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Introduction

Heavy metal is a genre of music that emerged in the late 1960s and is traditionally characterised by distorted guitar sounds, heavy drumbeats and wailing or whining vocals. Heavy metal has its own subculture to which fans affirm their membership through buying albums and attending concerts, as well as growing their hair long, getting tattoos and wearing denim and leather (Weinstein 2000:294). For most 'metalheads', the battle jacket—a sleeveless denim jacket covered with band patches—is an iconic item of clothing, which works as a complex symbol of their individual and collective identity and plays a key role in memory construction, social interactions and status relations. The battle jacket has its origins in WW2 flight jackets and the 1950's biker scene, where symbols and artwork were used to express one's personality or develop group solidarity. Its popularity grew in the 1980s as patches began to be sold at concerts, which fans added to their jackets to authenticate their passion for metal and serve as a cultural biography of their life experiences.

The battle jacket is a unique, multifaceted material artefact which provides a vernacular genealogy of heavy metal. However, it has only received scant attention in academic research. Of the few studies on clothing in heavy metal subculture, most have tended to explore band t-shirts (Brown 2007), as well as the role of certain dress codes (Araste and Ventsel 2015) and how clothing is used to 'perform' identity (Chaney and Goulding 2016). To date, the most extensive study on battle jackets is an unpublished PhD thesis by Cardwell (2017), which aims to situate the garment in deeper artistic narratives and traditions. However, no attempt has yet been made to carry out a case study of battle jackets, drawing upon social semiotics and ethnography to gain a better understanding of the creative process behind the choice and arrangement of patches and their meanings for owners.

Thus, this article will bring together multimodal analysis and ethnographic insights in order to explore three different types of battle jacket: the 'classic' jacket, the 'tribute' jacket and the 'modern' jacket. By supporting visual observations with detailed information provided

by owners, this study will identify the motivations and connections between semiotic choices and personal/collective identity. In doing so, it will demonstrate the importance of embedding options of word, image, colour, texture and typography in a broader sociocultural context and considering specific genre conventions and canons of use. Overall, it will bring about a reassessment of the importance of battle jackets as a sophisticated sociocultural object, offer new ways to approach the study of material artefacts and highlight the benefits of combining social semiotics with ethnography to achieve an integrated view of the socioculturally-induced meanings and functions of signs.

A Brief History of the Battle Jacket

Using symbols to mark identity has a rich history that can be traced back to the standards carried by legions in Ancient Rome, but it became consolidated as a concept in the Middle Ages when royalty and nobles employed personal emblems on their armour and shields to distinguish friends and enemies on the battlefield (Cardwell 2017:104). The practice of customising clothing with personal markers is also an established part of British folk traditions, as seen in the costumes of Morris dancers or the shiny suits of Pearly Kings and Queens.[1] Similar customs can also be found in the letterman jackets of American colleges, the insignia of traditional military dress and the badges of the Boy Scout Movement.

While this short historical overview indicates the long tradition of using symbols as indicators of identity, the battle jacket itself is mostly strongly associated with the 1950's biker scene and outlaw motorcycle clubs. Many of these clubs were founded in the USA by ex-WW2 airmen who had decorated their flight jackets with words and illustrations detailing their combat exploits. These airmen began recontextualizing the practice, using cut-off jackets to mark their motorcycle club affiliation, geographical territory and individual role/rank within the group. Around the same time, similar conventions emerged in Japan amongst the

[1] London costermongers who raise money for charity by dressing extravagantly.

Bosozuku biker gangs and in Britain amongst the Rockers and Ton-up boys (Cardwell 2017:65). Motorcycle jackets became associated with rebelliousness and were adopted by various youth movements, including punks, skinheads and metalheads, who added patches, studs, spikes and chains as external identifiers (Hebdige 1979:104). For metalheads, these jackets became known as 'battle jackets' in homage to their WW2 roots amongst fighter pilots.

Traditionally, metalheads marked their jackets only with patches bought at concerts.[2] In this way, the patches worked like modern forms of military 'battle patches', used to pledge allegiance and denote attendance at an event. Today, fans tend to decorate their jackets based on their favourite bands or albums, but they still continue to add personal touches that give the jacket authenticity, such as signatures of musicians they have met or stitched-on festival wristbands. For many, the 'battle scars' that mark it—blood, sweat, vomit, rips—also make the jacket more authentic because they indicate its entwinement with heavy metal practices, such as headbanging, moshing, crowdsurfing and stagediving. This 'social life' of the jacket gives it a quasi-human quality, demonstrating its important role in building and maintaining friendships, commanding respect from others and embodying a particular way of living and thinking.

For a long time, battle jackets were associated with metalheads who were teenagers in the 1980s. However, they have recently experienced a rebirth amongst younger fans thanks to their strong aesthetic appearance, which makes them ideal visual artefacts to be shared on platforms like Instagram and Pinterest. Unlike band t-shirts, battle jackets are uncommercial and depend on an individual's own time, effort and money to create, thereby indicating a stronger commitment to heavy metal. As this paper will demonstrate, the battle jacket is a unique and powerful symbol of personal and collective identity, yet it is also part of a broader genre with its own in-language reflected in the visual syntax and symbolic meanings of

[2] As noted by Wiederhorn and Turman (2014), the early years of heavy metal are not well documented, so anecdotal evidence often has to be used to reconstruct its history. The information in the subsequent paragraphs was gained from interviews with 50 owners of battle jackets on Instagram and Reddit conducted in March 2020.

patches. To be a true member of the metal community, an individual must appropriate a set of 'unspoken rules', which grant him/her status based on internal factors, such as knowledge of heavy metal, arrangement of patches and sewing skills, and external factors, such as age and the number of concerts attended.

Towards an Ethnographic Approach to Multimodality

Multimodality is a term used to describe the domain of enquiry concerned with how different semiotic resources (e.g. word, image, colour, typography) work together to make meaning. Within this domain, the theory of social semiotics—which views sign-making as a social process—is frequently applied to explore the full repertoire of meaning-making resources that are available to a person in a specific context, the motivations that influence his/her selection from these choices, how these choices are organised to create meaning and the social effects that they may have (O'Hagan, 2020b:23). The term 'social semiotics' was first introduced by Michael Halliday in his 1978 book *Language as a Social Semiotic*, but it was popularised by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen who, in 1996, proposed a "grammar of visual design" to analyse multimodal texts in their seminal book *Reading Images*. Since then, what has become known as 'visual social semiotics' has been further developed in relation to a particular semiotic mode, including music (van Leeuwen 1999), colour (Kress and van Leeuwen 2002), typography (van Leeuwen 2006) and texture (Djonov and van Leeuwen 2011).

While social semiotics is a valuable approach to multimodality, it has shortcomings that can limit its applicability. First, as Dicks *et al.* (2011:231) point out, although social semiotics invokes and relies on the social, it does not in itself "provide a base of social evidence." Moreover, the approach has a tendency to neglect genre conventions, canons of use and comparisons of modes (Bateman 2008:46; Ledin and Machin 2018a:501), which means that analyses can be non-critical or highly subjective. To avoid what Machin (2013) calls this "tunnel vision," multimodal analysis should form one part of an interdisciplinary whole which

encompasses other theories and methodologies (Bezemer and Jewitt, 2010:194). Over the past two decades, ethnography has been increasingly recognised as a complementary methodology because it shares the view that texts must be understood as part of a wider dialogue with the social world, but offers insights into social spheres which multimodal analysis cannot in itself reveal (Dicks *et al*., 2011:231). Carrying out detailed and contextual multimodal analyses brings about a better understanding of how individuals and social groups organise their lives and make sense of their experiences, as well as how culture and knowledge is produced and reproduced.

According to Kohrs (2017), multimodal ethnography is still part of an emerging field of scholarship. Nonetheless, as Dicks *et al.* (2011:230) note, the idea of combining ethnography and multimodality is not new in itself. They cite the fact that 1980's literacy studies helped "pave the way for an emergent 'semiotic turn' in classroom ethnography" by focusing on non-linguistic, embodied and material features in the production of meaning. The first attempt to establish multimodal ethnography as a recognised methodology was carried out by Dicks, Soyinka and Coffey (2006) in their study of the way that semiotic resources were used to make meaning in a Welsh interactive science discovery centre. Influenced by the study's focus on children and education, since then, most research has used multimodal ethnography to explore similar lines of inquiry (Clark 2011; Flewitt 2011) or multimodal literacy more generally (Jewitt and Kress 2003; Pahl and Rowsell 2006). It has also been applied in the growing research areas of linguistic landscaping and geosemiotics to investigate the relationships between space and identity (Scollon and Scollon 2003; Lou 2017). Most relevant to the current study, however, is its application in the exploration of material artefacts.

In their 2010 book *Artefactual Literacies*, Pahl and Rowsell used multimodal ethnography to explore the way that educators can engage students with literacy beyond traditional text formats. This idea was further developed by Rowsell (2011) in her study of personal possessions and their meanings for owners. She argued that using ethnography as a

lens for multimodal analysis can unravel the link between an owner's material possessions and the place he/she inhabits. For Rowsell, objects are "active life presences" (334) that signal elements of a person's lived experiences that might otherwise be hidden in observations or interviews. Consequently, objects can provide ways into narratives that may otherwise be inaccessible or harder to reach (cf. Cashman, 2006; Poole and Bruck, 2012). Multimodal ethnographic approaches have also been adopted by Rowsell, Kress and Street (2013) and Martin (2018) in their study of tattoos as artefacts of identity, as well as Hurdley (2006) in her exploration of objects on mantelpieces. All of these studies have deeper roots in the seminal work of Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) on the meaning of personal possessions.

According to Feldman (2011), thinking of ethnography only in terms of participant observation can limit its depth, as well as the types of phenomena and experience that can be researched. Today, most researchers recognise that ethnography is now much broader than its initial definition and can encompass a wide range of practices, including map-making, photography, walking and archival research, as well as the use of sound, social media and performances (cf. Denzin 2003; Powell 2010; O'Neill and Hubbard 2010; Postill and Pink 2012; Morgade, Verdesoto and Povedo 2016; Chaffee, Luehmann and Henderson 2016). The heavy semiotic nature of these practices and the way that they produce meanings provide support for Kress's (2011:239) view that ethnography and social semiotics can be brought together to "mutual advantage" to learn about the setting that surrounds the social interaction.

Social semiotics provides ethnography with a robust set of theorised analytical tools with established terminology to describe texts less anecdotally and reveal how the intricacies of sociocultural norms, relationships and identities play out through semiotic resources (Rowsell and Chen 2011:466). Ethnography, on the other hand, can help deconstruct multimodal texts in meaningful and predictive ways through empirical research into participants' lives rather than theoretical assumptions (Lillis 2013:16). When applied to the

current context of study, a multimodal ethnographic approach can lead to grounded, theorised and detailed insights into battle jackets as complex sociocultural artefacts, revealing how choices and arrangements of patches are embedded in individual ideas and attitudes, socially-situated activities and heavy metal subcultural traditions. Together, they will uncover the "semiotic instantiations of lived practices" (Flewitt 2011:307) and demonstrate how the jackets' processes of production, coupled with the affordances of each modal component, enable fans to project a group image that carries a feeling of community, solidarity and musical tribalism, while also expressing their individuality, both within and outside the subculture, through specific band choices, patch preferences and layout.

Research Design

This paper adopts a multimodal ethnographic approach to the study of battle jackets, bringing together social semiotic analysis and first-hand evidence from interviews to explore three different types of battle jacket: the 'classic' jacket, the 'tribute' jacket and the 'modern' jacket. It aims to identify the motivations behind owners' choice and arrangement of patches, making connections with the ways in which they identify themselves as belonging to the heavy metal subculture.

The current study consists of four stages. In the first stage, I contacted battle jacket owners on the Instagram page battlejacketslondon. With over 35,000 members, battlejacketslondon is the largest fan group for battle jackets on the internet and offers a platform for owners to share images of their jackets with others. I contacted the owners of the 100 most recently posted images via private message and asked them if they would be interested in filling in a questionnaire about their choice of patches and their arrangement on the jacket, as well as what the jacket means to them. The questionnaire contained open-ended questions only to enable participants to reflect and provide detailed responses about their battle jacket.

Out of the 100 people contacted, I received 28 replies in total. As these users largely fell into the 18-24 age bracket (a reflection of the typical age group of Instagram users), I also posted my questionnaire on the Battle Jackets subgroup on Reddit with the aim of receiving responses from a broader range of age groups. Reddit was chosen as it has the second largest battle jacket group on the internet with almost 30,000 members. 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. Rogers (2015) 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 teenagers and mature adults just as likely to be fans of the genre. In her recent ethnographic study of metal fans, Bishop (cited in Connick 2018) also found that the genre attracted a broad spectrum of ages.

Next, I carried out a qualitative content analysis on each transcript 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. As I have argued in another paper (2020a), this analysis revealed seven key meanings of battle jackets for metalheads: musical tribalism; material individuality; biography of life; unspoken rules of etiquette; seal of approval; authenticity; and form of protection. Triangulating the content analysis with a detailed examination of the battle jacket images also revealed that they could be broadly categorised into three types, which I have termed the 'classic' jacket, the 'tribute' jacket' and the 'modern' jacket, based on their recurring features and purposes, and the way they were described by the participants themselves. The 'classic' jacket outlines the early

pioneers of heavy metal and is strongly influenced by the original jackets of the 1980s; the 'tribute' jacket shows allegiance to one band in particular, with each patch representing a different aspect of their career; and the 'modern' jacket has a more sociopolitical aim that goes beyond the boundaries of expressing musical taste.

After carrying out the content analysis, I sent a follow-up message to all participants who said they would be happy to be contacted with further probing questions via email or Instagram Messenger about their specific patch choices and arrangement. I received 11 responses in total (3 'classic', 4 'tribute', 4 'modern') and selected one example for further analysis from each battle jacket category based on the prototypicality of the user and their jacket design and purpose. The owner of the 'classic' jacket is a 47-year-old Swedish male; the 'tribute' jacket belongs to a 32-year-old French female; and the 'modern' jacket is owned by a 29-year-old American male. I then anchored their responses in multimodal theory, drawing particularly on the work of Kress and van Leeuwen (1996, 2002), van Leeuwen (2006), Djonov and van Leeuwen (2011, 2015) and Ledin and Machin (2018b, 2020). Combining these two complementary approaches—multimodality and ethnography—enabled a better understanding of the way in which owners' semiotic choices are part of a broader sociocultural practice of heavy metal subculture that is strongly linked to performances of identity, belonging and kinship.

The 'Classic' Jacket

Turning to the first case study, the 'classic' jacket can be defined as a type of jacket that takes its inspiration from the early battle jackets of the 1980s. These jackets tend to be made of blue denim—a material that has a long association with counter-capitalism and manual labour—which gives them a symbolic quality that is seen as authentic. According to Cardwell (2017), authenticity is a key aspect of heavy metal subculture and is defined by appropriate codes of dress, specialist knowledge and longevity. All three aspects of authenticity are channelled

through the ‘classic’ jacket in its choice of colour, fabric, band patches and arrangement, and work together to give its owner “subcultural capital” (Thornton 1995).

Across the collected dataset, users of the ‘classic’ battle jacket tend to be male and female, most of whom are 25-59 years old. Many of the oldest interviewees still owned and wore their original jackets from the 1980s, while younger interviewees deliberately designed their jackets in the classic style as they considered this to be an “initiation ritual” or “rite of passage” that marked their entrance into the heavy metal community. Some even stated that they took advice from “veterans” at heavy metal concerts before creating their jacket to ensure that they stayed true to the original designs. Twigg (2013) notes that, in mainstream culture, young people tend to develop their own trends. However, in heavy metal culture, we see a different practice 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. Furthermore, 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 gain subcultural capital from younger peers for their rebellious choices (ibid 2013).

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

The battle jacket in Figure 1 belongs to Pär, a 47-year-old man from Flen, Sweden. Pär is a sales engineer and has been a heavy metal fan since he was a teenager, but only decided to create a battle jacket in 2009. Today, he has four jackets and is in the process of starting a fifth. In our interview, Pär discussed his first jacket only, which he considers to have a particularly special meaning because it sparked his growing interest in developing battle jackets to reflect his passion for music. Pär says that, for many years, he had seen other fans wearing battle jackets at concerts, but he had never “had a go” at creating one himself. After buying tickets for the 2009 Sweden Rock Festival, he was inspired to start his own jacket. He

began purchasing patches at the festival and then went on to buy more online. Pär's jacket was originally long-sleeved, but he promptly cut off the sleeves with the justification that "making a vest felt more genuine." Gradually, he filled his jacket with patches, each evoking particular memories and emotions, and working together to tell the story of his passion for heavy metal. Here, I focus on the most salient patches and their stories.

In keeping with the traditions of the 'classic' battle jacket, Pär's jacket predominantly features early pioneers in the genres of hard rock, heavy metal, punk and rock & roll. The patches also show a mixture of Swedish and international bands. When asked if this was a conscious choice, Pär admits that he is "proud of the many good bands in hard rock that come from Sweden," but that "he likes what he likes and that's that." In other words, for Pär, the leading decision that influences his choice in placing a band on his jacket is if he likes their music. Pär elaborates:

> If someone comes up to me and compliments me on a certain patch and asks what's my favourite 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. That is sad.

Pär also sees the jacket as "a sign of commitment" to heavy metal because endless hours are dedicated to finding, buying, arranging, rearranging and sewing on the patches. This commitment pays off when his jacket attracts attention from other metalheads at concerts or, as he explains, "Even if you're on a stroll and you're lucky enough to meet another metalhead, you give each other a nod and a smile. Knowing that you both share that feeling, it's a beautiful thing." By moving iteratively between the jacket and the practices and social framings in which it is embedded, we can better understand the jacket as an expression of Pär's individuality, with each patch acting as an entry on a timeline that marks a particular memory for him, but is also heavily tied up with a sense of group belonging (Pahl and Rowsell, 2010; Rowsell, 2011). The jacket's ability to act as a biography of Pär's life means that he has developed a deep emotional bond with it over time. Jung *et al.* (2009:65) describe this as a

process of “ensoulment”, i.e., a personal possession acquires a unique value to its owner that is inseparable from its material existence.

The first patch that Pär points out is the TCB flash located in the jacket’s front centre. The TCB flash was made famous by Elvis Presley and his TCB band. According to Holt (2004:42), the emblem has become so iconic today that it acts as a visual stand-in for Elvis himself, receiving immediate recognition from viewers and demonstrating Elvis’s mythologisation as a cultural brand. While Pär acknowledges that the TCB flash might seem a strange choice to metal fans, he explains that he is “an Elvis Presley freak” so there was no doubt in his mind that this would be his first patch. The patch also acts as a subtle nod to the origins of rock music in 1950’s rock & roll. Shortly after sewing on the TCB flash, Pär added the image of Elvis directly above because “they belong together.” In placing these two patches side by side, they work in “relay” (Barthes 1997:41), encouraging viewers to make a link between the slogan “Taking care of business in a flash” and Elvis.

The next patch that Pär describes is the large Black Sabbath backpatch. The backpatch is a staple feature of ‘classic’ battle jackets and tends to represent the owner’s most beloved band. According to Pär, the backpatch is “the first thing that you want others to see,” so careful consideration must be given to the choice. While Pär knew that he wanted Black Sabbath to be his backpatch (“my all-time favourite band”), he gave much thought to the choice of image and what it represented to him:

> My backpatch is from a less popular era of the band and derives from the album TYR where Tony Iommi was the only member from the original line up. The TYR tour was also my first Black Sabbath concert and I saw them in Stockholm 1990. With this backpatch, 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. Furthermore, this backpatch cost me a small fortune to get my hands on. It’s an original… very important… and was unused prior to me buying it. Bought it from a bloke in Spain through an internet forum.

Through his patch choice, Pär showcases his “connoisseurship” (Allett 2013:172) of and dedication to the band, thus gaining subcultural capital (Thornton 1995) amongst fans who

recognise him as being authentic. Pär also points out two other Black Sabbath patches on his jacket: one on the bottom back panel and the other above the left-breast pocket. The back panel patch uses the typography adopted by Black Sabbath for their 1971 album *Master of Reality*, while the typography of the front patch was first used on the 1972 *Black Sabbath Vol. 4* album. For Pär, the typography was important in signalling that he also liked the early era of Black Sabbath with Ozzy Osbourne on lead vocals. Here, the typography has a "coded nature" (Stöckl 2005:212): its interpretation hinges upon the specific connotations within the cultural domain of heavy metal. In other words, it is not the design of the letters that carries meaning here, but their ability to signal broader ideas tied up with the history of Black Sabbath.

Directly above the Black Sabbath backpatch, Pär has stitched a long patch representing Richie Blackmore's Rainbow. He explains that he gave Rainbow such a prominent position because Blackmore is one of his "guitar heroes" and the band in general produces a "very high class of music." Furthermore, the original line-up of Rainbow featured Cozy Powell who would go on to play drums in Black Sabbath. Pär recalls catching a glimpse of Powell at a 1990 Black Sabbath concert: "We jumped and waved our arms for him to see us and when he saw us idiots, he gave us a thumbs up… I felt like a thirteen-year-old girl at a Beatles concert!" In this way, the patch acts as a material representation of Pär's personal experiences, emphasising how the jacket is a patchwork of memories that is entwined with the broader social practices of heavy metal subculture, such as going to concerts. The slight overlapping of the Rainbow and Black Sabbath patches also creates a link between the two elements, providing a "visual beat" that establishes continuity and cohesion (Zakia 2007:39).

Many of the other patches that make up the back of Pär's jacket reflect album covers rather than band logos. Again, for Pär, these choices were premeditated. Highlighting the Dio patch (third from top-left back), he explains, "Holy Diver. What can I say? A classic with one of the best singers the world has seen," while the Iron Maiden patch (fourth from top-left back) was chosen because "They've always had fantastic record covers, but this is probably one of

their nicest." On the Metallica patch (second from top-right back), Pär is keen to stress his reason for choosing the *Ride the Lightning* cover:

> I love Metallica, at least until the *…And Justice for All* album. When I first heard *Black Album*, something broke. It wasn't my Metallica anymore. Of course, I respect that it is the hard rock album that sold the most in the world, but that's why I detest it. When it comes to Metallica, I want to be specific. I don't want to just put their logo because God forbid anyone would think I liked *Load*.

Choosing album patches serves two functions for Pär: to highlight the musical pinnacle of the band in his opinion and/or to align himself with a particular period of the band and, in doing so, distance himself from other periods. Here, the aesthetic is not as important as the wider perspectives that it encompasses. Aware that the jacket is made to be worn and will be 'on show' and subject to scrutiny from peers, Pär chooses patches that will serve as social currency, enabling him to perform his identity as a metalhead appropriately.

Another important patch to Pär represents Slayer (fourth from top-right back). It shows a mock-up of the Heineken logo, with the surname of Slayer's guitarist Jeff Hanneman in the brand name's place and the name of the classic Slayer album *Reign in Blood* printed above. The aural and visual similarity between 'Heineken' and 'Hanneman' serves as a humorous device and attracts viewers' attention who, on first glance, may misinterpret the patch. Hanneman died in 2013, which Pär reflects was "a great loss and the beginning of the end for Slayer." He chose this patch as a tribute to, who he calls, "a real fighter." This 'in memoriam' patch is embedded in a broader historical tradition of mourning practices that emerged in the nineteenth century and used visual artefacts, such as cards and handkerchiefs, to create tangible, lasting reminders of the deceased.

Pär describes his battle jacket as a "uniform" or "armour" that he likes to combine with "full war regalia," including boots and ammo belt. Aware of the jacket's roots in motorcycle and military traditions, he feels that it is important that some patches give a subtle nod to these origins. He points out his Ramones patch (top-right front), which "looks like a club badge or a military badge" and fits into the general idea of the jacket as a uniform. Pär also

emphasises the Anthrax patch (directly left of Ramones patch), whose "shape of a police badge fit well with the idea of a uniform," and the Napalm Death patch (top-left back), whose shield shape also conforms to the jacket's military connotations. As Kress and van Leeuwen (1996:57) note, certain shapes are embedded in our visual schema and we interpret them by making links between the values attached to their qualities in different social contexts. In these cases, the shield shapes (and eagle) evoke police or military domains, thus emphasising the notion of the battle jacket as a protective device. The fact that these symbolic interpretations are highlighted by Pär himself signals the importance of supporting social semiotic analysis with eyewitness accounts to ensure its robustness as a framework of analysis (Bezemer and Jewitt 2010; Kress 2011).

The 'Tribute' Jacket

The 'tribute' jacket only features patches by one band who is usually the owner's favourite. On a 'classic' battle jacket, placing more than one patch by the same band is considered by many fans to flout the unspoken rules of the genre. Most questionnaire responses from jacket owners described jackets with various patches of the same band as "overzealous" or "amateur." Nonetheless, they unanimously agreed that 'tribute' jackets are an exception to this rule because they are "original" and "a real musical memorial to a band who has inspired you" (O'Hagan 2020a).

Like the 'classic' jacket, owners of 'tribute' jackets tend to be both male and female. However, most owners are over 30 years of age. Questionnaire evidence suggests that younger battle jacket users prefer to wear jackets with multiple band logos because they are still experimenting with their heavy metal identity and do not want to "tie themselves down" to one band. Equally, they have a greater concern about what others may think of their choice and, therefore, feel more protected knowing that "a person may hate one of my band choices, but it's unlikely they'll hate them all." By the time these young people reach adulthood, their

identity has consolidated and they feel more confident in themselves (Twigg 2013:3), which is reflected through a growing move towards 'tribute' jackets around the age of 30. As one 30-year-old man stated, "Sometimes I get criticized for my Iron Maiden jacket but it's what I like so fuck them."

[INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE]

The owner of the battle jacket in Figure 2 is Sylvie, a 32-year-old woman from Paris, France. Sylvie is a German and English teacher and a self-confessed "heavy metal maniac" who has been a fan of the genre since her teenage years. Sylvie started collecting patches when she was 14 years old, but as she had little pocket money, she saw records and concert tickets as her top priority and only bought patches from time to time. Four years ago, she finally made the decision to start working on her own battle jacket. She admits that she waited this long because she wanted to have enough "good material" as well as the perfect jacket in terms of size, fit and colour. She now has five jackets and is currently working on a sixth. However, her favourite is her 'tribute' jacket to her favourite band: Judas Priest. Sylvie explains that she first came across Judas Priest after finding a cheap boxset containing five of their albums at a record store. As she explains, she thought she would "give it a shot" and she "fell in love immediately." Sylvie describes this jacket as her most prized possession, along with her childhood teddy bear, and states that if there were to be a fire at home, she would make sure to grab both before fleeing the building. To Sylvie, the jacket gives her a sense of pride, a feeling of belonging and a "heavy attitude." The motives and meanings of some of her favourite patch choices are outlined below.

Much research on folk quilting and embroidery has made reference to the symbolic process of collecting and assembling fragments into a form that can be read as a narrative (cf. Parker 2012). Like these traditional folk practices, battle jackets are also part of a symbolic

process with its own coded and visual language. For Sylvie, the creative process is an extremely important aspect of designing a battle jacket, with each step forming part of a ritual that has "spiritual" qualities. As she explains:

> First I build a global idea of the project in my head: theme, colour of the vest… I also think about if I want it to be a sleeveless jacket or not… Then I gather patches. This is 'the hunt', the best part of the process for me. It's exciting to browse pages on Facebook, markets at festivals, mail orders. When I have enough patches, I start positioning them on the vest and try to find the right combination… Generally I don't sew them right away. I try different combinations, take pictures, let it sink in my mind a little bit. I sometimes talk about it with friends who share the same interests in patches and take some suggestions but I always have the last word! Also when sewing I listen to music, preferably the band matching the patch I am sewing. Gets me in a good mood, focused and happy to be creative and a little crafty.

Here, Sylvie's artistic process is dependent upon a relationship between the physical object that exists materially and the ideas on its development inside her head (Parker 2012:xx). The ultimate objective is to achieve a unique jacket, so the process is not to be rushed, as emphasised by the fact that Sylvie took two years to create her jacket. These first-hand insights into Sylvie's creative process signal the importance of examining the temporal unfolding of semiotic choices and linking them to an individual, the situated encounter and his/her community of practice (Feldman, 2011; Rowsell, 2011).

Although Sylvie's jacket represents just one band, her comments reiterate many of the points that Pär made about his 'classic' jacket. For example, she describes her backpatch as "the most important item" because "it sets a tone." She explains that her backpatch, which shows the album cover for *Screaming for Vengeance*, was influenced by the fact that this was her favourite Judas Priest album at the time. Echoing Pär's comments about Metallica, she also justifies why only certain eras of the band are represented on her jacket:

> You may have noticed that the "Ripper" era is missing [1996-2003 period when Tim "Ripper" Owens replaced original singer Rob Halford]. Nothing against him… but I simply do not like the music on *Demolition* and *Jugulator*. It's not my Priest music… The songs lack vibes and feelings, it's too nu metal in sound… Even the visual aspects of the covers I do not like… even the logo, it's too aggressive. Not classy.

Equally, like Pär with his Black Sabbath logos, Sylvie sees typographical significance in her patches of the Judas Priest logo. She points out the black and yellow logo at the top centre of the jacket's back, explaining that she wanted a patch with the band's old logo to pay tribute to their early years. This logo first appeared on the cover of Judas Priest's 1976 album *Sad Wings of Destiny* and was adopted to underline the dramatic 'fallen' angel theme of the album's cover (Tattari, 2008). The pronounced angularity and elaborate swirls of the Gothic lettering turn the patch into a visual representation of Judas Priest, symbolising toughness and determination, as well as the medieval and pseudo-religious themes of their music. Sylvie also points out the contrast between this patch and the other typographical band logo (bottom right back), which was first adopted by Judas Priest in 1978 and remained unchanged until Rob Halford's temporary departure from the band in 1992. Sylvie notes that this 'electrified' sci-fi-themed logo provides a "visually interesting way of filling the gap" between the *British Steel* and *Defenders of the Faith* patches. Highlighting the importance of "creating harmony" on her jacket, she points out that she hopes to find a patch representing the band's modern logo to put in the same place on the jacket's left. On both patches, the yellow logo is striking, injecting a sense of energy and optimism into the jacket (Ledin and Machin 2020:96). For Kandinsky (1977:37), yellow can also have "a disturbing influence" and "insistent, aggressive character," which fits well with the heavy metal image that Judas Priest portray. However, like Pär, the symbolism of the colour and typography is secondary to the broader connotations that it represents for Sylvie in terms of the era of Judas Priest and the albums they produced at this time.

While Sylvie's choice of patches represent her love for Judas Priest, as well as her greater sense of belonging to the heavy metal subculture, they also hold personal meaning to her in terms of their embedment in relationships with loved ones. In this way, her jacket acts as a modern form of the signature quilt, encompassing personal qualities that transcend the semiotic and material properties of the item and are heavily entangled with social ties (King

2001:27). This is something that Sylvie notes for the first time as she is sharing her story: “Now that I think about it, it seems like my favourite patches are the ones I got from loved ones.” This observation was not something unique to Sylvie and was, in fact, commented on by most male and female owners of tribute jackets. The emotional bond between family and friends channelled through the jacket not only challenges the idea of heavy metal as an aggressive and violent genre, but also shows how material artefacts can enable individuals, particularly men, to open up about personal feelings in ways that they may not do without a visual prompt (Hurdley, 2006; Martin, 2018).

Sylvie proceeds to point out the two coffin-shaped patches that sit symmetrically on the jacket’s back, explaining that she received both of them last year for her birthday, one from her best friends and the other from her then-boyfriend. She also emphasises the ‘Sentinel’ patch (second from top-right front), which represents her favourite Judas Priest song and was a gift from her then-boyfriend. She also explains that the *Firepower* patch (fifth from top-left front) has special meaning to her because she became sick the night before she was due to attend the *Firepower* concert, so the patch was bought by her friend “in consolation.” Sylvie also muses on the fact that patches can help build bonds between fellow fans. In reference to the bottle cap-shaped *Rock a Rolla* patch (top-left front), she elaborates: “I was at a festival last year in Sweden… buying some shirts from a Mexican guy... He was a huge fan of the Priest himself… After I bought my shirts he just gave this patch to me ‘from one Priest fan to another’. Very cool gesture.” As Carrier (1900:585) notes, when items are given as gifts, they become infused with social meanings that are tied up with the giver and recipient. In the above cases, Sylvie’s patches act as vehicles of memory, serving as visual representations of her relationships with others.

As Sylvie talks, she also notes that the patches that are particularly special to her tend to be vintage and, therefore, often more rare and expensive. She indicates the Rob Halford and KK Downing patch (fifth from top-right front), the *Point of Entry* triangle patch (sixth from

top-right front) and the circular *Stained Class* patch (bottom right of backpatch), all of which are authentic, vintage pieces. She also highlights the rectangular patch of Rob Halford (third from top-left front), explaining that:

> it's vintage, has glitter, is made of thick fabric, the picture is full of energy, the little studs drawn on the side as very heavy metal details, the contrast between the black and the logo. Love it so much! Probably the perfect patch!

Through her choice of vintage patches, Sylvie creates an authentic self that embodies certain eras of Judas Priest and captures the link between authenticity and purity in form, and connections to past times and places. This grants her subcultural capital amongst peers as she is viewed as not only having knowledge of Judas Priest and the appropriate appearance and style of a tribute jacket, but she also shows a long-term commitment to the band (Thornton 1995). Furthermore, these vintage patches carry "value" in terms of monetary worth, as markers of difference and for their aesthetic appeal. This is why, as Sylvie explains, she always makes sure that none of them overlap.

The 'Modern' Jacket

The 'modern' jacket takes inspiration from the 'classic' battle jackets of the 1980s, but puts a contemporary spin on the choice of patches and layout. Not only do the bands on this jacket tend to be current or obscure rather than drawn from the heavy metal canon, but they are also chosen for the connotations that they carry beyond the music itself in terms of the their political, religious or social views. Thus, the jacket acts as a moving billboard of its owner's tastes, making a bold statement to the world about his/her identity. The modern jacket also tends to flout the typical convention of using blue denim; instead, it is black or grey, or may even consist of a different fabric, such as leather or cotton. As the jacket is made up largely of 'new' bands, it is often seen as a "work in progress" that is constantly updated as the owner discovers new music or develops new beliefs and opinions.

Unlike the other two types of battle jacket, we see a clear gender divide in ownership of the 'modern' jacket, with most owners being male. We also see a distinct preference for this type of jacket amongst the under 30s. Questionnaire responses indicate that most female participants are only interested in using their jackets within the framework of musical identity and personal relationships rather than broader sociopolitical events. As one 29-year-old woman stated, "With my jacket, I can block out all the shit going on in the world. When I put it on, there's no Brexit, no Trump, no coronavirus…" Heesch and Scott (2016) note that female heavy metal fans often have to work hard to gain respect from a male-dominated scene. For this reason, they may give preference to expressing musical, rather than sociopolitical knowledge, in their jacket choices. Equally, the age preference reflects a long history of young people using subcultural clothing (e.g. mods, rockers, punks) to establish their own identity, make public statements and offend or shock others (Twigg 2013:22). As young people reach 30, they tend to move away from 'modern' jackets and tone down their choices by gravitating towards more 'classic' or 'tribute' designs that do not overtly emphasise individual political or religious views. This is in line with the move in mainstream society towards less bold clothing as a person gets older (ibid: 29).

[INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE]

Figure 3 shows a 'modern' battle jacket owned by Jesse,[3] a 29-year-old male from Boston, USA. Jesse has an MFA in Poetry and was employed as a teacher for some time, before changing career paths. Now, they work for a moving company that specialises in handling libraries and archives. According to Jesse, they went through a punk phase in high school and decorated their backpacks and hoodies with patches, but they became more actively interested in heavy metal (particularly black metal – a subgenre with typically anti-Christian

[3] Jesse has asked for they/them/their pronouns to be used when referred to throughout this paper.

or satanic themes) two years ago and started making their first battle jacket in 2019. They describe giving up being part of academia and taking on a blue-collar job as a major contributing factor in their decision to create a battle jacket. For Jesse, the battle jacket represents class solidarity and pride, standing in direct juxtaposition to the preppy clothing associated with academia. Jesse also explains that they live opposite a Catholic church and, because of their strong aversion to the politics and history of abuse in the Church, they wanted to create a jacket to remind the church that "they weren't the only ones in the neighbourhood." Jesse also acknowledges the re-emergence of right-wing politics and their strong dislike for these political views as another major influencer. Aware of black metal's association with right-wing politics, Jesse felt that their battle jacket would be a good way to challenge this association:

> I started feeling like the best way to not let [fascists and racists] win would be to have a kickass vest that had lot of anti-fascist bands on it. I wanted to assert a place for leftists in that scene, and that I could do that while also annoying the Christians and Trump supporters around me was just a big, big plus.

In his study of tattoos, Bradley (2000:245) describes the process of tattooing as consisting of symbolic practices that enable "a rich and complex mediation on issues of agency, autonomy and control." When I speak to Jesse, it is apparent that the process of creating a battle jacket carries the same notions for them, emphasising the importance of using ethnography to provide a "social map" for multimodality (Flewitt 2011:296). As they explain, from the offset, they gave much thought to the aesthetic, musical and ideological properties of their patches. They state, for example, that they deliberately chose black and white patches only to help unite all the patches thematically, even if they belong to slightly different styles of black metal. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (1996:233), black and white create a sense of veracity and authenticity for viewers—both fundamental aspects of the battle jacket for heavy metal fans. Furthermore, black and white has a timelessness quality that makes images symbolic rather than descriptive (Ledin and Machin 2020:78). Jesse also

says that they try to organise their patches according to the natural columns and weaves of the jacket, using black thread and simple stitching to ensure that each patch is emphasised in its own right. They feel that this quasi-symmetrical layout gives the jacket a feeling of balance. Symmetry has a long association with harmony and order, which helps viewers to make sense of the world around them (Zakia 2007:45). As becomes clear throughout our discussion, Jesse's compositional layout brings greater meaning to their arguments, as the patches work in unison to reflect and project their beliefs to others.

The theme of politics is a major component of Jesse's jacket. They first point out the two patches on its front: Summoning (top left) and Dawn Ray'd (top right). While they describe both bands as "fucking sick," they admit that the reason for their prominent positions is because of their openly anti-fascist and anti-white supremacist stances, which align with Jesse's own views. Jesse comments particularly on the logo of Dawn Ray'd, which shows a shield with the Antifa symbol and flails (weapons that were used by medieval peasants against landowners). According to Riddick (cited in Rampton 2018), heavy metal logos have their own language, with each telling a story that offers insights into a band's overarching creative message. The fact that Dawn Ray'd have embedded the Antifa symbol and flails within their logo emphasises the entwinement between their music and political views—something with which Jesse identified and drew upon when designing their battle jacket. Although the locations of the Summoning and Dawn Ray'd patches were mainly influenced by a desire to showcase their ideologies, Jesse also agrees that they aesthetically complement one another. Complementarity in imagery means that images are read as belonging together (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996:176). Here, viewing the two bands side by side strengthens the impact of their message, both musically and ideologically.

Jesse also indicates the Mizmor patch on the bottom-left of the jacket's front, which is written in Hebrew. While Jesse likes Mizmor's music, they describe the patch as a "conscious choice" because they wanted to make it clear to the world that they were not a Nazi. This was

especially important to Jesse because they live adjacent to a predominantly Jewish neighbourhood. Foreign words/phrases are often adopted by non-native speakers to signify solidarity with certain groups, a recent example being “Je suis Charlie” used widely following the 2015 terrorist attack in France to signal support for freedom of speech and press. In this case, Jesse moves the Hebrew word beyond its functional meaning to serve the symbolic purpose of distinguishing them from others in the metal community with antisemitic views. Similarly, Jesse highlights the badge of Feminazgul (right-breast pocket) and the patches of Underdark (directly above Lustre patch on back) and Wolves in the Throne Room (left of pentagram on back). Feminazgul and Underdark are explicitly pro-LGBT, anti-fascist, anarchist and strongly against patriarchy and toxic masculinity, while Wolves in the Throne Room promote anti-capitalist and anti-civilisationist ideas. Jesse also states that they included Trelldom (bottom-left on jacket front) because they feature one of the few openly gay people on the black metal scene.

When designing his battle jacket, Jesse also paid close attention to displaying their views on religion. They point out the Beherit patch (below left-breast pocket), explaining that they deliberately chose the old logo because of its “over-the-top and cartoony version of satanic imagery,” including pentagrams, claws, devil horns and an inverted crucifix, as well as the Zeal and Ardor patch (directly under left pentagram on back), which shows a sigil. According to van Leeuwen (2014:288), these types of images are powerful because their ideological meanings are hidden behind the argument that they are ‘just a bit of a fun’, thus giving them a more subtle persuasive capacity. Directly above the Berehit patch, Jesse has placed a badge showing an ouroboros, skull and crossbones, two inverted crosses and an empty hourglass with the flaking letters ‘MM’. For Jesse, this badge aligns aesthetically and ideologically with the rest of the jacket, emphasising their general opposition to religion: “I think the world would be generally better if people didn't believe that justice or reward came in the next life, but had to be achieved here and now.” Jesse has also placed a large patch of

the band Blasphemy at the top of the jacket's back. As they explain, its size was deliberately chosen to accentuate their strong opinion: "Blasphemy is all I'm about. I inherently distrust authority and received truths, and so I'm into blasphemy in a general sense in addition to a religious one." This salience creates a hierarchy amongst the patches on the jacket's back, showcasing Blasphemy as having high symbolic value for Jesse (Ledin and Machin 2020:170).

While Jesse's other patch choices and arrangements are more overtly bound up with aesthetic appeal, they, nonetheless, hold strong ideological meanings. The Blood Incantation patch (directly below right-breast pocket), for example, was chosen because the logo is "comically unreadable," which attracts attention from others. As Vestergaard (2016) notes, metal typography often draws upon indecipherable forms in order to reflect an in-culture that is inaccessible to outsiders. Jesse also explains that the Boris patch (directly below right pentagram on back) is a deliberate parody of a famous patch by the band Venom. As they dislike the band and this patch is one of the most frequently seen on black metal vests, they decided to be provocative and choose a patch that satirised the logo. Jesse also points out the Dio patch that sits in the jacket's back centre. Although Dio is the only patch that represents one of the canons of heavy metal, Jesse contends that they will "never have a Dio-less vest" because "he is a classic." Here, Dio's central location visually implies that the other contemporary bands emerged from his pioneering work. Jesse also justifies his reasons behind the Ash Borer patch, which is located at the top of the jacket and is considerably larger than any other patch: "They're a little less well known, so I felt good about giving them more real estate." In this way, the size and spatial position of the patch turn it into an advertisement for Ash Borer, serving a quasi-missionary function that aims to 'convert' others to the band's music. Finally, Jesse's decision to place the Lustre patch at the bottom back of the jacket was influenced by the fact that their music has a "much more peaceful/upbeat feel" than the other bands, so it was the perfect way to end the jacket on a calm note.

Jesse describes their jacket as “a living document” that is “constantly in flux.” Nonetheless, they like to wear it as much as possible to “test it out,” as well as to remind people in their neighbourhood that not everyone is like them but that they can still be good people. As they clarify:

> I figure someone being nice to them or petting their dog or whatever with a big Blasphemy patch on it might make them think a little about how other people who are different from them can also be kind neighbours and fellow citizens.

So, unlike the ‘classic’ and ‘tribute’ jackets, which serve as devices to gain subcultural capital from peers, the ‘modern’ jacket is just as rebellious in its purpose as in its appearance, seeking to challenge the perceptions of both ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ about the typical heavy metal fan rather than manage complex face needs in an attempt to fit in.

Conclusion

This paper has used a combination of social semiotic analysis and ethnographic insights to explore three different types of battle jacket: the ‘classic’ jacket, the ‘tribute’ jacket and the ‘modern’ jacket. Its findings have emphasised the importance of validating semiotic and material choices by engaging with the people to whom the artefacts belong and, together, developing a narrative on how these choices shape and are shaped by socially situated norms and practices (Rowsell and Chen, 2011; Kress, 2011). All three owners underline the creative process as a key element of the battle jacket, as well as the importance of canons of use and how they work bidirectionally, the context both infusing the jacket with new meanings and being infused with new meanings by the jacket (Machin, 2013). Furthermore, in all cases, the jackets are visually striking with their bold colours and typography, vivid imagery and symmetrical arrangements. However, aesthetic concerns are, in fact, secondary to the jackets’ function as a ‘channeler’ of memories, relationships, beliefs and ideologies. The meanings of these intangible yet profound elements transcend far beyond heavy metal subculture into everyday life, but only come to the surface when subtle differences in semiotic and material

choices are teased out through first-hand testimonies provided by the jacket owners (Rowsell, 2011).

In the case of the 'classic' jacket, its two fundamental characteristics are authenticity and commitment, as played out through the way that the patches navigate between representing a biography of the owner's musical life and serving as a dedicated uniform that identifies him/her as a member of the metal community. In Pär's example, we see how the typography, colour and shape of his patches are not guided by their own rhetoric, but rather by the relationship that they have to the broader world of heavy metal and its history. This can be observed specifically in the font on his Black Sabbath patches, as well as the shield-shaped Anthrax patch and military-style Ramones patch. Furthermore, patch arrangement (particularly the backpatch and long strip patches) is influenced heavily by the unspoken rules of the battle jacket genre. Overall, the 'classic' jacket evokes distinct personal experiences, such as concert attendances or hearing a specific album for the first time, and serve to align its owner to or distance him/her from certain bands or periods in the history of heavy metal. The fact that it is owned across both genders and most age groups, and that younger members take advice from "veterans" when creating their versions, also indicates its timeless quality and its significance as a validating tool for membership in the heavy metal community.

On some level, the 'tribute' jacket has similar purposes to the 'classic' jacket. Although its owners give attention to "creating harmony" across their jacket, its general arrangement is embedded within the social conventions of the battle jacket genre. Equally, owners are more concerned with the coded nature of typographical choices within the heavy metal domain (e.g. representing certain eras of Judas Priest in Sylvie's case) than the symbolic qualities of the fonts themselves. However, in contrast to the 'classic' jacket, each element of the 'tribute' jacket is bound up with relationships between friends, family and even kind strangers because many of the patches are received as gifts. Thus, the semiotic and material properties of the patches are subordinate to the social connections that they represent,

reminding their owner of particular people and specific occasions. As a result, the patches carry strong emotional value, which is particularly accentuated in vintage examples which have high monetary, social and cultural worth. The similar purposes of the 'tribute' jacket for both men and women directly challenges the aggression and violence associated with heavy metal, while its heavy concentration of ownership amongst over 30s indicates the anxiety of young people in committing to one band when they are still exploring their heavy metal identity.

While owners of the 'modern' jacket choose patches that reflect their musical taste, the jacket carries an additional layer of complexity as the ideologies of the chosen bands play an equally important role in the decision to display the patch on their jacket. Although the jacket is not, first and foremost, a political statement, it can be an opportunity to call out harmful political views, challenge others to think differently and make a stand against metal stereotypes. As Jesse explained, "if I [am] going to be 'advertising' for a band, I'd like to agree with them." Nonetheless, there is often a difficulty in trying to balance representing the bands a person likes and promoting good politics, as sometimes these goals work in opposition to one another. For most owners, the 'modern' jacket's design is not purely influenced by aesthetics. By placing greater thought on the ideologies of the bands they like, owners subvert and disrupt the traditional standards and functions of the battle jacket, creating a 'metal hierarchy' based on each band's political and religious stances in addition to their music. The predominant ownership of this jacket by males under 30 implies that the 'modern' jacket works as an "embodiment" of age (Twigg 2013:77), enabling users to interweave their sociopolitical views with their clothing choices. However, as they become older, this loses importance and they move towards 'classic' or 'tribute' designs instead. The reasons why 'tribute' jackets are favoured by males is a line of research that requires more attention.

In general, bringing together ethnography and social semiotics has enabled a far more nuanced examination of the battle jacket, ensuring that insights concerning arrangement of

patches and use of image, colour, typography, shape and texture are embedded in primary evidence from the jacket owners. Fusing these two perspectives has made it clear that the semiotic and material choices of patches are heavily influenced by the specific genre conventions and unspoken rules of battle jackets, their canons of use, their broader relationship with heavy metal culture, as well as personal connections, memories, beliefs and ideologies (Kress 2011; Dicks *et al.* 2011; Kohrs 2017). Adopting a social semiotic approach alone would not have uncovered these socioculturally-induced meanings and functions, while a solely ethnographic methodology would have missed the subtleties of meaning in visual signifying practices. In blending synchronic analysis with diachronic evidence, a multimodal ethnographic approach puts language and materiality on a level footing with context, thus providing a more human interpretation of battle jackets that is sensitive to the affordances and constraints of the meaning resources available and can recognise examples of deviation and their potential significance (Rowsell and Chen 2011; Lillis 2013). This methodology has the potential to transform how multimodal artefacts are understood, providing new insights into the relationship between semiotic choices, genre conventions and the cultural codes of a specific group.

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