

Bruno Mars, 'Uptown Funk' (2014)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OPf0YbXqDm0>

Subject content focus area

Media language

Representation

Media industries

Audiences

Contexts

Background context

- 'Uptown Funk' was released in November 2014, as a crossover single between Mark Ronson and Bruno Mars. Ronson is a British producer and composer well-known for his work with Amy Winehouse, and Mars is a Grammy award winning solo artist. Both have a love of soul and funk music from the 70s and 80s.
- By incorporating musical influences from Rick James, Prince and James Brown, Mars and Ronson were able to target a market beyond youthful pop fans.
- As of March 2019, the video has 3.5 billion views, making it the 5th most viewed YouTube video of all time. The single was the top-selling of 2015 and was number one for 14 weeks in the USA.
- Similarities to The Gap Band's 70s hit 'Oops Outside Your Head' led to a copyright court case; as a result, the three members of the Gap Band are now credited as co-writers.

Part 1: Starting points - Media language

- The setting for the video is an American urban environment familiar from 80s movies like *The Warriors* and *Do the Right Thing*. Though shot in a number of cities, the majority was filmed on the 20th Century Fox 'NYC' backlot in Los Angeles. For this reason, the location is reminiscent of a stereotypical 'ghetto' often associated with American Black and Latino culture.
- 'Uptown Funk' conforms to the music video convention of focusing on performance: - a fun group dance routine and singalong on the street, followed by a 'live' performance with full instrumentation in a nightclub. There is very little narrative or concept compared to other contemporary music videos, and this potentially adds to its 'authentic' appeal.
- Most of the shots are medium or long shots of Mars and members of The Hooligans (Mars' band), dancing and having a fun time. There is some synchronicity to the dance routine, but individuals regularly break into their own style, whilst staying in rhythm. This 'unpolished' choreography again makes Mars and his friends seem 'identifiable'.

- Because there is little narrative to engage the viewer, the video functions mainly to accentuate the beat of the music, the fun atmosphere and, later, an exciting live performance. In the first verse, Mars and his friends dance towards us as the camera dollies back. This makes us feel as if we are dancing with them.
- The fast and funky rhythm is also accentuated by the performers' handclaps and finger clicks.
- The artist is framed at the centre of the shot, but his camaraderie with the others is shown by them regularly leaning into shot to deliver a line along with Mars. This links to the collaborative writing of the song: along with Mark Ronson, *eleven* other writers are credited.
- There are many conventionally 'urban' elements to the video, familiar from the 'Blaxploitation' film genre: brownstone houses, men playing dominos on the sidewalk, fast food diners, fire hydrants etc. The costume of the performers - shades, suit jacket over t-shirt, single chains and hats - are also familiar from urban crime dramas from the 80s such as *Miami Vice*, reflecting an element of intertextuality.
- In the second part of the video, the performers dance and sing around a stretch limo, a symbol of 'conspicuous wealth'. Limos are often hired by groups of male friends for events like stag parties, so this also fits in with the atmosphere of 'feel good' male friendship.
- The final part of the video moves into a nightclub, where the viewer is positioned in the audience by low-angle shots, silhouettes of other crowd members dancing and occasional cuts to on-stage shots of the performers playing the instruments that have been audible throughout. Seeing this live performance accentuates the 'authentic' nature of the song as well as the skill and status of the performers.

Media contexts - Cultural

- Both Bruno Mars and Mark Ronson have made music with large bands, especially a brass section that recalls Motown soul music of the 60s and 70s. This 'vintage' style of production contrasts with the polished, electronic production on much contemporary pop and has attracted fans both young, to whom it sounds fresh and different, and older listeners, for whom it holds nostalgia value.

Part 2: Starting points - Representation

- There is an interesting portrayal of gender in the video. The emphasis is clearly on male camaraderie. The opening shots are close-up of hands shaking, slapping shoulders etc., all typically 'male bonding' behaviour. When the song starts properly, the dance routine does not focus solely on Mars, but rather shows him as a member of a team.
- By contrast, there are hardly any women featured at all. The opening shot of a pair of long women's legs, with later shots of a woman's fur coat, mimic the videos (and films) of the 1980s.

These 'buddy movies' featured a group of male friends chasing after girls - though the emphasis was on male friendship rather than sexuality. Later in the video, a number of women walk past the boys whose eyes follow admiringly - like the first female 'character' these are framed so we only see their bodies. Feminist approaches might argue that this objectifies and de-humanises the women.

- Despite the traditionally masculine nature of these sequences there are a number of amusing subversions. Mars seems to be mainly interested in *himself* (narcissism) rather than the passing women. He wears a pink jacket, goes to a women's beauty salon to have his hair styled, and at one-point sings "I kiss myself/ I'm so pretty". All of these subvert the male stereotypes of not caring about appearance, and of 'beauty' being a feminine obsession.
- Race and class stereotypes are also subverted. Mars was born in Hawaii and is mixed race, most of his band are African-American and Mark Ronson is white British - all of whom are represented very positively as fun, talented people. There are no signs of criminality (such as drug dealers, pimps or prostitutes) that might typically be associated with this type of 'urban' location; the neighbourhood seems poor, but happy.
- Another subversion is the short sequence where the band have their shoes polished by white shoe-shine guys. This role has usually been associated with Black Americans, and has become symbolic of racial inequality. By showing white shoe-shiners working for black characters, the video deliberately challenges this stereotype.

PART 3: STARTING POINTS - Media industries

- 'Uptown Funk' was a collaboration between Bruno Mars and Mark Ronson, a very successful DJ and music producer who also features in the video. This potentially widens the target audience for the product, as it has the potential to appeal to fans of each artist.
- Bruno Mars is signed to the Atlantic Records label, which is part of Warner Music Group. However, 'Uptown Funk' was released by Columbia Records, part of the Sony conglomerate, as this is Mark Ronson's record label. The video demonstrates the high production values typical of a high budget music video released by a major label.
- Mars was already an established star, having had two platinum-selling albums (*Doo-Wops and Hooligans* and *Unorthodox Jukebox*) in the USA prior to the release of 'Uptown Funk'. He was named as *Billboard's* Artist of the Year in 2013 owing to the chart success of *Unorthodox Jukebox* (album and three singles), combined with the box office sales of his 'Moonshine Jungle' tour. He has also worked as a record producer and co-produced the video for 'Uptown Funk'.
- 'Uptown Funk' became a huge commercial success, for example it achieved a 'Diamond' certification from the RIAA (more than 10 million units sold in the USA) and also sold multi-million copies in several countries around the world, including the UK.

- The song was released for digital download in several countries in November 2014 and the video was published on Mark Ronson's YouTube page on 19 November 2014. This is a popular time to release music as many products compete to be the Christmas number one single.
- 'Uptown Funk' won Best Male Video at the 2015 MTV Video Music Awards. The video was awarded a PG rating on YouTube.

PART 4: STARTING POINTS - Audiences

- Bruno Mars' target audience is primarily younger females, however the 'Uptown Funk' video appeals to wider demographics. The retro elements of the song and video, for example, might create a sense of nostalgia and appeal to people from older age groups. Male audiences in particular might identify with the performers or aspire to the lifestyle that is represented in the video.
- In terms of the Uses and Gratifications theory, the main gratification for audiences is likely to be entertainment. Elements such as the fast paced editing, the energetic performances and choreography, as well as the moments of humour are likely to engage and offer a sense of escapism to viewers. The popularity of the video, demonstrated by the vast number of views on YouTube, is likely to have generated discussion amongst fans, providing an element of social interaction.
- Many user-generated videos recreating 'Uptown Funk' were posted on social media, showing an interactive audience response. Several of these went viral, potentially generating more publicity for the official video.
- There was a positive critical response to 'Uptown Funk', for example it was named in *Rolling Stone* magazine's Top 20 music videos of 2014. The video was described in *The Guardian* as having 'super-slick, Jackson-like group choreography, glossy production and retro styling'. A review on the *Billboard* website (*Billboard* compiles the music charts in the USA) said of 'Uptown Funk': 'It's easily one of the most joyous songs released in 2014, and now, an equally ebullient music video for the track is here.'
- These responses seem to demonstrate a preferred reading of the video, according to Stuart Hall's Reception Theory.