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“My Musical Armor”: Exploring Metalhead Identity through the Battle Jacket

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers the first detailed exploration of the key functions and meanings of battle jackets – sleeveless denim jackets customized with band patches – for heavy metal fans. Drawing upon a dataset of 50 battle jackets collected from Instagram and Reddit, coupled with evidence from questionnaires and comment threads, it identifies three key aspects of battle jackets (sense of community, pursuit of selfhood, and codes of civility/authenticity) that turn it into a cultural biography that is central to a person’s sense of identity and web of memories. It argues that battle jackets should be reconsidered as sophisticated and multifaceted artifacts that have a range of important sociocultural functions embedded in a rich history.

KEYWORDS

Battle jackets; heavy metal; subculture; identity; authenticity; patches

Introduction

Since Led Zeppelin, Deep Purple, and Black Sabbath burst onto the British music scene in the late 1960s, heavy metal has developed into a unique genre with its own subculture of fans – or metalheads – characterized by their long hair or shaven head and leather or denim clothing (Weinstein). One item of apparel that has become particularly associated with this group of aficionados is the battle jacket: a sleeveless denim jacket customized with band patches. Inspired by both military uniforms and the biker scene, the first battle jackets emerged in the mid-1970s and soon became a popular way for metalheads to pledge allegiance to particular bands, express group solidarity, and develop a communal identity (Cardwell). However, like tattoos, the look and placement of patches on these jackets also serve as an expression of self and a reflection of the owner’s personal values, beliefs, and experiences (Rowse et al.).

This paper offers the first detailed exploration of battle jackets. It does so by drawing upon a dataset of 50 battle jackets collected from Instagram and Reddit, as well as evidence provided from questionnaires distributed to their owners and comment sections on owners’ posts. It will identify three key functions of battle jackets – sense of community, pursuit of selfhood, and codes of civility/authenticity – and explore their meanings and importance for owners. Shining a spotlight on these battle jackets will show that they are not curios or insignificant material artifacts, but rather “cultural

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Figure 1. An archetypal battle jacket kindly reproduced with permission of Metalhead2799.

biographies” that are central to a person’s sense of identity and web of memories (Kopytoff, 64) (Figure 1).

A Brief History of Dress and Symbolic Identity

The idea of using symbols for identification and expressions of unity dates back to the Roman Empire when legions carried eagles on their standards to indicate courage and strength (Cardwell, 104). This concept became consolidated in the Middle Ages when royalty and nobles employed personal emblems on their armor and shields to distinguish friends and enemies on the battlefield. Soon, the use of distinct colors and symbols to profess a unique identity was adopted by universities, guilds, and towns. The children of celebrated warriors also started to reuse the symbols of their fathers, thus marking the beginning of heraldry: the use of inherited coats of arms to show family lineage (Wise).

Outside of heraldry, Cardwell notes the practice of customizing clothing as an established part of British folk traditions (108). He cites the examples of Morris dancers who add paper, feathers, sashes, and bells to their costumes, as well as Pearly Kings and Queens: London street-sellers who sew mother-of-pearl buttons onto their garments in distinct patterns to draw attention to themselves. We also see similar traditions of marking clothing with letterman jackets, used by American colleges since 1865 to represent the social identities of athletes and reflect a sense of team spirit and pride of belonging to a particular school (Beltran). Insignia has also played a key role in traditional military dress, serving to indicate the rank of fellow troops and their battalions

(Rosignoli). The use of emblems is also heavily linked to the Boy Scout Movement, founded in Britain in 1907. Drawing on his army background, Lord Baden-Powell issued badges to mark achievements, signal ranks, and display years of service, which were subsequently sewed onto hats, shirts, or blankets (Baden-Powell, 38).

This brief historical overview indicates the long tradition of using symbols on clothing as identity markers. The link between fashion and identity is particularly prominent in music subcultures, where individuals use clothing to express their music tastes, thereby fostering a sense of togetherness centered around exclusivity and shared values (Hebdige; Thornton; Bennett; Jackson; Wilson).

The Role of Clothing in Music Subcultures

In music subcultures, clothing is heavily tied to notions of identity, belonging, and authenticity, and represents a visual statement of a person's cultural values and feeling of community (Hall; Jaimangal-Jones et al.). In his seminal study on subcultures, Hebdige outlined the importance of clothing to various groups, including Teddy boys, mods, rockers, skinheads, and punks, arguing that their "fabricated aesthetics" produce codes that go against mainstream culture and clearly mark out in-groups and out-groups linked by shared interests and experiences (100). Since its initial publication, Hebdige's work has received some criticism for its lack of ethnographic perspective, which fails to recognize the subjective goals, values, and motivations of the social actors themselves.

This critique led to a turn toward post-subcultural research in the 2000s, which uses insights from subcultural individuals to understand what motivates people to dress in a specific way. Muggleton, for example, interviewed 57 people described as "unconventional in their appearance" to explore subcultural identification and dress style (171), while Hodkinson blended participant observation, interviews, and media analysis to explore how goths use clothing to retain and strengthen their group identity.; Willis, on the other hand, has investigated the 1960s hippie and biker subcultures, using a combination of ethnography and homological analysis to assess the importance of clothing in personal expression and the formation of collective identities.

Clothing is particularly important in rock and heavy metal subcultures. While some fashions have changed over the decades, the core elements of denim, leather, spikes, studded belts, tattoos, piercings, band t-shirts, and motorcycle boots or high-top sneakers have largely remained unchanged since the 1970s (Snell and Hodgetts, 440). In marking their bodies transgressively in dark and outwardly aggressive clothing, individuals create a "visual break" with conventional styles, enabling them to perform life narratives and symbolically indicate their membership and adherence to the unspoken rules of the heavy metal subculture (Chaney and Goulding, 157).

For some time, heavy metal was overlooked in studies on subcultural clothing. Knee's work on underground fashion in Britain between 1960 and 1990, for example, neglects heavy metal subculture, while Polhemus' *Street Style* provides a cursory overview of heavy metal fashion, but does not offer any details about its evolution or meanings for individuals. Even seminal works on heavy metal subculture pay little attention to the role of clothing in performing identity (Weinstein; Baka). Savigny and Schaap suggest that, traditionally, heavy metal was perceived as less worthy of attention within subcultural studies and that early works were too often dismissed as "fan writing" (550). In

recent years, a marked change in attitude has been noted thanks to the development of metal music studies, with increased recognition of the importance of clothing to metal-head identity. Key research has been carried out on fashion on the death metal scene (Vasan), the meaning of band t-shirts amongst young people (Brown), and the significance of queerness to heavy metal clothing (Clifford-Napoleone) as well as metal's more general esthetic symbolism (Hickam).

Despite being one of the most easily identifiable symbols of metalheads, battle jackets remain overwhelmingly underresearched. To date, the only study is an unpublished PhD dissertation by Cardwell who places them within the artistic genre of contemporary still life and appropriative painting. Bestley and Burgess have conducted some research on the significance of advertisements in music newspapers for purchasing patches and other artifacts, while advertisements for "Rock Clothing" sew-ins are mentioned briefly by Polhemus. However, neither study provides an insight into how individuals select, organize, and stitch patches onto their jackets. The current paper will take these discussions forward by using firsthand insights from individuals to explore the meanings and functions of their battle jackets.

The Battle Jacket: A Heavy Metal Icon

The battle jacket is most strongly associated with the biker scene and the motorcycle club jackets of its members. Motorcycle clubs were largely established across the US following the Second World War. Many of its members were ex-US Airmen who had tended to decorate their flight jackets with pin-up girls, cartoon characters, and bomb decals for each successful mission. These Airmen started to recontextualize the practice, using cutoff jackets to mark their club affiliation, geographical territory, and individual role and rank within the group (Shields, 14). Similar conventions also sprung up in Japan amongst the Bosozoku biker gangs and in Britain amongst the Rockers and Ton-up Boys (Cardwell, 65). Motorcycle jackets became associated with rebelliousness and, thus, were soon adopted and customized by various youth movements (e.g. punks, skinheads) as external identifiers (Hebdige, 104). As many bikers were also metalheads, they began to personalize their denim and leather jackets with band patches. And so, the battle jacket was born.

As noted by Wiederhorn and Turman, the early years of heavy metal are not well documented, so anecdotal evidence often must be used to reconstruct its history. Because of this, there is no clear agreement on when the term "battle jacket" was introduced to describe a sleeveless jacket modified with band patches. Metal fans born in the 1950s and 1960s state that the battle jacket was known as a "cutoff" or "kutte" (from the German for cutoff) throughout the 1970s and that they first heard the term "battle jacket" employed in the 1980s as its popularity grew and patches started to be sold at concerts. Fans bought these patches and sewed them onto their jackets as proof that they attended the concert. In this way, they worked like military formation patches – known colloquially as "battle patches" – worn by soldiers on sleeves or helmets to identify their division or denote former wartime service (Davis). This association between band patches and battle patches may explain how the name "battle jacket" came to be widely adopted. Unlike "cut off," "battle jacket" also captured the notion of the patches as evidence of its wearer's

experience, thereby authenticating his/her passion for metal and building an individual identity and group allegiance.

More than forty years on, battle jackets continue to be worn today and are still frequently seen at concerts. According to [Cardwell](#), battle jackets remain popular because they are more authentic than band t-shirts, which have become commercialized and are now worn as fashion items by nonmetal fans (89). Battle jackets also show a stronger commitment to metal because they reflect a greater investment of personal time, money, and skill, while their unique designs enable individuals to connect with other fans in ways that are not possible with generic band t-shirts. Overall, the battle jacket's ability to project individual/collective identities and channel memories, relationships, beliefs, and ideologies affirms its importance and stable position in heavy metal subculture.

Research Design

The current study is made up of two stages. In the first stage, I used Instagram to search for owners of battle jackets using the hashtags #battlejacket and #battlevest. This led me to battlejacketslondon, which was founded in 2017 and is currently the largest fan group for battle jackets on the internet with over 35,000 members. Battlejacketslondon runs an online shop where heavy metal fans can buy patches and customized jackets, but their Instagram page is a place for individuals to share images of their jackets and receive feedback on their designs. I contacted the owners of the 100 most recently posted images and asked them if they would be interested in completing a questionnaire about their patch choices and arrangement, as well as what their jacket means to them ([Appendix A](#)). The questionnaire contained open-ended questions only to enable participants to reflect and provide detailed responses about their battle jacket. This method was chosen for several reasons. First, every battle jacket is unique, so it was expected that each participant would answer slightly differently and need an open format to do so. Furthermore, as all responses were going to be subjected to a detailed content analysis, open-ended questions offered the best way to capture a variety of possible answers from the random target population sample. Finally, this format provided a robust alternative to conducting qualitative interviews with all participants, which would have been too time-consuming and costly ([Singer and Couper](#)).

Out of the 100 people contacted, I received 28 replies. As these users largely fell into the 18–24 age bracket, I also posted my questionnaire on the Battle Jackets subgroup on Reddit to attract a wider age range. Reddit was chosen over other platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Pinterest, because it has the second largest battle jacket group on the Internet, made up of almost 30,000 members. It also has a mixture of image-sharing, peer feedback, and detailed discussions, which provide important insights into all aspects of creating a battle jacket. Through Reddit, I received a further 22 responses, bringing the total number to 50.

Overall, 40 of the respondents were male and 10 were female. They ranged between 15 and 59 years old and came from the UK, mainland Europe, the Americas, Asia, and Oceania ([Appendix B](#)). [Rogers](#) notes that heavy metal continues to be a male-dominated genre due to its association with aggression, rage, anti-authority, and sexual objectification of women. This disproportion was reflected in the gender balance of the study's

participants. Age, however, was more balanced, with jackets equally owned by teenagers and mature adults.

In the second stage, I carried out a qualitative content analysis on each questionnaire to identify the key themes emerging from the participants' responses. First, I focused on manifest content, highlighting important words throughout the transcripts. Then, I revisited the highlighted words to identify latent content and derived codes that captured the underlying meanings of battle jackets for participants and helped organize them into meaningful clusters (Patton). The advantage of this approach is that knowledge generated from the analysis comes directly from the participants' data without imposing preconceived categories or theoretical perspectives. To ensure that the questionnaire results were representative, I also looked at the comments posted on the images of each owner's battle jacket and used the same form of content analysis to pinpoint recurring themes. Triangulating these two methods revealed three core aspects of the battle jacket – sense of community, pursuit of selfhood, and codes of civility/authenticity – all of which signal the garment's importance as a cultural biography that plays a key role in identity formation and memory construction. Each theme will be discussed in the subsequent sections of this paper using relevant literature and direct quotations from respondents to provide an overview of the key functions and meanings of battle jackets for metalheads. All respondents have been anonymized and are referred to as "Participant" plus a number.

Analysis: Battle Jackets as Cultural Biographies

The idea that objects can have "social lives" was first developed by Kopytoff in the 1980s. He claimed that things are embedded in frameworks of time and memory, which make them important in the construction of individual and collective identities and turn them into "cultural biographies." In the context of battle jackets, these notions are extremely relevant: their blank canvas enables owners to become active producers of meaning, selecting patches and compositions which allow for complex identity performances that are integral to group (inter)actions. As the jackets gather time, movement, and change, they become invested with meaning through the social interactions in which they are caught up. Therefore, they accumulate their own biographies that are intrinsically tied to their owners' life history. As this analysis will show, battle jackets are inscribed with biographical and historical resonances that move them beyond simple material artifacts into "active life presences" that signal elements of their owners' identities, lived experiences, and memories (Rowse, 334).

Sense of Community

Central to the cultural biography of the battle jacket is sense of community. Owners see their jackets as forms of "musical tribalism" that establishes them as belonging to a particular group, in this case metalheads. In wearing their jackets, users distinguish themselves from mainstream culture, marking themselves as "insiders" who have a deep lifestyle commitment to heavy metal music and subculture (Cardwell). The jacket's patches act as a set of "symbolic resources" that project a group image, carry a feeling of collectivity, and represent a material construct of solidarity with other heavy metal fans

(Widdicombe and Wooffitt, 24). These beliefs were affirmed by many of the questionnaire respondents. Participant 1 stated that the jacket is “a symbol that you’re part of a wider culture” while Participant 4 felt that it gave her “a particular feeling of belonging” whenever she wore it. Participant 35 also recognized that the battle jacket “represents a tradition within the metal community passed down through generations” while Participant 38 described it as “mandatory . . . a trademark” amongst metalheads. Here, we see how the jacket acquires meaning based on its status as a deeply embedded social practice in the heavy metal subculture. Users place great importance on maintaining this tradition, viewing the jacket as a constant and unwavering symbol of heavy metal fandom.

The importance of tradition in building a sense of community is particularly apparent in the responses of young fans who describe their jackets as an “initiation ritual” or “rite of passage” that marked their entrance into the heavy metal subculture. Some even stated that they took advice from “veterans” at heavy metal concerts before creating their jackets to ensure that they stayed true to the original designs. Twigg notes that, in mainstream culture, young people tend to develop their own trends. However, in heavy metal subculture, a different practice is at work, with young people actively seeking to replicate the jacket style of older people who have the experience to guide them on appropriate subcultural norms. In a similar vein, we see older people continuing to wear a jacket style associated with their youth as a way of symbolically resisting the “age-appropriate” rules of society and even gaining subcultural capital from younger peers for their rebellious choices. Thus, through advice-sharing and knowledge transfer, the jacket is co-created, its meaning dependent on its relationship with peers.

For many participants, the battle jacket also has a quasi-religious or cult function because it is seen to represent a group commitment to “protect” heavy metal and ensure its longevity. When explaining their rationale, several people quoted the title of a well-known Judas Priest song: “We are defenders of the faith.” Repeating this idea of “sacredness,” respondents also described the jacket as embodying “metal as a lifestyle” (Participants 15, 38) or “metal as a way of thinking” (Participant 6) rather than just music because it enabled wearers to do their own thing, not depend on the mainstream, and stand up for themselves. This view was also seconded by a comment posted on one of the images: “I wear it to the store, to work, to pick up at daycare, the kids’ ice hockey practice, on tour, on stage. I don’t really see the jacket as something for special occasions. Either you use it or you don’t. Either you’re a metalhead or you’re not.” These quotations clearly situate the jacket within a communal setting, stressing its symbolism as a collective identity display of not just a person’s music taste, but also his/her broader ideologies and life values. In emphasizing the dichotomy between those who wear jackets and those who do not further singles out the heavy metal subculture and highlights its cultish aspects of bringing together people with a common vision of the world and alienating “ordinary” citizens (Gross). Nonetheless, some participants recognized that the jacket could also serve a “missionary function” and could be used to “convert” others to “the cause” (Participant 5). This was seconded by Participant 35: “I want people to be intrigued by my jacket, hopefully leading them to discover metal.” These testimonies reveal a complexity in the battle jacket, suggesting that building a sense of community is not necessarily linked to a “subculture of alienation” (Arnett) and that metalheads are

open to outsiders if they are willing to adopt the codes of dress, appearance, and behavior associated with heavy metal subculture.

Another key aspect of being part of a community is obtaining peer approval. As [Gabriel and Lang](#) note, identity is not just about creating and projecting an image; it is also about commanding respect from others and seeking to validate both individual and collective identities through social interactions. While many battle jacket owners seek peer validation at concerts (as we have seen above), social media also provides a way to obtain ratification from others. Instagram comment threads show many examples of users praising jackets for their overall look (“Sick vest”; “Battle vest goals”) while others commend the owners themselves for their talent (“I wish I could sew like you”; “You’re so artistic”). Other comments are more specific and relate to the chosen bands (“Another Cannibal Corpse fan. I see you’re a man of good taste”; “Every band a winner. All killer, no filler”) or the general composition of the jacket (“I really appreciate that symmetry”; “This jacket is so well put together that it’s orgasmic”). Other comments go one step further and plead with owners to share where they bought a particular patch (“I need that Type O Negative patch. Where did you get it?”) or jokingly ask owners to give away their patches (“How much do you want for that Blood Incantation patch?”). In posting their jackets and receiving validation from peers through likes, comments, and reposts, owners become “shills” ([Goffman](#)), i.e. worthy spokespeople for the entire metal community who have valuable knowledge to disclose to others. This recognition as legitimate members of the metal community also imbues them with “cultural capital” ([Bourdieu](#)).

On the flipside, when this seal of approval is not met, feedback can be potentially face-threatening and directly challenge the jacket’s role in community-building: “It was looking good until I saw the Black Album by Metallica”; “Remove Motley Crue NOW. Lame”; “Yuck”; “Ewwwwwww.” Many participants claimed that they did not really care what other people thought about their jackets, which was, in their view, the “essence” of heavy metal culture. As Participant 2 succinctly put it, “I get hate for what’s on my jacket but in the end it’s what I like so fuck it.” These comments stress the way that the jacket cannot be separated from the broader discourses and ideologies of heavy metal subculture: even in expressing collective identity, tensions can arise between fans of different bands, yet these tensions are not seen as major sources of conflict, but rather as an accepted aspect of the heavy metal lifestyle and self-image. In some cases, users jump in to defend the owner’s jacket, asking the “hater” to “let people enjoy what they want, man,” “respect different opinions,” or “remember that we’re all metalheads at the end of the day.” By drawing upon the notion of heavy metal fans being a collective despite individual tastes within the community, these users seek to break sub-boundaries and emphasize what fans have in common rather than what divides them.

The idea of the battle jacket as a bonding mechanism across metal subgenres was stressed by many respondents who felt that seeing somebody in a jacket automatically made them feel favorable toward him/her. As Participant 5 from Ireland reflected, “You might be total strangers, but you see the jacket and you know you’re united in your love for metal.” These thoughts were echoed by Participant 13: “When you’re wearing the jacket and you meet another metalhead on your stroll, you give each other a nod and a smile.” This suggests that, while the battle jacket may single out individual sub-groups within concert or festival settings (e.g. fans of black metal, thrash metal, glam metal), when navigating everyday life, it serves as a reassuring “beacon” (Participant 41) that

unites the more general group of like-minded heavy metal fans, creates a central talking point between them, and may even spark new and lasting friendships. These views provide support for [Lonsdale and North](#) claim that people who like the same music genre naturally gravitate toward one another. Although not stated by participants, we must also recognize that this “beacon” can be problematic, making metalheads the target of abuse from those outside their community who view them as “other” (see [Jones](#)).

While heavy metal is often portrayed as a sectarian genre, on the whole, respondents felt that the jacket was “inclusive” as long as it was “all about the music.” In other words, when creating jackets, metalheads should put political or religious viewpoints aside and allow the music to take precedent. Despite these statements, some respondents did take advantage of the jacket as a “moving billboard” to express political views, but interestingly, these views were in direct opposition to the far-right Nazi rhetoric that has typically been a troubling aspect of heavy metal subculture (see [Fangen](#)). Instead, patches were deliberately chosen from bands with LGBTQ or ethnic minority members or even non-music-related patches, such as Antifa or Black Lives Matter. Some participants also stated that seeing band patches associated with fascism, racism, or toxic masculinity on a jacket “immediately tells me who I definitely want to avoid” (Participant 9). These practices show how the meanings of the battle jacket are constantly evolving and that, even within a tight-knit community, individuals are prepared to challenge offensive behavior. This micro-scale action is reflective of a wider macro-scale action against right-wing rhetoric by heavy metal fans in recent years ([Kelly](#)).

Pursuit of Selfhood

While battle jackets are associated with a collective identity amongst metalheads, they are also central to individual performances of selfhood ([Cardwell](#), 217; [Kahn-Harris](#), 20). No one jacket is the same; each is customized according to its owner’s personal music tastes, patch preferences, and compositional choices. Participant 9 described his jacket as “a distinct representation of my individuality and personality” while others described it as “an extension of myself” (Participant 14), “a reflection of me” (Participant 30), and “an introduction of myself without words and without formalities” (Participant 24). In their study of hip-hop fashion, [Baxter and Marina](#) found a similar trend: individuals generally conformed to the fashion expectations of hip-hop to maintain a sense of community, yet customized their style to put their own unique spin on it (e.g. t-shirt size, trouser bagginess, braid style). This customization is essential in showcasing individuality in ways that will gain recognition amongst particular sub-groups within the heavy metal subculture.

Research on folk quilting and embroidery has often made reference to the symbolic nature of quilts, with each assembled fragment reading as a narrative of the owner’s life (see [Parker](#)). Battle jackets operate in a similar way, with both young and old owners agreeing that each patch on their jackets can be read as an entry on a timeline that marks age, place, and state of mind at the moment of purchase. In describing his Black Sabbath back patch, Participant 13 reflected that, “[It] derives from the album TYR where Tony Iommi was the only member from the original lineup. The TYR tour was my first Black Sabbath concert and I saw them in Stockholm 1990. With this back patch I like to think that I stand true to the name Black Sabbath and Tony Iommi. That I have supported them

through thick and thin.” Equally, Participant 12 recalls, “I wanted to display my love for Metallica by choosing to represent them as the center-piece on my back. . . . I owe them for my heavy music taste. I saw them for the first time in August 2017. I was in the pit for that show.” Reflecting more generally on his jacket’s symbology, Participant 22 stated, “It is a conglomeration of the bands that helped form my musical identity. . . . It’s a representation of my metal journey.” These memories show how a collective subcultural fashion garment can take on individual meaning through its strong emotional subtext embedded in personal experiences (Batty).

Older owners of battle jackets tend to view their patches nostalgically as memories of their youth. This notion of the jacket as a time capsule is reflected in the fact that most had not modified their jackets since the 1980s, thus demonstrating a strong allegiance to certain bands which have lasted the test of time. Participant 44 mused, “You can read the story of my teenage years through my battle jacket,” while Participant 11 equally agreed, “I spent most of my youth in this thing. My whole youth is on this jacket.” Young owners, on the other hand, view the jacket as part of an incomplete journey that is constantly edited as they develop new tastes or see new bands live. Participant 9 explained, “As I find newer bands I enjoy a lot, I have started adding those. I also replace patches with new ones that I like over other ones.” Some younger fans expressed anxiety at placing a patch on their jacket as it was “a sign of commitment” to a band and they wanted to explore other bands before “settling down” (Participant 14). In using words associated with a romantic relationship, we see how battle jacket owners become involved in a process of “ensoulment” (Jung et al.), i.e. their jackets acquire a unique value that is inseparable from their material existence. The close bond that individuals have with their unique designs is also reflected in the language that many use to describe their jacket: “my old faithful,” “my old friend,” “my pride and joy,” “my whole life,” and “my precious.” Comment threads show how the jacket is also personified by some owners: “He’s going out on his maiden voyage tonight”; “He’s ready to rock this weekend in Birmingham.” Personifying the inanimate jacket creates a sense of emotional immediacy and deeper connection between the owner and the object. Most owners also emphasized their jackets’ irreplaceability and uniqueness: “If there were to be a fire at home, I would make sure to grab my jacket before running away!” (Participant 4); “Over time, I began to realize that my battle jacket was not just a thing to show off to others; it became a part of who I am. . . . To not wear it makes me feel like a piece of myself is missing. . . . I would never dare give it up for anything in the world” (Participant 26).

Green notes that, when people remember music memories, they often construct their personal narratives in relation to group narratives, interpreting and remembering them using shared frameworks. This is apparent in the patches of some individuals, which were chosen because they reminded them of certain family members or friends. As Participant 43 explained, “I’m not really a fan of Exodus, but my girlfriend loves them, so I wear them here on my heart.” In placing patches associated with loved ones close to their heart, owners show their awareness of the esthetic, musical, and ideological properties of their jackets, turning them into unique forms of “material individuality” (Cardwell, 60).

The weaving of personal and collective narratives is also discernable in the frequent passing down of jackets from mothers and fathers to their children when they have “come of age.” Participant 5 recalls her father presenting her with his battle jacket on her eighteenth birthday, a moment that she describes as “truly emotional.” Just as the

parent's story is deeply entwined with the child's story in life, so it is played out in miniature through the battle jacket. The upcycling of old patches onto the battle jacket also makes this entwinement clear. Participant 48 recalled, "This Whitesnake patch actually used to be on a pair of jeans my dad wore in the '80s. When he finally threw them out, we decided to rescue the patch and put it right here." According to a comment posted on Instagram, these cherished family memories bound up with battle jackets make them "far more valuable than any Gucci item." The way that an individual's jacket and patches can transfer to another person who then adapts them in their own pursuit of selfhood emphasizes the multifunctionality of the battle jacket as a physical embodiment of individual and collective identities and experiences (Komter).

In addition to band choices and their link with specific music or familial memories, most participants agreed that layout was central to expressions of individuality – see O'Hagan for a detailed analysis of semiotics and battle jackets. Explaining their choice of layout, some fans stated that they were guided by links between bands: "Thin Lizzy is next to Gary Moore, Iron Maiden next to Samson, Black Sabbath next to Rainbow and Dio" (Participant 5). For others, it was more important to achieve a balance and harmony between patches: "I try to get symmetrical. Only black/white/red" (Participant 2). A limited number of participants admitted that they were just "guided by instinct" (Participant 16) and that to make the jacket too planned would lose the "chaotic energy" (Participant 22) associated with heavy metal music. For many, the act of arranging and sewing patches was also integral to their sense of selfhood: "Sewing represents my dedication to the scene" (Participant 25); "It shows my deep personal investment in heavy metal" (Participant 36). Participants also reflected on their own creative processes, with many stating that they listened to the music of the band whose patch they were sewing "to get in the mood" and "feel inspired."

Almost half of the participants stated that they owned several battle jackets, each representing the different heavy metal subgenres that they liked. In this case, fabric seems to play an important part in individual design choices, with black denim being chosen for black metal, death metal, and thrash sub-genres and blue denim being reserved for hard rock, power metal, or NWOBHM (New Wave of British Heavy Metal) subgenres. As Participant 43 explained, "The black represents isolation, hate, and death, while the blue is more social and friendly." These examples clearly indicate the instability of self and suggest that having a repertoire of battle jackets enables owners to adopt different roles and identities according to their mood, social setting, or audience (Larsson, 98). In this way, the jacket acts as a "costume" that helps wearers express, emancipate, and transform themselves both physically and mentally (Chaney and Goulding).

Strongly linked with the idea of "costume" is the feeling of protection and security that the jacket confers upon individuals. The idea that personal possessions, such as clothing, can make a person feel safe is well-established in literature on psychology and memory studies. According to Habermas and Paha, objects can offer their owners "protection" by reminding them of happy moments in their life, providing familiarity, and, thus, enhancing their mood (5). This came across in the various ways that participants described their jackets: "my magic cloak," "my musical armor," "my metal armor," "my suit of armor," "my security blanket," "my cloak of protection," "my shield." According to Participant 10, wearing the jacket made him "feel untouchable and safe." Others described it as giving them "a real confidence boost" (Participant 11) or making them

become “more powerful” (Participant 31) whenever they put it on. Some individuals used negative stereotypes about heavy metal fans to their own advantage: one Reddit user posted a selfie in a battle jacket with the caption, “The key to a peaceful trek through post-Christmas Walmart.” In this case, the user’s projected image as somebody scary, intimidating, and violent enables him to enjoy a stress-free shopping trip.

Chaney and Goulding note that clothing can often acquire “magical and irrational properties” as it enables people to escape their everyday lives and take on new identities. This is evident in the battle jacket as a surprising number of metalheads revealed that they started their jackets after being victims of bullying at school and looking for a way to “become immersed in a different world” (Participant 5). As one respondent put it, “The more outward the expression of love for what some consider strange music means the more resilient one can become from criticism” (Participant 15). These connotations of the jacket as a protective armor or shield embed it within the historical context of heraldry and highlight its deeply personal psychological meanings for owners.

Codes of Civility and Authenticity

The previous sections have demonstrated how the customization of battle jackets is heavily guided by an individual’s pursuit for selfhood, as well as his/her sense of collective belonging to the heavy metal community. Nonetheless, codes of civility are also central to the definition and creation of the battle jacket. Familiarity with the implicit standards of conduct, traditions, and social refinements of the battle jacket guides not just belonging to the heavy metal subculture, but also hierarchies within it. If these tacit rules are not followed by users, it can lead to challenges to their authenticity, which ultimately impacts their sense of selfhood and group belonging (Eisenstadt and Giesen).

Most battle jacket owners agreed that failure to adhere to the unspoken rules of etiquette on patch choice is a major boundary marker. They felt that proper battle jackets must have a large patch in the center of their back and that this patch should represent a person’s all-time favorite band. Participants often used words with strong deontic modality, such as “must,” “need,” and “should,” to emphasize their point: “The back patch absolutely must be your favorite band” (Participant 13); “You need a big patch for your favorite band” (Participant 35). Most respondents also emphasized that a proper battle jacket should not contain more than one patch by each band. Participant 32 described his first jacket as “amateur” because he “made the mistake of being overzealous with Revenge patches.” This rule was apparent from comments on Instagram, which often criticized jacket owners for replicating the same band (“Ridiculous Metallica overdose”; “Looks like a Judas Priest fetish”) or made sarcastic remarks about their frequency of occurrence (“Can anyone guess their favorite band?”; “I guess this person is not into Megadeth”; “I have a feeling he might like Black Sabbath”). The only exception to this rule was when a fan chose to use the jacket as a tribute to one band only (e.g. all patches by Slayer), which was often praised by commenters as being original.

Respondents also stressed that owners should not mix metal subgenres on the same jacket or at least try to keep them separated from each other by using boundary markers such as the jacket’s seam. Instead, they advise having several battle jackets, each dedicated to a different metal subgenre. Again, comment threads provide clues to the importance of these rules for fans. On a jacket featuring mainly NWOBHM bands, one user wrote,

“Nice but System of Down and Rage Against don’t match the rest. You can’t mix genres.” Likewise, on a largely thrash jacket, one fan commented, “You may wanna remove that Manowar. It doesn’t match.” A small group of respondents felt that the battle jacket should be kept “pure” by featuring only obscure bands rather than well-known groups. Comment threads show critiques of some jackets for being too mainstream (“This is a jacket full of beginner bands”; “Poser”), but also credit jackets when they feature lesser known bands (“Tales of Terror! So obscure but that’s what makes it cooler”; “Godflesh getting some love, I see. You don’t see that often!). Here, we see the subtle hierarchies that play out within the metal community based on a person’s understanding and internalization of the battle jacket’s unspoken rules.

The arrangement of patches is another major bone of contention for individuals. A large proportion of respondents agreed that it was a massive social error to cover every area of the jacket with patches. One particularly angry fan used the comment thread on Instagram to quote the Motorhead song in reference to the overuse of patches: “Overkill. Overkill. Overkill.” Nonetheless, other fans felt that a real battle jacket was one that had no spare space. They linked this to the traditional German “kutte” style of the 1980s, arguing that it embedded their jackets in the origins of heavy metal and, therefore, made them more authentic. Many fans also believed that it was disrespectful to stitch one patch on top of another. For some, this issue was esthetic (“It makes the jacket look really ugly,” Participant 42), while for others, the issue concerned the jacket’s social life (“In patching over something, you’re erasing history, you’re erasing a part of you,” Participant 45).

Another issue related to the use of full-sized patches. Most respondents were in agreement that jackets should only feature one large patch and that it should be placed in the center of the back as “it sets the tone” (Participant 12) and “you have to build around it” (Participant 20). Comments on posts of jackets with multiple full-sized patches are largely negative, with users being described as “too ambitious” or “inappropriate.” Despite these unofficial rules, some respondents had their own personal motives for arranging patches in certain ways. Participant 31, for example, explained that he put death metal bands on the back of the jacket because he has a “strong back from lifting weights” and death metal is musically powerful. In rebelling against the expected composition of the battle jacket, owners seek to put their own stamp on the garment, but in doing so, they risk losing credibility amongst peers. This indicates the complexity of balancing individuality with group identity and tacit subcultural norms when creating a battle jacket. Inability to harmonize these three aspects can threaten the owner’s face and frame him/her as inexperienced and unknowledgeable (Cardwell).

Correct sewing techniques are also another contentious issue amongst battle jacket owners. There was a general consensus that patches had to be stitched onto the jacket by the owner because this demonstrated “effort and dedication to metal” (Participant 5) and felt “more rewarding” (Participant 26). Participant 40 described the act of sewing patches as “therapeutic” while Participant 31 called it “a ritual” and Participant 28 stated, “It’s a cardinal rule that a metalhead has to DIY.” Many male respondents recognized that sewing was a typically feminine practice but argued that the act of creating a battle jacket turned it into a masculine act tied up with heavy metal fandom, power, and aggression. Respondents also stated that stitches on jackets should be neat or, at least, an “organized mess” (Participant 8). These feelings were generally echoed in Instagram comment

threads: “Bit sloppy”; “Terrible sewing.” Here, we see metalheads positioning themselves as unofficial experts on sewing, awarding subcultural capital to those who are deemed to know the “correct” way of stitching. Respondents were also almost unanimously in agreement about their dislike of iron-on patches, which were seen to be too commercial and phony. Angry comments on Instagram noted, “Iron-on patches aren’t metal” and “This should be burned imho.”

Possessing a tacit understanding of appropriate patch choices, arrangement, and sewing techniques is key to being accepted into the metal community, but it is also closely interrelated with the notion of authenticity. [Cardwell](#) defines authenticity as being true to oneself but also to one’s peer community (80), while [Thornton](#) sees it as not trying too hard to fit in (12). Authenticity has long been recognized as a central aspect of subcultural discourse, particularly within the punk rock and heavy metal musical subcultures ([Hebdige](#); [Weinstein](#); [Barker and Taylor](#)). According to [Larsson](#), this authenticity has three key elements: longevity, specialist knowledge, and codes of dress, all of which can be identified in the battle jacket.

Most respondents agreed that authenticity is shown through the time and effort taken to select certain patches. As Participant 5 stated, “Finding the right patches is important. The patches I own are often collector/rare.” This was explained further by Participant 19: “It’s important to find patches that have personal or symbolic meaning to you. You can’t just put any old patch on your jacket.” When describing the process of buying patches, owners regularly use the word “hunt,” thereby emphasizing the painstaking method of seeking, pursuing, and finally “capturing” their chosen designs. Participants also note that collectible or rare patches are important in gaining respect from peers and, therefore, carry value not only in terms of monetary worth, but also in signaling status. Such is the significance of collectible and rare patches that one participant stated that she did not begin creating her battle jacket until she had the financial means to acquire exactly what she wanted (Participant 4). The fact that some patches are not financially accessible to everybody indicates how certain hierarchies can form within the heavy metal subculture that are dictated by people’s economic capital.

For many jacket owners, another key aspect of authenticity is being able to showcase music knowledge when asked about specific patches. Participant 13 mused that “If someone comes up to me and compliments me on a certain patch and asks what’s my favorite song or album with that particular band, I need to give an honest or knowledgeable answer or I would be as bad as that person who buys a Slayer shirt at a fashion store when they’ve never heard a single song.” This was echoed by Participant 44 who likened his practice of buying patches to earning badges in the Boy Scouts: “You should only get a patch if you’ve done something to deserve it.” When asked to elaborate on what he considered “deserving,” he explained, “You know, if you’ve seen the band in concert or met them or their music had an impact on your life. You need to be able to defend your choice of patch and be prepared to answer questions about it if asked by other metalheads.” [Allett](#) describes this phenomenon as “connoisseurship” (172), whereby status and authenticity are given to fans who can exhibit knowledge and mastery of the subject. [Baka](#) and [Cardwell](#) have found that, unlike other subcultures, metal fans are unlikely to wear clothing without a commitment to the music that it represents. For this reason, many respondents were keen to call out “posers” or “pretenders” who bought pre-made battle

jackets from shops without knowing anything about the bands. According to Participant 5, these types of jackets were “soulless and phony.”

Kidder claims that style cannot be separated from the social practices involved in its creation. In the case of battle jackets, these practices involve the actions of searching for particular patches and sewing them onto the jacket (as we have seen above) as well as elements of the live concert experience, such as head-banging, moshing, crowd surfing, and stagediving. For many respondents, it was the way that these two practices combined – the creation and the use – that makes the jacket truly authentic: “There are beer stains, blood stains, probably some vomit, dirt ground into the denim. It’s like a living memorial to all of the shows and good times that I’ve had with friends” (Participant 9). This was seconded by Participant 35: “You can’t wash it! If you do wash it, then you’ve failed as a metalhead. It’s meant to smell of the pit: beer, sweat, mud, and blood.” Other respondents also described the jacket’s subtle rips and tears as “bringing out the soul” (Participant 12) or “mosaics” of the concert experiences (Participant 5). These aspects grant the jacket a symbolic value that attest to its use and signal that the owner is authentic.

Respondents also stated that authenticity is reflected in the jacket’s accouterments that go beyond the use of patches. Studs, chains, hand-painted logos, badges, spikes, and buttons were all considered elements that showed dedication, personal investment and, therefore, authenticity: “It’s the little additions that give the jacket more character” (Participant 50). Other signs of authenticity were the creative use of resources, such as dental floss to sew, a coin shoved into a bottle cap to make a thimble, and a lighter to melt the ends of the jacket, or stitched-on festival wristbands to prove the person was in attendance. Authenticity is also granted to a jacket if it has come into close contact with a famous musician. As Participant 38 noted, “My jacket is stage-worn by Doug Scarratt of Saxon, so it has a special meaning for me,” while Participant 26 explained that the inside of his jacket is signed by musicians he has met, which gives him “the feeling that their spirit is with me.”

Another sign of authenticity for many respondents is the use of denim. Participant 15 claimed, “I like how [metal] takes something as simple as a few panels of denim and recontextualizes it as a canvas which in turn models the uniform of a working-class laborer into the most iconic part of metal and outsider fashion.” Here, denim’s original associations with counter-capitalism and manual labor give it a symbolic quality that is seen as authentic (Cardwell, 87). Equally, respondents link authenticity to jackets being worn by older fans, particularly if the jacket or patches were originally created in the 1980s. As Participant 43 stated, “I really admire those older guys. They’ve been there, done that, got the jacket, so to speak.” This fits with the findings of studies by Larsson and Widdicombe and Wooffitt who found that the time a person has been involved in a culture has a direct effect on the level of authenticity ascribed to them and the amount of cultural capital they gain from peers.

Concluding Discussion

Using first-hand evidence from battle jacket owners, this study has explored the functions and meanings of battle jackets. It has found that battle jackets are a sophisticated and multifaceted artifact with their own “social life” embedded in a rich and broad history.

Battle jackets are both a reflection of an individual's personality and his/her belonging to heavy metal subculture, but also an embodiment of a particular way of living and thinking, with each patch representing a key moment in his/her life. The huge investment of time, effort, and money that goes into their creation shows owners' deep lifestyle commitment to heavy metal, while the "battle scars" that mark it – blood, sweat, vomit, rips, or tears – indicate their entwinement with heavy metal practices, such as attending concerts or music festivals.

Battle jackets can serve as initiation rituals, coming of age tokens, tapestries of life, heirlooms, missionaries, protective shields, and confidence boosts. They can encapsulate good times with friends and families, nostalgia for youth, or excitement at the memories to come. In addition, they are gateways to building and maintaining friendships, commanding respect, and gaining cultural capital amongst peers, but they can also be face-threatening if somebody disagrees with their content or an outsider wrongly interprets the code. For many, patches must be earned through knowledge, longevity, or concert attendance, and owners must be prepared to explain and defend their choices if asked. These subtleties, whereby status is granted according to wisdom, age, experience, and even wealth, create a unique hierarchy within the heavy metal subculture. Jackets also have their own in-language, reflected in the visual syntax and symbolic meanings of patches, which must be learned. Only when somebody appropriates the codes of civility concerning patch choice, arrangement and sewing are they considered to be an authentic member of the metal community. These unique characteristics indicate the complexity of the battle jacket as both a tool for inclusion and group acceptance, but also a mechanism for exclusion and boundary-making for those who lack the appropriate social, economic, or cultural capital.

Together, these aspects emphasize the battle jacket as a form of cultural biography, which is encapsulated concisely by Participant 30:

My jacket represents to me where I've come from, and who I used to be. Every time I wore it, I remembered epic shows: getting beer poured in my ponytails, crowdsurfing, chatting on the patio with strangers in a drunken, smoky haze. And I remember growing up! I remember breaking hearts, getting my heart broken. I remember all the new bands I discovered and how they felt like the greatest thing in the world at the time. I remember getting into fights, spraypainting walls, being trouble. But I also remember the deep depression and other issues I had that, at the end of it all, kinda felt ingrained in the jacket. It feels like an old friend now, the embodiment of who I used to be, who I can look back on fondly sometimes. But sometimes it's a lot of regret.

The findings of this study have highlighted the important role of the battle jacket in heavy metal subculture and make an important contribution to the fields of material/popular culture more generally and heavy metal/fandom studies more specifically. However, I also hope that it acts as a springboard to encourage further research into this scarcely investigated area. While my online data collection method enabled me to communicate with battle jacket owners across the world, it, nonetheless, meant that those without digital access or digital literacy were excluded. Furthermore, my sample, which predominantly consisted of 16–56-year-old Western males, unintentionally reflected heavy metal stereotypes. Therefore, an important next step would be to conduct targeted data collection of less well-documented battle jacket owners, such as women, ethnic minorities, and non-Western fans. Complimenting online data collection with interviews at concerts or festivals would achieve a broader sample of battle jacket owners and facilitate

a better understanding of the way that the jacket creates friendships and bonds between people. Combining ethnographic observations with social semiotic analyses would also draw greater attention to how choices and arrangements of patches are embedded in individual ideas and attitudes, socially situated activities, and heavy metal subcultural traditions.

On their 1981 song “Denim and Leather,” Saxon claimed, “Denim and Leather brought us all together, it was you that set the spirit free.” The battle jacket truly encapsulates these words. As long as fans continue to adorn their jackets with patches and wear them with pride, heavy metal subculture will remain strong, distinct, and full of character.

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Appendix A. Questionnaire

Gender:

Age:

Location:

1. When did you start collecting patches/working on your battle jacket?
2. What made you decide to start doing it?
3. What does the jacket mean to you? What does it represent?

4. Explain to me your choice of patches.
5. Explain to me your choice of arrangement on the jacket.
6. Do you wear your jacket? If so, on which occasions? If not, why not?
7. Where do you get your patches from?
8. Do you sew them on yourself?

Please add anything else relevant here about your experience or feelings about battle jackets.

Appendix B. Participants

Participant 1	Male	19	UK
Participant 2	Male	21	Netherlands
Participant 3	Male	18	USA
Participant 4	Female	32	France
Participant 5	Female	29	Ireland
Participant 6	Male	18	Austria
Participant 7	Male	27	UK
Participant 8	Male	18	USA
Participant 9	Male	29	USA
Participant 10	Male	19	Canada
Participant 11	Female	45	USA
Participant 12	Male	24	USA
Participant 13	Male	47	Sweden
Participant 14	Male	21	USA
Participant 15	Male	25	UK
Participant 16	Male	28	Germany
Participant 17	Male	16	USA
Participant 18	Male	16	UK
Participant 19	Male	20	Germany
Participant 20	Male	29	USA
Participant 21	Male	20	Belgium
Participant 22	Male	25	USA
Participant 23	Female	16	USA
Participant 24	Male	16	UK
Participant 25	Female	17	USA
Participant 26	Male	23	USA
Participant 27	Male	23	USA
Participant 28	Male	30	Canada
Participant 29	Male	18	USA
Participant 30	Female	20	USA
Participant 31	Male	22	Canada
Participant 32	Male	27	Australia
Participant 33	Male	19	Sweden
Participant 34	Male	21	USA
Participant 35	Male	16	UK
Participant 36	Male	15	USA
Participant 37	Male	35	Finland
Participant 38	Male	56	Brazil
Participant 39	Male	37	Germany
Participant 40	Male	56	Finland
Participant 41	Female	30	Italy
Participant 42	Female	42	Spain
Participant 43	Male	25	UK
Participant 44	Male	59	UK
Participant 45	Male	29	Japan
Participant 46	Female	32	Sweden
Participant 47	Male	29	UK
Participant 48	Female	31	Romania
Participant 49	Male	20	USA
Participant 50	Male	42	Spain