertise within the space. Instead, the brandscape embeds and entwines itself with cultural practices that contemporary subjects find authentic.

Audience members recognise that the V festival ‘promotes user generated content where most events discourage it’. In doing so, the festival increases the ‘feeling of being involved’ for audience members, at the same time those audience members ‘take photos and videos (they) are likely to share with friends – which is free advertising for Virgin’. The brand is made mobile and reflexive by savvy and cynical audience members. Mobile and reflexive brands are more adept at moulding themselves to constantly changing social contexts where traditional advertising texts are incapable. The V festival crafts the social space as a self-governing mechanism that constructs information commodities and brand equity. At the V festival the audience goes to work producing advertisements. While they may recognise this practice as brand building, they also see it as rooted within their enjoyment of live music culture.

In the early afternoon at the 2007 V festival the ultra-hip French band Phoenix took to stage. The lead singer of Phoenix, Thomas Mars, jumped into the crowd during the performance. The crowd pushed toward him to photograph him. The main stage screens displayed images of the Phoenix singer being photographed, and then these photographs were distributed to the screens by the audience. The spectacle can be read as a metaphor for paparazzo and celebrity media culture. Audience members use their devices to capture digital content and celebrities and then feed this content into online media spaces such as the V festival screens, the V festival site, and the audience’s YouTube, Facebook, Myspace and Flickr pages. Devices are used to capture the festival atmosphere and distribute it throughout web 2.0. Using their
digital cameras and mobile phones, and gazing upon the big screens at the festival, one participant explained that the practices revolved around people ‘expressing how much fun they were having’. The lens and screen are a mechanism for capturing and mediating enjoyment. The V festival seeks to commodify enjoyment to increase its brand equity (Arvidsson 2005).

At a music festival, the stage and the bands provide the key point of reference for this capturing of enjoyment. Audience members use devices to enjoy gazing upon, and being gazed upon (Gye 2007, Chesher 2007). Chesher (2007) describes the myriad of actions music fans at a U2 concert undertake with their phones. He illustrates how phones are used to produce a ‘cinema of convenience’ (Chesher 2007: 222). The images and videos captured may be for their own personal memories, to immediately share with friends, or to upload to web 2.0. The V festival presents live music performances that the audience enjoy and find authentic, and then facilitate the mediation of these live performances using mobile phones, digital cameras and web 2.0. The live popular music festival is a strategic brandscape, where the performance of live music acts as a catalyst for the production of media texts by the audience that create the Virgin brand as a reflexive media object. Participants also use their mobile phones and digital cameras to stay in touch with friends, to network across the site, arrange meetings and distribute content to peers.

For the mainstream audience, full participation in the festival space is dependent upon not only access to the physical space, but also access to the devices and online spaces within which the audience, bands and Virgin mediate the festival experience. While the audience appear empowered to use devices, capture content and participate in the performance, this participation is contingent on them having access to these commercial spaces (Goggin 2006, Goggin and Gregg 2007). Goggin and Gregg (2007) articulate the need for research that determines the larger social, political and economic impacts of wireless communication technologies. Research that examines how participation is harnessed as a form of labour for the production of information commodities fits within this research agenda (Arvidsson 2006, Moor 2003).

**Enjoying Virgin**

As I entered the site I received an SMS from Virgin stating, ‘Rumour has it that Richard Branson is in town for V festival! Keep your eyes peeled.’ One audience member I interviewed happened to be nearby when Branson appeared on site with a harem of promo-girls dressed in shiny red kitsch nurses uniforms. The participant recalled that, ‘Richard
Branson came out handing out free ice-creams and a swarm of people mobbed him taking pictures, this gives Virgin even more promotion and money. Richard is not a silly man’.

The audience member recalls that people used their mobile phones to create mediated texts. If these texts are uploaded to social networking sites they function as information commodities or promotional texts. As the audience photographs both musicians on stage, or themselves on the Virgin site, or even Richard Branson and his promo-girls handing out ice-creams they go to work constructing the Virgin brand in flexible and mobile forms. If they aren’t already wearing Virgin wristbands, badges, ponchos, bags, or carrying blow-up Virgin balls, beds or drink holders, they could find themselves photographing Richard Brandon standing near a retro Virgin branded ice-cream van. The V festival is endowed with a certain aura by the presence of rock stars as authentic beings, be they musical artists, or rock star CEOs (as Naomi Klein (2000) labelled Branson in her manifesto). The audience, not only emulates rock stars’ behaviours, dress, and values, they also gaze upon the rock stars using digital devices to mediate the performances and convert them into information commodities. These information commodities are attached to the brand and distributed through online spaces. Brand value is created in the interactions between actors at the festival. The brandscape is a structure that cultivates cultural practices that build brands, rather than just visually clothing the space in brand logos.

The mobile phone is at the heart of translating enjoyment into information commodities and branded texts. The compulsive mediation of social life is a part of ordinary local social practices. These local practices need to be understood as embedded within an experiential brandscape. Understood in this context, we can see the mobile phone as both a device enabling new forms of social practice that invigorate participation in public life, at the same time they more directly connect everyday social practices to building brand equity and accumulating capital.

Audience members go to the V festival to experience music, not to experience Virgin. The V festival is a strategically valuable brandscape because it manages to appear authentic, ethical and ‘disinterested’ (Holt 2002). V festival participants’ comprehension of Virgin’s strategic interests does not undermine their enjoyment of the event. The performance of music that the audience perceives is authentic makes the whole event authentic. They can experience the music in ways which match their perceptions of authentic popular music culture (a band on stage, large video monitors and light shows, dancing, drinking, taking drugs, ‘getting physical’ and socialising), without the strategic mechanisms within the space disrupting them.
Virgin carefully constructs the notion that these authentic music experiences make the brandscape real. That Virgin supports and facilitates ‘authentic’ music culture.

Despite Arvidsson’s (2005) notion that the brandscape displaces experience to the ‘artificial branded plateau’ I encounter in the responses of participants the notion that the festival is more real than reality itself. The brandscape, they propose, takes authentic culture and both preserves and enhances it. The brandscape becomes a proselyte for the authentic, ‘I assume a corporation with a large budget can afford to hire better venues, more popular bands and more advertising’. Participants seek out authenticity as enjoyment, and so, the regulative or strategic aspects of the space are not interrogated. Participants who are ‘enjoined to enjoy’ (Dean 2006), appear unfazed by Virgin’s strategic intentions. In fact, some argue that the branded spaces and elements of the V festival enhance the experience.

Rather than explicitly defend romantic notions of pure and authentic music culture, V festival participants savvily and pragmatically engage with music performances ‘as if’ they are authentic within their strategic cultural contexts. To these savvy participants ‘all music experiences are commercialised anyway’. They are ‘not too concerned’ because, ‘no matter what sort of event you go to these days, there is always a corporate motive behind it’. The brandscape functions effectively as long as it does not intervene in their enjoyment of the space, ‘if they’re providing good music for a decent price in a relatively safe environment then it doesn’t really matter who runs it in my opinion’. The brandscape, they claim, doesn’t harness or coopt their experience.

These contemporary subjects cultivate ways of savvily engaging or creating authentic (and enjoyable) experiences within strategic spaces. Capital is seen to support and protect our authentic cultural experiences. As savvy subjects we are aware of capital’s strategic uses of space, but act as if these strategic mechanisms have no real consequences. Capital cultivates enjoyable experiences which audiences read as empowering, ethical and authentic. Participants don’t go to the festival ‘based on who is running it’ but based on the authentic and enjoyable musical experiences they anticipate. The ideological trick is that we implicitly act ‘as if’ (Zizek 1989) these authentic experiences precede capital, when ‘in reality’ these notions are constructed by capital in the first instance (Frith 2007, Zizek 1989).

The theoretical perspectives on the performance of live music as an ideological effect discussed at the beginning (Auslander 1999, Frith 2007, Gracyk 1996), suggest that the performance of live music is always-already commodified, but that contemporary audiences derive meaning from it nonetheless. At the V festival, we see experiential branding as a
communicative strategy that rehabilitates the live as the authentic core of mediated experiences. We witness the Virgin brand being constructed by an active audience. Their work in translating their social world into information commodities creates the Virgin brand as an authentic, empowering and socially responsible media object. They provide immaterial labour and submit to forms of surveillance that enable corporations to accumulate capital via developing brand equity (Andrejevic 2007). The performance of live music is more central to mediation, and to brand building, than ever before.

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