

From Anti-hero to Commodity: The Legacy of Kurt Cobain

Paul Ziek, Pace University, USA
Mirjana Pantic, Pace University, USA

Abstract

April 8, 2019, marked the 25th anniversary of Kurt Cobain's death. Since his suicide, Cobain's image has been immortalized in a variety of ways: there are documentaries and popular press books dedicated to his life and death, there is a park in Aberdeen, Washington, named after him, his personal paintings are part of a traveling art show and his handwriting is available as a downloadable font. Moreover, dozens of retailers sell merchandise featuring him and his band, Nirvana. Although a large amount of academic literature has been written on Kurt Cobain and the music he created, there is still a gap: little to no work investigates his rise to celebrity status. To fill in the gap in academic knowledge, the current paper considers the legacy of Kurt Cobain at the silver anniversary of his death. It does so by utilizing a constitutive view of communication to explain how the narratives surrounding Kurt Cobain create both a rise in his fandom as well as the commodification of his reputation as an antihero.

Keywords: antihero, Cobain, grunge, Kurt Cobain, music, Nirvana, rock music

Introduction

In the summer of 2017, on a nondescript rack in the Paramus, New Jersey location of the popular American store Five Below, sat approximately a half dozen hats with the iconic Nirvana “smiley face” logo. The drooling, cross-out eyed logo was designed by Kurt Cobain for the 1991 release party of “Nevermind.” That was the album that marked the entry of Nirvana and the grunge subculture into the mainstream (Kramer, 2016). Although the meaning of the logo is not entirely clear, it has become synonymous with the band in general and the lore of Cobain in particular. Some of the unsubstantiated theories behind the logo include it being an ode to the marquee of a now-defunct gentlemen’s club in downtown Seattle, Cobain’s artistic interpretation of Guns N’ Roses’ lead vocalist Axl Rose, and a representation of the symbol for “The Acid House.” The conjecture behind the logo fits well with the narrative of Kurt Cobain: he was a complex individual, an artist that rejected the mainstream, and a musician that was reluctantly chosen as the “voice of Generation X.”

April 8, 2019, marked the 25th anniversary of Cobain’s death. Since his suicide, Cobain has become the quintessential celebrity in that the public’s fascination with him exceeds both his talents as either artist or musician. Beyond the fact that Nirvana’s music is played on alternative and classic rock stations around the world, Cobain’s image has been immortalized in a variety of other ways: he has a park in Aberdeen, Washington, named after him, his personal paintings are part of a traveling art show, and his handwriting is available as a downloadable font. Moreover, dozens of retailers sell Nirvana and Cobain merchandise, including Target, 7/11 and ETSY, to name a few. Yet, of all these retailers, Five Below is the most interesting. As a publicly traded company, Five Below targets “the teen and pre-teen customer” by identifying and responding to mainstream styles and crazes; in essence, the retailer is promoting a band that last played decades before their customers were born as “trend-right” (“Five Below Partners With Charities to Give Back,” 2018, para. 5).

Over the years, dozens of popular press books, magazine articles, documentaries and dramatized films have detailed Cobain’s life. Some of the more popular topics involve conspiracies about his death, his impact on Generation X, and the issues surrounding his estate. Academics have also followed suit and written about a variety of subjects relative to Cobain. Although there has been a considerable amount of work on Cobain and the music he created, there is a gap in the literature: little to no work investigates the rise in Cobain’s celebrity status. Academic literature on Cobain falls into two general areas: the meaning of his lyrics and examinations into the impact of his suicide. In addition, this work is predominantly cross-sectional in that very little exists within the past five years. In other words, no recent work has explored the current state of his celebrity and how it came to be. Even though the study of music has been around for decades, the study of individuals is a relatively new phenomenon. Therefore, the purpose of the current paper is to consider the legacy of Kurt Cobain in the year of the silver anniversary of his death.

Literature Review

There are two main threads of literature dedicated to Cobain. The first thread revolves around the lyrics he wrote and the music he created with Nirvana. Here, the arc of the literature is rooted in the academic fields of music, popular culture, media, and literature. The concepts and viewpoints covered in this first arc draw heavily on the imagery and performance style of his art. The second thread explores the impact of his death and suicide. This second thread takes a very different path to explore Cobain; this second thread had its origins the healthcare field and

is bent on health-related topics and practice relative to suicide. Both threads do well to cover the chosen topic but neither has significantly explored, or explained, the Cobain phenomenon, especially as it relates to the new millennium.

The Music and Lyrics of Kurt Cobain and Nirvana

For many, the lasting image of Cobain will always be one of him sitting on stage in torn jeans and ratty green cardigan leading Nirvana in a rendition of the “The Man Who Sold the World,” aired on MTV’s “Unplugged” in November of 1993. Soon after this performance, on April 8, 1994, Cobain committed suicide in the guesthouse of his suburban Seattle home. The importance of the MTV “Unplugged” performance cannot be overstated, especially when discussing the lyrics written or chosen by Cobain. Originally released by David Bowie in 1970, “The Man Who Sold the World” was easily the most popular point of the set. The song carries strong metaphors of the inner conflict between Bowie and his alter ego Ziggy Stardust. As Mazullo (2000) explains, Cobain’s rendition of the 1970s-style progressive rock song serves as his reminder to the audience that the expressive nature of grunge was supremely rooted in images of the physical body, sexuality and identity. Although this moment was years after Nirvana began their meteoric rise, the performance of “The Man Who Sold the World” shows the distinctive principles that govern Cobain’s own lyrics and the meaning behind his music.

Cobain, and consequently Nirvana, were part of the grunge movement. Simply explained, grunge is a form of music born in the mid-1980s in Seattle, Washington (Mazullo, 2000). The qualifier “grunge” was attached to bands from the Pacific Northwest that synthesized heavy metal and punk (Shevory, 1995). However, when given more thought, Horsfall (2013) argues that grunge music was a deviant genre of music. As Horsfall explains, like all forms of deviant music, grunge was focused on three main functions: social criticism, spreading news and as catharsis of outstanding events. Although there were dozens of popular grunge bands from this era, including Pearl Jam, Soundgarden, Screaming Trees, Alice in Chains, and Mother Love Bone, to name some, Nirvana was the paradigmatic grunge band because of Cobain’s complex nature and the magnetism of his prose (Shevory, 1995).

As Fish (1995) explains, Cobain’s lyrics reflect his view of the fragmentation of modernity. He used vivid metaphors revolving around the human form, bodily fluids, suicide, violence, sex, and drugs (Wood, 2011). These underlying narratives were a rallying call for Generation X and consequently a point of research among academics. According to Kahn (2000), Cobain’s prose hones in on the anguish felt by Generation X – he portrayed their pain and fears, the tension they felt between private and personal space, and especially the angst revolving around the negative judgment Boomers and Greatest Generation individuals expressed about them, calling them superficial, lazy and amoral (i.e., Howe & Strauss, 1993). Although the melody always came first to Cobain, his choice of words showed originality, even when he was employing decades-old topics. For example, “All Apologies” was an act of both confession and contrition for his humanness because “all in all is all we are” (Cobain, 1993, track 12; Herbert, 2011).

The Death and Suicide of Kurt Cobain

Cobain’s suicide was fodder for innumerable newspapers, magazines, and radio and television programs. The days and months subsequent to April 8 saw a host of journalists and reporters covering the death to the extent that Mazzerlla (1995) maintains that this coverage “perpetuated, solidified, and entrenched his position as generational icon” (p. 52). Perhaps

the most celebrated coverage given the event was Strauss' (1994) *Rolling Stone* article. The article traced back a month to an apparent suicide attempt in Rome and subsequently focused in on Cobain's final days. Strauss details the steps Cobain took leading up to April 8 and the grief and confusion that many felt after hearing the news. He further explains that the Seattle Crisis Clinic received roughly 100 more calls than usual, and there were a few instances of copycat suicides as well. The public's reaction to the news of Cobain's suicide provided fodder for the second dominant theme in the academic literature on Cobain: the one that analyzes how Kurt Cobain's suicide reverberated with the public.

Baume, Cantor, and Rolfe (1997) studied more than 300 sites that chronicled Cobain's life, death, and music; in many instances they found that the star's suicide note and death certificate had been posted. The availability of this material, coupled with the massive media coverage, is believed to lead to what Jobes, Berman, O'Carroll, Eastgard, and Knickmeyer (1996) refer to as the "Werther Effect." This is where the death of a celebrity has the potential to stimulate vulnerable youth to imitate. Luckily, studies did not prove the "Werther Effect" occurred. Martin and Koo (1997) examined the total rate of suicide in Australia in 1994 for people between 15 and 24 and found that the number of suicides was identical to the same time frame for the previous five years. Berman, Jobes, and O'Carroll (1998) collected data from King County, Washington, the suburb where Cobain lived, and found that there were actually fewer suicides in 1994 as compared to 1993. However, Jobes et al. explain that there was a significant increase in suicide calls following Kurt Cobain's death. Although the expectation is generally that suicides increase when a well-loved celebrity commits suicide, Jobs et al. hypothesized that the extensive media coverage, the particularly bloody method of suicide, and outreach interventions quelled copycat suicides.

The main avenues of research on Cobain do a good job in analyzing the many aspects of his life, work, and death. But the literature aims attention at the year of his death and shortly thereafter. Missing are explorations and explanations that would focus on the period of his rise to celebrity since 1994. His suicide at age 27 is part of American mythology. It is a story often told alongside those of Jim Morrison, Brian Jones, Jimi Hendricks, and Janis Joplin. Cobain's imprint, however, is more than a romanticized view of life in the fast lane or as member of the "27 Club." As Borchard (1998) stressed, unlike other "27 Club" musicians who supposedly died of an accidental drug overdose, Cobain's death was intentional, as he committed suicide. In addition to that, Cobain's image and likeness are certainly used more than any of the other members of the "27 Club," but there are no convincing explanations of why. In "Serve the Servants," a song from Nirvana's final studio album "In Utero," Cobain sings the lyrics: "Teenage angst has paid off well, Now I'm bored and old" (Cobain, 1993, track 1). It is true, Kurt would be 51 and Nirvana 32 in 2019, therefore, there needs to be a better understanding of why the public is still attracted to these "old" images and music.

Discussion

The simple explanation is that Cobain's celebrity has grown alongside both his, and Nirvana's, fandom. Fandom is a common feature in industrial societies and emerges from "the mass-produced and mass-distributed entertainment of certain performers, narratives or genres" (Fiske, 1992, p. 30). Obviously, Cobain will irrevocably be linked to Generation X (Mazullo, 2000), but the fact is that his iconic status has developed *beyond* one generation. Today, individuals of all ages have developed a deep affection and attachment to Cobain. Not only does Nirvana's music continue to play on the radio, and their albums continue to sell, but also the Internet and social media have significantly sustained their fandom. Beyond websites, over

the years there have been memes, Twitter trends, Facebook pages, and YouTube videos dedicated to Kurt Cobain. Since the movement of fandom online allows for an increasingly customizable “fannish” experience (i.e., Coppa, 2006), the demographics and psychographics of those attracted to the way Cobain challenged social structures reverberate beyond the youth of the 1990s. What this actually means is that the pathology of fandom relative to Cobain moved beyond a single demographic, which could crudely explain the growth in his celebrity over the past 25 years.

There is a deeper explanation behind the rise in Cobain’s popularity over the decades, one that is a bit sinister. Over the years, Kurt Cobain has become a commodity. Marx (1906), who introduced the idea of the commodity in all its complexity, defined it as “an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another” (p. 41). In a certain way, commodification depicts the entire grunge subculture of which Cobain and the other musicians were a part. On the one hand, the way they dressed and the values they promoted through their performances and lyrics were anti-materialistic to their core. On the other hand, they were eager to embrace the fame and become successful musicians, which is evidently in contradiction inherent in the grunge movement (Kramer, 2016).

In other words, these commodities were paradoxical at their core. Cobain and his band were on the opposite side of the American mainstream music spectrum and were perceived among those who embraced their music as the embodiment of resistance (Mazullo, 2000). Furthermore, as a subcultural movement, grunge was non-materialistic, so the commodities that were based on it, as suggested above, were contrary to the movement’s philosophy. This paradox was pertinent even during the time when Cobain was writing songs and producing music. However, it appeared to have gained energy after he committed suicide. Every aspect of the singer’s life would find its place in the market. Some of the most vivid examples of the commodities that appeared after his death and further contributed to his celebrity, perhaps even against his own will, were diaries filled with reflections that preceded his suicide. Ironically, these diaries also contribute to the notion that there was a lack of general understanding regarding what the musician was dealing with as he was evolving into a rock star.

The diaries were published by Cobain’s wife Courtney Love eight years after the grunge star took his own life (Thackray, 2015). In his autoethnography, Thackray, who was a chronologist of the development of the grunge movement and the rise of Nirvana, contends that Cobain would certainly not be willing to share his journals with others (p. 202). Thackray brought up such an assumption based on what he described as first-hand observations and the friendship he had with both Cobain and Love.

Having made its way into consumer culture, Cobain’s name is used to sell diverse types of manufactured items. Inspired by Nirvana’s song “Rape me,” Borchard (1998) used the term “Raping Cobain” while explaining how the Hard Rock Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas used the musician’s image to convert what was left of his life into commodities. Borchard evaluated the items displayed in the Hard Rock Hotel and Casino as a “tragic farce,” considering that they resemble what Cobain and the grunge movement were trying to combat. Cobain’s suicide, according to the author, can be perceived “as a final, unequivocal statement of hurt and despair in which the artist regains final control of his art’s meaning, a statement of purity” (p. 255).

The idea that today Cobain’s image is a commodity is not new. Fish (1995) was the first to suggest that the tension between aesthetics and commodification is at the center of Cobain’s celebrity status. As Fish explains, even though Cobain’s lyrics and behavior were an attempt

to break away from the mainstream, he, and Nirvana, nevertheless became mainstream icons and celebrities. Borchard (1998) believes that Cobain's success could be his "biggest failure" considering that "the more people accepted his statements of alienation, the more alienated he became" (p. 255). In line with this, Bickerdike (2014) adds that Cobain's humanity has been replaced by easily replicated and distributed commodities bearing his image. However, as we contend, the rise in Cobain's iconic status over the past 25 years has everything to do with the celebration, and commodification, of his status as an anti-hero.

The popular press has often referred to Cobain as an antihero. At one time or another, *Time* (1997), *The Village Voice* (2005) and *Rolling Stone* (2012) have all regarded him as an antihero. The use of the antihero moniker is interesting since it presupposes that the individual discussed has an anti-establishment ethics that lacks many of the traditional hero characteristics – in short, they are the opposite of what Campbell (1949) outlines in the hero template, especially when considering their life's work and arc. Anti-heroes are imperfect, morally corrupt, they sometimes lack physical prowess and are more often than not social outcasts (Vaage, 2015). The antihero is not a new term or idea, as it has been around for millennia (Adams, 1976). Moreover, the persona of the antihero has been used in a variety of contexts. Mostly though, the antihero remained the fundamental feature of media and narratives that were narrowcast toward certain readers or viewers (e.g., Schafer, 1968; Simmons, 2008; Raney, Schmid, Niemann, & Ellensohn, 2009) such as those in the literary world. Hence, our deeper focus should be on examining his anti-hero image, as it could help us understand those important aspects of Cobain's rise in popularity that turned him into a commodity, despite the ideas conveyed by his music and the conceptual designs of his life philosophy.

However, one should not disregard the fact that, starting in the 1990s, there was a plethora of antiheroes that crossed over into the mainstream largely because the quality of the genre itself began to improve (Tokgöz, 2016). There are other explanations for this phenomenon: more so than ever, conventional audiences were not only exposed to antiheroes but had also begun to support them in their quest (Vaage, 2016). Although the list is long, the most prominent antihero characters are Tim Burton's Batman, *Fight Club*'s narrator/Tyler Durden, *The Crow*'s Eric Draven and *Spawn*'s Al Simmons. It was also during this time that stores began to carry more than just media relative to the antihero, but also all the associated merchandise that goes along with commodification: posters, hats, tee-shirts, lighters, mugs, etc. In fact, the 1990s was a watershed moment for antiheroes because soon after the decade ended there was an uptick in box office, television, DVD, comic and book sales associated with Tony Soprano, Patrick Bateman, James Howlett, Dexter Morgan, Walter White and even John Wick. Nowadays, Cobain's Funko Pop!, sits on shelves in dozens of F.Y.E. stores next to Deadpool, Rocket from *Guardians of the Galaxy* and Deadshot from *Suicide Squad*, to name just a few.

An outcome of this trend has been Cobain's commodification. We at once grew to become fascinated with how Cobain embodied not only the antihero but an antihero that was not associated with a comic, novel, movie or television program. Instead, Cobain was a rock star and the embodiment of a subcultural movement called grunge. He was a genuine person that personified all of the prototypical antihero traits - he was physically slight, opposed to macho masculinity, said he felt closer to the female side of the human being and yet was fascinated with guns (Muto, 1995). In his music, he conveyed anti-institutional messages that fixated on the complexities of life – especially those that revolved around the acute anxiety resulting from a white, heterosexual, masculine identity (Saint-Aubin, 2013). What further solidifies his anti-hero image is Kurt's rejection of his role as the voice of a generation. He based this rebuff on the argument that his songs were simply an artistic expression (Fish, 1995). The last thing he

wanted was to become the voice of Generation X. Interestingly, although his music was written and recorded 30 years ago, his lyrics still offer a valid criticism of the troubled society in which we live today (Horsfall, 2013; Kahn, 2000).

To further expand on the substance of this argument, we must talk about the centrality of communication. Communication is not just the expression of meaning, it is the act of meaning-making – it is the process by which celebrity is created and maintained (Ziek, 2016). In other words, communication is central to Cobain's prestige. Hence, his image as anti-hero was created through communicative acts. On the one hand, as fans of Cobain continue to follow and support him and his music, they are producing a joint reality in which he plays the principal role. There is an importance to Cobain that his fans have come to accept and make widely known through their interactions both online and offline. On the other hand, even the economic process relative to how his image has been co-opted is principally a communicative event (Cheney & Cloud, 2006). Although there is an assumption that commercialization is largely due to market-driven forces that are especially dominant in a consumer society like the United States, the underlying act of communication still plays an important role. The creation of a brand, or brand image, is about messages sent out (Whetten & Mackey, 2002). Whatever consumers know, and consequently buy, is the result of an organization's decision to offer a particular product and the narratives it generates around that product. As far as Kurt Cobain is concerned, as organizations continue to trade on his image as an anti-hero, consumers will consequently adopt this image as reality.

Conclusion

Many musicians from the 1990s can boast of anti-establishment, anti-institutional imagery including Rage Against the Machine, Green Day, Smashing Pumpkins, Soundgarden, etc. Yet none of these bands enjoy the fame attained by Cobain or Nirvana. None of the lead singers of the aforementioned bands find their images sold in stores to consumers from not only Generation X, but also from the Millennials generation and Generation XY. Indeed, this is because none of them have become part of the process whereby the United States commodifies its antiheroes. In late 2018, fashion designer Marc Jacobs released "Grunge Redux" collections that feature several images from Nirvana, including the "smiley face" logo. Yet the cross-out eyes are replaced with the letter M and J. Marc Jacobs is a high-end fashion brand that targets a luxury-oriented audience and thus the polar opposite of Five Below. Remarkably, the "Grunge Redux" collection's "Come As You Are" t-shirt retails for \$130. Cobain's image has become synonymous with an abundant variety of products for a variety of consumers; it is an icon that is not simply the image of an anti-fashion, alternative music performer.

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Corresponding author: Paul Ziek

Contact Email: pziek@pace.edu