

***Personal Branding of Jesus –Portrayed in the Movies 1897-2014: Applying  
Meaning Theory of Media Portrayal***

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**Abstract**

A phenomenal figure throughout the centuries, a hero for Christians and the savior for believers –JESUS- is the name that is the center of this research. More than twenty movies since 1987 until 2014 –in fact the newest of Ewan McGregor’s has been featured on Sundance film festival 2015- have been portraying the life, the death and the resurrection of Jesus.

By definition, branding is all about creating differences. Derived from marketing and communication science, personal brand is about specific characteristics, unique quality, name and symbol that each person has and that conveys meaning to others. This paper explores the personal branding of Jesus –how He is different from other persons, if not other religious leaders. How He is unique depicted from these movies. What are His unique selling propositions which inspire mankind? And what are His brand promise?

It argues whether the movies shown throughout different times and languages manage to portray true meaning (image and USP) based on the Bible. Movies as media portrayal can establish, extend, substitute and stabilize the meaning, but at the same time it can reduce the meaning of the name Jesus.

Keywords: Jesus, movies, personal, branding, meaning, media, portrayal, bible

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## Introduction

Feature films nowadays have been one of the most favorite media ultimately for audience to receive entertainment if not information. We refer feature films as those being produced for the cinemas which have a variety of length in time; 40, 70, 80 minutes or more. Usually after being projected in the cinemas, those movies will then go to television broadcasting or later will penetrate the household's entertainment through mediums what we call nowadays as DVDs or VCDs. Movies in the cinema, movies broadcasted on TV station or even on the DVDs, they are categorized as media which have functions-one of them is to entertain and to inform the audience.

After the discovery of *cinematographe* in 1895, the phenomenal figure throughout the centuries, a hero for Christians and the savior for believers, Jesus Christ, has been presented for the silver screen. And since then, numerous feature films have been created by movie directors across centuries, different languages, and different cultures even for different purposes. Interesting to learn that in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, cinema was called as a new medium whilst now the 21<sup>st</sup> century, internet holds that title and who knows what lies ahead serves as a new medium after decades.

Since the cinema was born, the brand "JESUS" has been undergone several reconstruction in accordance of subjectivity develop in society of certain era. The limitations of cinema and the limitations of humans in representing "JESUS" as recorded in the Gospel contributes to the discourse about the brand "JESUS CHRIST". And the gospel referred within this text, is in accordance to the Bible – translated into Bahasa Indonesia- produced by Lembaga Alkitab Indonesia (LAI 1974).

Representation is unavoidable. People receive images within their mind –color and black-and-white; moving and still images- both deliver inputs to people's mind. People construct meaning inside their mind, their feelings are much more affected by their mind and they will act upon what resides within their heads and hearts. What people think and how do they feel are influenced by individual determinants and experiences as well as culturally constructed. The thoughts, feelings, attitudes even intention usually precede the behavior as learned in consumer behavior (Blackwell et al., 2012).

This writing aims to see how the brand "JESUS" is portrayed through the medium we call a movie using the model of a successful brand according to Jason Miletsky's book (2010, p.227). It is taking samples of 15 movies that can be gathered representing different centuries, different cultures and languages, yet only focusing on one brand that is "JESUS". Perhaps there are more than 20 even 30 feature films about the same brand all over the world, however these 15 are the ones that the author use. Theory meaning, according to DeFleur and Plax (1980), media portrayal can establish, stabilize, expand and substitute the meaning of something. Thus, media portrayal of a person in a movie can positively establish and stabilize the meaning conveyed in accordance to the bible or it can also expand even substitute it. Having said this then the meaning of the name "Jesus" can be either expanded or reduced; meaning can also be either substituted or distorted against bible narrative. Later, matrix below are made to contrast what the filmmakers had produced –using the point

of view of brand manager- and what did the bible say about it (as general knowledge that bible is the sole and foremost source of reading by Christians). And here, the writer uses the term film and movie interchangeably with no significant difference. The FBB matrix is created to serve as a ground-thinking on examining both silent and sound films against the biblical narrative in a point of view of brand management.

This article starts with the concept of branding then crystalized in personal branding concept and continue in dividing the movies based on three centuries; the first movie about Jesus was made in the year 1897 or the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the largest number of movies fall under the 20<sup>th</sup> century, while entering the 21<sup>st</sup> century was the movies produced in the year 2003 until 2015 (however, the newest of Ewan McGregor's that has been featured on Sundance film festival 2015 will not be part of this writing rather the next one).

### **Personal Branding as Part of Brand Management**

“Branding is all about creating differences” (Keller, 2013, p.57); differences in your name, icon, symbol, mark, logo and tagline, so that when those appear, people or audience in this case, will have meaning when they encounter with those brands. Now, take these examples: when you encounter a big golden letter M while driving, you will associate it with McDonald's-the biggest fast food burger food chain in the country, or when you hear the word chicken as food then Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) may come across your mind, or nowadays, the generation X, Y and Z or millennials will most likely associate the word “apple” not only with a healthy fruit, rather with a sophisticated gadget such as laptops, tablets and iPod. Those are the power of a brand and the term “branding” is the process of creating all the above or what Duncan refers to as “the process of creating a brand image that engages the hearts and minds of customers” (2008, p.38).

The letter “M” in McDonald's refers to the symbol or mark of the brand of the biggest fast food burger food chain, while the word “chicken” as food will be associated to KFC –also a fast food restaurant- which has gained an image of restaurant with its signature dish on chicken. “Apple” computer, on the other hand, has gained a reputation in expanding the meaning: do you want to buy *apple*? (Then one might ask: is it fruit or gadget?)

At simplest, the American Marketing Association (Keller, 2013), defines brand is a “name, term, sign, symbol or design or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods and services of one seller to another, to differentiate them from those of competitions.” Professor Keller argued that “a person brand must live up to the brand promise at all times. Reputation and brands are built over years but can be harmed or even destroyed in days. One slip can be devastating and difficult to recover from” (2013, p.283). Montoya and Vandehey's book “The Brand Called You” (2009) refers to a lot of luxury product brands out there for example: Ferragamo, Versace, Mercedes-Benz, Rolls-Royce, Prada, Yves Saint Laurent, many others are actually someone's name, a person who started a company and built over the years of reputation and crafted of excellence.

Based on these preliminary definitions, this text is going to examine whether the movies of Jesus in the year 1897 – 2014 portraying the same meaning as in the bible?

Which movies can be said establish and stabilize the same meaning based on bible and which can be said to reduce even distort the meaning based on the bible?

A successful brand according to Jason Miletsky's model of branding (2010, p.227) is as follows:

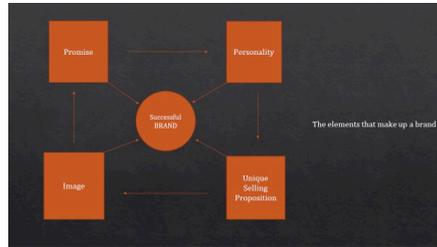


Figure 1: Model of a Successful Brand by Jason Miletsky.

There are four elements that make up a successful brand –be it a product/service or personal brand- i.e. brand promise, brand personality, brand unique selling proposition and brand image. This text will elaborate the four elements of one brand name that is the name of Jesus Christ; what is Jesus' promise, Jesus' personality, Jesus' unique selling proposition and Jesus' image as the four elements being portrayed in the movies. Movies as the representation of the bible in the digital era, are evaluated whether they establish the meaning as written on the bible, whether they stabilize the meaning of the bible or the contrary would they expand (reduce) the meaning of the bible or they substitute (distort) the meaning of the bible.

## **BRAND PROMISE**

Dr. Woodrow Kroll, leader of Back to Bible International in Lincoln, Nebraska and Jonathan Ziman, have compiled chronologically the brand promise and unique selling proposition (USP) of Jesus in a book "Simply Jesus" (2010). There are about nine promises written and quoted direct from the bible. First, Jesus has promised that the presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit will teach us about Jesus (Luke 12:12), second, ask then it will be given to you (Matthew 7:8), third, God is our protector, He will be with us everlastingly (Matthew 28:20b), fourth, Jesus will grant us joy, peace and relief to those who come to him and obey his commandments (John 16:33), fifth, God provides our needs; seek the kingdom of God and He shall provide all your needs (Luke 12:32), sixth, those who believe in Jesus will gain eternal life and shall live with Him (John 3:16), seventh, to God all things are possible (Mark 10:27), eighth, God loves us (John 16:27) and ninth, Jesus' sacrifice are for all men, not only for the "righteous" (Mark 10:45).

## **UNIQUE SELLING PROPOSITION (USP)**

Kroll and Ziman wrote at least five of Jesus' uniqueness. First, the incarnation of God in a flesh named Jesus. Therefore, Jesus is unique because He is the God himself. The Christians understand this concept as the "Triune of God" which consisted of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Secondly, as human being, there is no other human beings that is willing to die for other human beings but Jesus (the Christians celebrate this as Easter day). Third, His birth, His death and His resurrection are unique due to

His deity. Fourth, Jesus claims in John 14:6 that he is the only way and the truth and the life and no one can come to the father unless through him. This makes him unique because he claims that he is the only way to reach heaven and there is no other way to reach heaven. And fifth, closely related to the fourth, is actually talking about branding, that there is no other human name in which salvation is bestowed than in the name of Jesus Christ (Acts 4:12).

## **BRAND PERSONALITY**

Another two elements of successful branding is personality and image. Herewith, the author categorize brand personality into four: origin, occupation, adjective(s) and predicate(s). The origin of Jesus will mean that genealogically he was from Nazareth –the city of Mary, his mother, in Galilee and the fact that he was born in Bethlehem as the city of David (Joseph -Jesus’ father is the descendant of David and Abraham). All these confirm that Jesus is a Jew.

The bible depicted Jesus’ occupation is as a teacher and a healer. As read in the bible especially the gospel, all of Jesus’ words are his teachings where many is formulated into parables and idioms. The bible did write in several chapters that Jesus teach in the temple of God (Matthew 21:23, Matthew 26:55, Mark12:35, Mark 14:49, Luke 19:47, Luke 20:1, Luke 21:37, John7:14, John 7:28, John 8:2, John 8:20, John 18:20). While in his actions as the bible witness, Jesus performed a lot of healings as part of his miracles, confirming his deity. Many other miracles are performed but not as many as healings.

As a human being, Jesus is also associated with at least two adjectives notably: Jesus is powerful (John 3:35, 16:15, Matthew 28:18) and Jesus is love (Luke 6:27-36, Matthew 5:38-48).

Predicates are given by people to you as an individual. In the case of Jesus, the notable predicates were among them are “Jesus of Nazareth” that were written scattered in five books of the bible (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John and Acts). Another predicate was given not by other people but by God’s angel “Emmanuel” which means God be with us (Matthew 1:20-23). One of Jesus’ disciples exclaimed this third predicate “The Messiah” which in Judaism will mean as a savior or liberator. Peter was the first who associated Jesus with this predicate (Matthew 16:15-16, Mark 8:29, Luke 9:20).

Needless to say that one’s origin, occupation, adjectives and predicates can describe one’s identity. According to Temporal (2001), an identity of a person is reflected in his appearance, action and behavior. The way a person dressed, talk, act or move are indicating whether he is believable, creative, friendly, etc. Even though an image is important, but an identity is supposed to actuate the brand. Thus, brand identity or personality contributes to consistency and long-lasting.

## BRAND IMAGE

As explained in paragraph four, visualization creates meaning in the audience mind. The mind can associate pictures with interpretations. The result of these interpretations is called brand image. Temporal argued that brand image is how the brand is perceived, but this is only a comparison point toward the identity. The image is supposed to reflect and to express the personality of the brand (2001, p.51). Thus, the image of Jesus Christ has to be reflected and to be expressed truly as a person named Jesus is a **Jew** came from **Nazareth**; Jesus is a **teacher** and a **healer**; He is **love** and **powerful**; And it has been written throughout centuries that he is **Emmanuel** and **The Messiah**. This text examined that the visualized images within these movies will be in forms such as symbol, logo, and color, appearance of brand name, Jesus' birth, Jesus' death and Jesus' resurrection.

Taken from the bible, the author infers that the symbol would be the **cross** (Matthew 27, Mark 15:21-32, Luke 23:26, Luke 23:33-43, John 19:17-24), logo is **INRI**, which is a Latin acronym that stands for *Jesus the Nazarene, King of Jews* (Matthew 27:37). In product/service brand for instance, the corporate color of Blue Bird Taxi is blue or AirAsia corporate color is red. In the case of Jesus, during his trial, they put on him the **purple** robe as a mock; purple color signifies royal status, even though at that time, they meant it for a joke (Matthew 27:27-28). While the images of his birth would be the **star from the east** (Matthew 2:2,9) and the **sheepfold** (Luke 2:7), his death would be visualized by the **cross, crown of thorns, Lamb of God** and **blood or shedding of blood** (Matthew 27:32-44, Mark 15:20-32, Luke 23:33-43, John 19:17-24). His resurrection is represented by the **dawn, empty tomb** and interestingly to learn that his resurrection event was firstly exposed to the **women** not to Jesus' disciples (Matthew 28:1-10, Mark 16:1-8, Luke 24:1-12, John 20:1-10).

Below is the epitome of 15 feature films about Jesus which were examined using a cross wising of personal branding model, theory of meaning and the biblical narration.

FBB Matrix (Film, Branding & Bible)									
No.	FILMS 19th, 20th, 21st CENTURY			PERSONAL BRANDING				WHAT THE BIBLE SAID	THEORY OF MEANING
	Year	Title	Director	Promise	Personality	USP	Image		
	<b>19th Century</b>							Promise & USP are taken from the book SIMPLY JESUS. While the author sets down personality & image.  <b>Promise:</b> 1) Guidance from Holy Spirit to understand about Jesus. 2) Ask then it will be given to you. 3) God will always be with us.	By ML DeFleur & TG Plax  1) .Most silent films are actually establishing the same meaning as the Bible. They were quoting the verses from the Bible in explaining the moving pictures. Or vice versa, the moving pictures are actually explaining the Bible verses.
1	1897	Passion du Christ	Albert Kirchner (Lear)						
1	1898	La Vie et La Passion de Jesus Ch (11 minutes)	George Hatot & Louis Lumiere	✓	✓	✓	✓		
	<b>20th Century</b>							4) Jesus will give peace, joy, relief to those who come to Him & obey His commandments.  5) God provides our needs.  6) Those who believe will live eternally. 7) To God all things are possible. 8) God loves us. 9) Jesus sacrifice offered to all men; not only "the righteous" but especially to sinners.	2). Establishment  3). Establishment 4). Establishment & Stabilization 5). Establishment & Stabilization 6). Establishment & Expanding (the film is not telling the bible story per se). 7). Establishment & Expanding 8). Stabilization (the scene started when Jesus was hailed entering Jerusalem. 9). Establishment yet Reducing (some scenes are not according to the bible) 10) Expanding the Bible and yet reducing the meaning of the brand "JESUS". 11) Substituting but not exactly distorting (because as the title said, it is not the movie about Jesus The Nazareth).
2	1903	La Vie et La Passion de Jesus Christ (The Passion Play)	Lucien Nonguet & Ferdinand Zecca	✓	✓	✓	✓		
3	1906	La Naisance, La Vie et La Mort du Christ	Alice Guy	✓	✓	✓	✓		
4	1912	From Manger to the Cross	Sidney Olcott	✓	✓	✓	✓		
5	1916	Christus	Giulio Atammoro	✓	✓	✓	✓		
6	1923	INRI	Robert Wiene	✓	✓	✓	✓		
7	1927	The King of Kings	Cecil B.DeMille	✓	✓	✓	✓		
8	1935	Golgotha	Julien Duvivier		✓	✓	✓	<b>Personality</b> Jesus is Jew (family tree)	
9	1942	Jesus de Nazareth	Jose Diaz Morales		✓	✓	✓	He was from Nazareth	
10	1973	Jesus Christ SuperStar	Norman Jewison		✓		✓	a teacher & a healer (occupations)	
11	1989	Jesus of Montreal	Denys Arcand					powerful & love (adjectives)	
	<b>21st Century</b>							"Jesus of Nazareth"	
12	2003	The Gospel of John	Philip Saville	✓	✓	✓	✓	"Emmanuel"	12). Establishment & Stabilization (the movie portrays the most Brand Promises of Jesus).
13	2004	The Passion of The Christ	Mel Gibson	✓	✓	✓	✓	"The Messiah"	13) Stabilization (using aramic, latin & hebrew). 14) Expanding & Substituting (a lot of scenes are replacing the biblical narrative).
14	2006	Color of The Cross part 1	Jean Claude de La Marre		✓		✓		
15	2014	Son of God	Christopher Spencer	✓	✓	✓	✓	<b>USP</b> The book SIMPLY JESUS 1) God who incarnated into human. 2) As human being, no other person willing to die for others but Him. 3) His birth, death & resurrection are unique due to his deity. 4) (John 14:6) the only way, truth & life. 5) (Act 4:12) there is no other saviour in this world & no other brand name can save this world. Only 1 brand name: Jesus Christ.	15). Establishment & Stabilization
								<b>Image</b> Birth star from the east, sheepfold Death cross, crown of thorns, blood, Lamb of God. Resurrectio empty tomb, dawn, women. Color purple robe during his condemnation Taglines (famous quotes:)	

Figure 2 – FBB Matrix.

## The First Movie about Jesus in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century (1801 – 1900 M)

David Shepherd’s “The Silent of Jesus in The Cinema (1897-1927)” released March 2016, confirms the earliest silent films of Jesus were created by Albert Kirchner (aka Lear) on 1897 and the following year-1898 was the work of George Hatot and Louis Lumiere. Most silent films are considered establishing the same meaning as those in the bible. They were literally quoting the verses from the bible both in explaining the moving pictures or vice versa the moving pictures are actually visualizing the bible verses.

Known as the very first movies of Jesus and quoting bible verses in explaining the scenes, it can be inferred that these films are establishing the same meaning as written in the bible. The FBB matrix above indicates there are elements of brand promise, personality, USP and image representing the brand name of Jesus.

## **The Movies about Jesus in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (1901 – 2000 M)**

The largest numbers of sample movies in this writing falls under this category. Six of which are still a silent film while the 1935 “Golgotha” by Julien Duvivier is marking the first “sound film” of Jesus (Shepherd, 2016). FBB matrix shows the movies from 1903 until 1916 are either establishment or establishment and stabilization. They contains the four elements of personal branding. Most movies only portray one brand promise and USP, thus stabilization of meaning here means that the movies have shown more than one element of brand promise and USP.

Nonetheless, INRI (1923) and The King of Kings (1927) are not only establishing but also expanding when they add dramatism even humor to the original stories.

Several movies in this category do not portraying nativity scenes, nevertheless, they can still be considered as stabilizing the biblical meaning of the brand “Jesus”. However, “Jesus de Nazareth” and “Jesus Christ Superstar” are not portraying resurrection scene. Resurrection part is important to Christians that explains the USP #1-God who incarnated into human, it explains that Christians are worshipping the living God. Thus, this leads to a meaning reduction of the brand “Jesus”. Not only the missing resurrection part, in “Jesus Christ Superstar” the adjectives of powerful does not shown and the adjective of love is deflected by the scenes of Mary Magdalene. The fact that Jesus is powerful proved by the miracles he performed and Jesus is love are not correctly visualized in “Jesus Christ Superstar”.

Interestingly, the movie “Jesus of Montreal” can be inferred to have meaning substituted where the whole scenes of the movie are not telling the bible story rather than a group of actors performing “The Passion Play” or inspired by the biography of Jesus. However, such a substitution in meaning is not necessarily regarded as a meaning distortion because as the title already stated “Jesus of Montreal”.

## **The Movies about Jesus in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (2001 – 2100M)**

Four movies are studied here; “The Gospel of John” (2003) is not only establishing and stabilizing the meaning of one person “Jesus”, but also it portrays the most brand promises of Jesus. And Mel Gibson in the following year has stabilized the meaning of that name when he is focusing on the last days of Jesus on earth –the crucifixion. The 2006 Color of the Cross Part 1 by Jean Claude de La Marre is trying to expand the meaning of “Jesus”. The director of that movie is also the leading actor playing “Jesus”. However, a lot of scenes are replacing the biblical narration and therefore, this film is considered expanding yet substituting the meaning of the brand name “Jesus”. For example that Jesus is visualized fainthearted-always running from the authority. Two years ago “Son of God” by Christopher Spencer has successfully portrayed not only three important milestones of Jesus life but it can be said that this film is the most complete one since it visualizes the nativity, death, resurrection as well as the ascension of Jesus to heaven.

## Conclusion

The ninth brand promises of Jesus as quoted from Matthew 9:12-13, he came down to earth to do his father's will and that is to become the ransom for all sinners, he did not come for the righteous. His argument was that not a healthy man needs a doctor, rather the sick. This means that the nature of the brand "Jesus" contains justice. Conviction of the Christians that Jesus' sacrifice on the cross is for all men, everyone deserves salvation (and not just Jews even though he is Jewish) is just. Justice ought to apply in the portrayal of Jesus in films. It is considered equitable for both Christians and non-Christians if filmmaker does not neglect the fact of historical data of the bible when making a movie bearing the brand "Jesus". Although, one can be inspired by the bible when doing creative work though. The work of Denys Arcand "Jesus of Montreal" (1989) is the precise example of it. The film is not meant to tell the story of "Jesus of Nazareth" at the first place, rather vividly the spectacle aware that the film is inspired by the biblical narration of "The Passion Play". When feature films bearing the brand "Jesus of Nazareth", hence it is only just, when both the silent and sound films are portraying historical data from the bible.

Finally, out of fifteen movies from three different centuries, watching the six different languages (French, German, Italian, Spanish, English and Aramaic), but focusing on one brand "Jesus Christ", it is found that some movies especially the earliest ones are establishing the meaning of the name "Jesus", they are visualizing the gospel into moving pictures. Audience can have better understanding after watching these films. Secondly, the FBB matrix above also categorized some movies to stabilize the meaning from the bible. It means they are strengthening or reinforcing the words of the gospel. Media portrayal of "Jesus" is not merely explaining the words of gospel, but also reinforcing the meaning of the name "Jesus". Nonetheless, FBB matrix indicates as well that movies as media portrayal can positively expanding the meaning of the brand "Jesus", but negatively it can also reduce the meaning of that name. Expanding means the creative work does not telling the bible story per se, but on the other side, reducing means the representation is diminishing the value of the brand name. One last category of theory of meaning is that movies can substitute even worse distort the meaning from the truth which is a biblical narration. The author does not find any distorting meaning out of these 15 movies from three different centuries, but several does have a substitutional meaning and the reduction in meaning (FBB Matrix –Figure 2). There are still quite a number of films about Jesus are yet to be studied.

Using the FBB matrix-Figure 2, anyone can decipher feature films about a person (or God in this case) using the personal branding model created within this text, apart from what language it uses even in a silent film. It is a development of Jason Miletsky's branding model and the augmentation of human communication as a biosocial process by DeFleur & Plax plus Jesus' promise and USP concept taken from the book "Simply Jesus".

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