

THE METAL T-SHIRT: TRANSMEDIA STORYTELLING IN PRODUCTS

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Abstract

Metal T-shirts represent a fusion of music, identity, and ideology. This case study approach explores the meaning of the metal T-shirt. Findings show that the metal T-shirt had several signatory functions, such as personal taste and a provocation against the general social structure. The T-shirt represented a visual identity, and it showed a mastery of a communicative act. The study demonstrates how products, such as T-shirts, are a part of transmedia storytelling in heavy metal culture.

Background: The meaning in a T-shirt

This paper explores how the T-shirt can have a role in everyday cultural metal practice in which music, identity, and ideology fuse into an aesthetic experience. Snell and Hodgetts state that a T-shirt can be a material representation of social relations (Snell and Hodgetts, 2007). They connected this argument to studies of material culture, such as Tilley's (Tilley, 2006), which promotes the idea that a core component of the social negotiation of a shared identity is non-verbal, that is, making, showing, using, and exchanging such objects as belts, T-shirts, and tattoos (Snell and Hodgetts, 2007). Tilley stressed the need to study various linkages between kinds of things, types of actions, and forms of sociability (Tilley, 2006, p. 71) to have an expanded understanding of material culture. There is a need for such an expanded understanding of the material culture in art practices (Berg, 2014), such as in heavy metal.

Self-expression through products

The heavy metal T-shirt was chosen because it is often connected with heavy metal fans as one of their possessions, and according to Belk, possessions are central to the formation of the self in terms of having, doing, and being (Belk, 2013). According to Hiort af Ornäs, things can serve as objects of admiration, but also as tools (Hiort af Ornäs, 2010). He describes how things can be more or less purposefully used to communicate something and mark group membership.

Things may convey certain meanings, which in their turn may provoke, excite fascinate, or leave a person indifferent. It is hence important, he claims, to try to understand how things are significant to different actors. Several other studies claim that the strong integrity of cultural icons help consumers express what they want to be (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008; Dittmar, 1992; Rompay and Ludden; Schifferstein and Zwartkruis-Pelgrim, 2008) and that products can contribute to modelling memories in people's lives (Gulden, 2013).

A branch of heavy metal is black metal, which presents a particularly useful example to explore how a T-shirt can express identity in this subculture. Norwegian black metal has had increasing popularity internationally since the 1990s. The first “wave” of black metal on the early Norwegian scene consisted of such bands as Mayhem (whose first album was released in 1987), Darkthrone (first album in 1991), the one-man band Burzum (first album in 1992), Immortal (first album in 1992), Satyricon (first album in 1993), Emperor (first album in 1994), and Gorgoroth (first album in 1994), according to Granholm, a researcher in ethnography and religion (Granholm, 2013, p. 13). In heavy metal in general, parts of the messages are represented on T-shirt motifs. The T-shirt was used as a medium for a message – to the extreme – in a religiously-inspired suicide that happened during the “second wave” of black metal (Granholm, 2013, p. 22):

Nödtveidt methodically wrapped up his musical and publically religious affairs. A week later he gave his last interview, at the end of which he announced his plans to “travel to Transylvania”—which in Black Metal culture is a euphemism for suicide, due to Mayhem vocalist Pelle “Dead” Ohlin, wearing a T-shirt with the print “I [Love] Transylvania” at the time of his suicide. On August 16, 2006, Nödtveidt was found dead in his apartment with a gunshot wound in the head, surrounded by candles and an opened “Satanic Grimoire” in front of him.

Snell and Hodgetts state that such artefacts as the metal T-shirt constitute material representations of social relations and a sense of community (Snell and Hodgetts, 2007). They further explain how the T-shirt, and other metal attributes, contributes to the person’s sense of self as a member of the heavy metal community: a marginalized genre that needs to be promoted and supported through the display of band merchandize. Snell and Hodgetts interviewed a heavy metal fan who said, “I like going out wearing metal T-shirts to show people that I’m into metal and to support the bands. If you’re gotta wear it...and you gotta support the bands you like, otherwise they might not be around much longer...I’m advertising it”.

Transmedia storytelling across media platforms

Products, such as the T-shirt in heavy metal, are used in marketing strategies in which music, products, identity, and branding have been fused into a total experience. The music, graphic design, and products connect people to the music’s concept in various ways. The story of the heavy metal band is experienced in concerts, groups, dialogues, posters, products, and in the T-shirt. As a story communicated through multiple medias, the T-shirt becomes the site of transmedia storytelling (TS) (Jenkins, 2010). Jenkins proposed that to succeed in TS, it is preferable to move away from seeing models in media limited to medium-specific platforms, such as film, television, comics, advertising, games, social networks, or other digital practices, and instead to openly explore across media platforms to understand how they interact with one other in increasingly complex ways (Jenkins, 2010, p. 944). Pavel and Berg propose that participatory design approaches in digital medias can strengthen group affiliation and create shared memories (Pavel and Berg, 2014). Jenkins proposes that design in a variety of ways can be a part of TS. He proposes the definition of TS as an operating principle: “Transmedia storytelling represents a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes its own unique con-

tribution to the unfolding of the story” (Jenkins, 2010, p. 944).

Material belongings not only serve practical functions, but they are in some cases cherished for their ability to convey meaning and in other cases serve to manifest one’s membership in or distancing from a group (Dittmar, 1992). The actual garments, such as the T-shirt, and its qualities are often of secondary importance. Rather, it comes to serve as a vehicle for carrying various visual elements connected to a story. Typically, imagery and fonts are distinct yet at the same time manifest the identity of a specific brand and membership in a more general genre. The research question in this study was therefore: How do metal T-shirts extend and complement TS in heavy metal music? The objective was to explore how a product can create a feeling of participation for the audience in the artistic practice of heavy metal. The study thus contributes to the discussion about art and design practices in TS across media platforms (Jenkins, 2010, p. 944).

Methods: a case study of the T-shirt in TS

Through a pilot case-study approach, with participant observation, key informants, and semi-structured interviews, a narrative about T-shirts was developed to embrace the empirical data (Yin, 2009). It was primarily a practical study that built on case studies, mainly with interviews. The verbal accounts collected through interviews are central to elucidating the insider perspective, reflecting a rationale for certain behaviours and some of the narratives that go into the making of meaning in such contexts (Fog, 2004). Accordingly through qualitative interviews, the participants could contribute their nuanced expertise to understanding the role of the T-shirt in heavy metal culture (Fog, 2004). Since much of people’s behaviour is directed from a subconscious level, observations are a natural complement to capture what people actually do. Observations not only enable the recording of interactions and overt behaviour, but they also allow identification of how certain values become reified into materialized symbols.

A man from Norway (aged 37) and a woman from Italy (36) were chosen as the first pilot study because they were a heavy metal couple. A man from Sweden (30) was chosen because he was a dedicated fan but had to adjust according to his context when it would be suitable to wear a metal T-shirt. A man (37) from Serbia was chosen because he used to design T-shirts himself when he was a part of heavy metal scene in Belgrade. Another fan was an artist (25) from Norway who was chosen because she served as an example of somebody who merges black metal and other fields of artistic expressions, in this case, textile art. As an artist that used the black metal vernacular form in her artwork, she represented both black metal and art communities. Such art practice may bring an important “outside” view to metal studies. She was chosen to further explore the cross-disciplinary nature of heavy metal, because from an epistemological perspective, it is essential to identify new issues that emerge in artistic practice. This idea has been promoted by the art philosopher Varto, who thinks that it is essential to be open to, and conscious about, the imprinting from other fields doing research in the arts (Varto, 2009).

The participants connect to metal in various contexts. This was inspired from seeing artistic expressions in an expanded field, as it has been done in other art fields (Krauss, 2006) and as Sjøvoll has shown by using artistic methods of play in creative video processes in design (Sjøvoll, 2014). Such a transition between cultures can demonstrate new views on what issues are central within a discipline, and this can contribute to establishing new epistemological and

ontological perspectives in several fields (Varto, 2009). Thus, there might emerge new answers to questions like “What is it to be a heavy metallor?” or “What are the topics talked about in the black metal?” Finally, the meaning of the T-shirt in heavy metal was visualized in a figure through concept mapping (Maxwell, 1996) and cross case analysis (Yin, 2009) to demonstrate an expanded view of its role in heavy metal. Thus, the article attempts to consolidate the emerging transdisciplinary, epistemological field in metal studies by linking ethnographic studies in heavy metal (Granholt, 2013) to theory from product design (Schifferstein and Zwartkruis-Pelgrim, 2008), artistic research (Varto, 2009), and TS (Jenkins, 2010). Based on this pilot study, the knowledge of TS in heavy metal can be expanded to additional studies of T-shirts or other artefacts.

Pilot Case 1: The heavy metal couple

This case explored how the T-shirt could expand and enhance visual, verbal, and musical experiences of heavy metal. It was an examination of how spectators and audiences could take part in – and be part of – the music and culture of the musical performance. The couple lived in Oslo in an apartment that was filled with heavy metal effects. The wall clock had a heavy metal motif of Slayer. On top of the kitchen cupboard, lined up, were around 30 glasses from different heavy metal concerts. The couple said they were happy to represent heavy metal fans, but that there are both more and less dedicated fans than themselves. Her background was in creative disciplines and his background was in IT.

A sign of personal taste: T-shirts became a natural part of the conversation physically, as they were identified in all sorts and varieties in cabinets and drawers. The couple determined who owned what. At one point, a T-shirt flew through the air several times. It was a T-shirt that nobody wanted to touch. There were laughter and cries as they threw it back and forth at each other. She explained that she had found it on the floor after a festival once, and neither of them really liked the release displayed on the shirt: *Armada* of the group Keep of Kallessin. They had tried to give away the shirt but nobody wanted it. They would not throw it in the bin, but neither of them would wear it in public. Therefore, it had become to her pyjamas as a preliminary solution.

A counterculture: She held up a shirt that demonstrated that heavy metal is a counterculture: it said “no fur,” which she had bought at a stand for animal protection at a heavy metal festival (Fig 1.1). They explained that heavy metal is a kind of anti-culture against the establishment: “metal heads think in different ways.” They have both been fans of heavy metal since childhood. His brother introduced him to it when he was about 8-9 years old. She said that at her primary school in Italy, there were approximately 20% heavy metal fans. The rest were straighter. When she was 13, she got her first heavy metal T-shirt: “That is; I thought it was heavy metal, but Guns'n Roses is really more hard rock, but I got it from my mum so it means a lot to me” (Fig. 1.2). Another shirt shows an upside down cross, mixed with sexual motifs and texts, and she said, “it is another expression of being against the establishment, which is opposition to the church's suppression” (Fig. 1.3 and 1.4).

Hyped black metal bands: Black metal is a term that is often referred to as a potentially big Norwegian export, but they were not particularly excited about this. We touched upon this subject in connection with her shirt *Dark Side of Norway* (Figure 1.5). He said that Norwegian black metal had been hyped up

by being linked to church burnings and violent and extreme expressions. They believed that this was not a good expression of a counterculture, but that there might be some people in distant countries that support these actions, because they do not take to heart what it means: “Perhaps some people in Egypt think it is stylish, but I think it is absolutely disgusting. Besides, the music is crap: there is such poor quality; one cannot listen to it”. He said that it was recorded in basements in the 1990s with very poor audio equipment.

Figure 1: Heavy metal T-shirts, examples from a metal couple in Pilot Case 1.



Connecting people: They were wearing shirts that they had recently purchased (Fig. 1.6), and said that they felt it was very OK to wear heavy metal shirts when they were out in public: “People – mostly other metallers - come over and say something about the motifs. One can talk to each other even if you like different bands. I do not think exactly the same thing happens with two that have shirts with different football teams,” he said.

A symbol of affection: Shirts are symbols that express content to express some shared values. One can also give shirts as gifts to one other. “This shirt I got from one of my best friends in 1994 (Fig. 1.7), and now I have given it to him [nodding to her boyfriend] because it is one of the dearest memories I have.”

The authentic: He said that a professional musician in a heavy metal band wanted to buy his shirt. It was the most used of all the shirts (Fig. 1.9). It was completely grey and washed out, and the sleeves were so worn out that they were hanging as shabby rags (Fig. 1.8). The professional musician wanted to wear this shirt on stage: “He offered me 1,500 [1 Nkr = 164 euros] for the shirt, but I would never have sold it. Never!” They showed a few more T-shirts (Fig. 1.10, 1.11, 1.12) and said that these kinds of shirts were what they usually tend to buy when they are at festivals and concerts. They do it to have a memory of the concert and to express that they have been to this place and that place. It also provides an expression of your taste and what you like, they explained. But this should be seen in the context of what else people are wearing. He said: “I see immediately if there is one [person] that fakes that he is [a] heavy metal fan in concert: a guy with short hair, no beard, but with a heavy metal T-shirt: not particularly credible. I have no respect for that. It is about being honest, genuine and authentic.”

Transitions to other fields: Finally, they expressed that they had quite different opinions about the limits of what was real and authentic in heavy metal music. He listed six to seven bands that he considered the core authentic ones, and she had a great deal more; they argued vigorously about why there was a limit or not on one or another band. When asked whether they thought that heavy metal could be aligned as a kind of religion, where they share life values and perspectives on the world, they completely disagreed: no it was certainly not, both said. Finally, she showed what she did with shirts that were too old, or completely destroyed; she cut out the motifs and used them as recycled objects, either by giving them away as gifts or sewing them on bags.

Pilot case 2: The heavy metal textile artist

New forms of cultural heritage: A follow-up of the transition to other fields was made through an interview with a textile artist from Norway who also was a black metal fan. She had used album covers as a part of her artistic practice. She had made a piece of artwork, a textile wall piece, from elements of album covers in heavy metal (Figure 2). She described that it was difficult to cut the black metal clothing, as they had been very meaningful for the wearers.

Her artwork had been selected for Høstutstillingen, an annual exhibition that intends to show the best Norwegian art. Not only was the artwork shown in the gallery, it was also acquired by the collection of a Museum of Decorative Art. It has now become a part of contemporary visual culture in Norway, a part of the public cultural heritage. This was an additional way to construct the heavy metal heritage into a public space, as it had been done previously in the United Kingdom (Spracklen, Lucas, and Deeks, 2014).

Figure 2: "Solve Coagula nr.1" by Linda K. Røed at the 127th annual national exhibition of fine art. Black metal motifs from T-shirts in a textile artwork.



An art museum as a media platform: In her weblog, "Necro Moose Disco Blog," she claims that black metal in contemporary art is on the rise. She writes, "Once a year, since 1882, there's this huge group exhibition in Norway, called Høstutstillingen. And this year they picked out my first Black Metal textile 'Solve Coagula nr.1,' to enter the 127th edition of the exhibition. In total,

there was [sic] 82 artists represented this year at Kunstnernes Hus in Oslo, and it all turned out pretty great!" She also writes: "I joined a guided tour around the exhibition to learn more about the other artists, and it was really REALLY strange when they came to my work and started to talk about it! I was standing right in front of the guide when she was talking, but nobody knew I was the artist, hehe. Strange, but cool."

Pilot case 3: The heavy metal office worker: a sign of emerging subcultures

Sign awareness: Our third example is a man in his late 30s from Sweden who grew up with metal in different forms. Over the years, he has amassed a range of T-shirts. He explained that they have typically been bought in connection to various gigs. While it is conceivable to buy them in a shop as a tribute to some band, they typically signal having undergone some experience, that is, visiting a gig or a festival. In his younger years, he would sometimes wear a metal T-shirt in town. These days, he typically wears them when meeting up with certain circles of friends. His job in IT development at a financial institution comes with an implicit dress code, and so a metal T-shirt would stand out; though, he explicitly mentions having worked in other contexts in which the opposite would be the case. He thought that heavy metal could be seen as a sign of emerging subcultures.

Shared interest: He describes metal T-shirts as possible entry points for conversations, for example, a marker of a possibly shared interest. Furthermore, he describes this concept as layered, with some generic attributes that might be shared between genres, such as black metal, according to him, would typically be characterised by white illegible fonts on dark backgrounds. In contrast, more unusual attributes are in their specificity better entry points for conversation, while they also require certain knowledge and hence also become more exclusive.

Status in older shirts: While he himself cares about the aesthetics, he feels that the T-shirts' celebration of a specific band is of highest importance to most, while visual quality might be of less importance. He explains that marking the attendance to some event is important, and hints at there being more status in the older shirts. In terms of imagery, he describes it as typically dramatic.

A provocative sign against the general social structure: The dramatic scenes on T-shirts often play on attributes that are provocative to the uninitiated, whereas the initiated take it less seriously. When questioned, he further explains that the form of the provocation is not directed at a specific person, but rather at a more general social structure. As the provocation is not individualised, no specific person is targeted, and it hence rests with the receiver.

Mastery of a communicative act: The T-shirt may serve to provoke and thereby facilitate active distancing of the self from a general collective; at the same time, it also works the other way around. By wearing certain attributes, one is an easy target for stereotyping, that is, as being unintelligent. Hence certain settings, such as romantic dates or business contexts, he would typically avoid it. However, he also explained how mastery of combining, for example, more formal attire with metal attributes that are subtly noticeable, could yield certain effects. The use and composition of different attributes is not random, but is a somewhat strategic, communicative act.

Pilot case 4: The heavy metal architect

Authentic participation: The fourth case was a man (37) who worked as an architect in Serbia. He explained that when he was young, he was active in the heavy metal community. He was familiar with the metal scene in Belgrade at the time. He recalled that he made the shirts himself. He used a Rothring pen because it had a thin rod that went through the tube, which made it possible to make the drawing by points, as a kind of pointillism. He used to copy cover albums. They did not use ordinary T-shirts, but instead T-shirts with long sleeves. He used to draw all over the shirt so that everything was covered: “I drew on the sleeves, collar, yes everywhere.” It took up to 10 days to make a shirt. He designed some shirts for heavy metal musicians too.

A way of understanding the world: He said that his relationship with heavy metal at the time was a way to explore the world and life:

For me, heavy metal was almost as a kind of musical exploration, a musical type of National Geographic [...] it was a way to look at life, to learn and look at things; I remember the excitement I felt in the stomach. It was as understanding what life could be in a different way. It was not just about anger, but also about fantasy. So really, it was about understanding the world.

Visual identity: The shirts became so widely used that they became completely worn out. The ones he had made became so ruined that he had only kept a few, despite the fact that they could not be used anymore. He had, however, preserved the blueprints for the shirts. He does not wear heavy metal T-shirts anymore, but he still has a heavy metal beard and heavy metal hair in his profession as an architect.

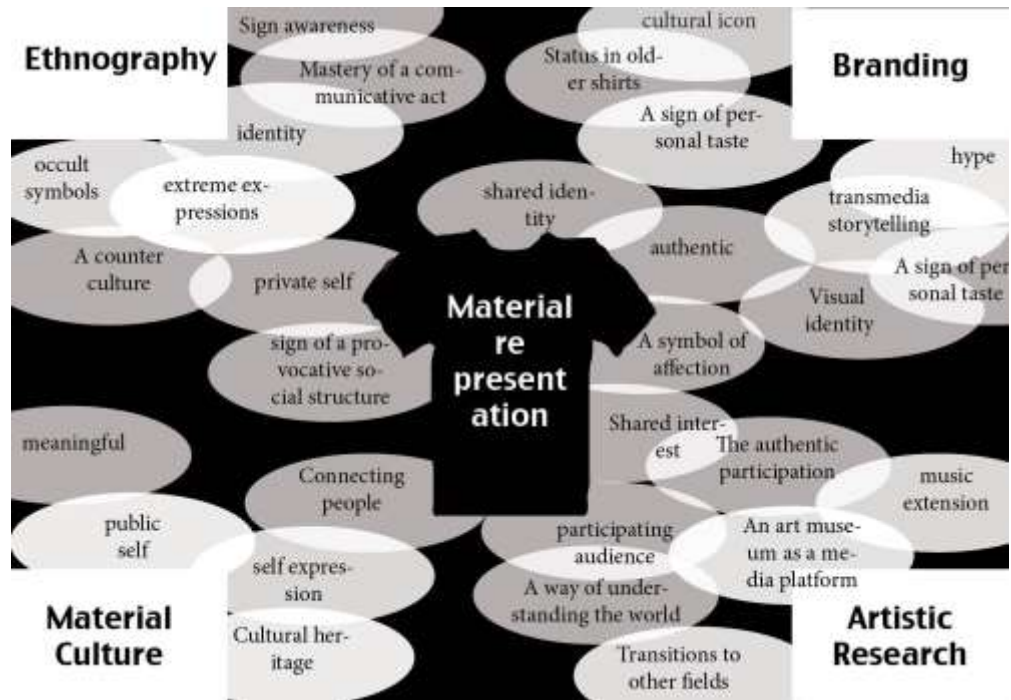
Discussion: user experience and self-expression in TS

The metal T-shirts in this study extended and complemented TS in heavy metal music. The study has shown how a product can create feelings of participation for the audience in the artistic practice of heavy metal (Figure 3). Jenkins (2010) states that in TS, each medium ideally makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story (p. 944). This pilot study explored this understanding by incorporating the qualitative descriptions of some audience members and how they experienced their heavy metal T-shirts. Through semantic signs, the T-shirt evoked a value for both the heavy metal fan and those who see the T-shirt. These are values that were linked to the story of a band and their releases. The T-shirt is itself a cultural icon. It represents a grassroots movement because it is inexpensive and can be used in many contexts. Thus, it is a product that is democratic in its nature; it is cheap and it is for everyone.

The T-shirt was a sign of personal taste and created a shared identity for those who had similar motifs. The T-shirt could tell a story across media platforms, because it was an instrument that had an effect on venues other than media-specific platforms like movies, television, comics, games, and others. It contributed to the story told in new ways across different media. Socially, the garment could connect people when they met and provided a starting point for a conversation. According to Schifferstein et al. (2008), “The private self aims at individual achievement; it tries to meet internal, personal standards. Products to which we become attached should reflect our identity, individuality, independence, uniqueness, skills, goals, and achievements.” This concept was

reflected in the study when people identified with a counterculture or extreme expressions that signalled a critical attitude to the establishment.

Figure 3: A meaningful metal T-shirt visualized through concept mapping.



Audience participation

There were several forms of participation in the study: ideological, practical, and cultural. The ideological participation was associated with a critical attitude to the establishment and conforming society. This was connected to extreme expression in order to signal strong emotions on a systemic level. The system awareness connects to an ideological awareness of peoples' roles in a social system (Aagaard Nielsen, 2010). Another example of participation shows how a man who was working at an office believed that it was important to have an awareness of adjusting to what matched the context. This context adjustment was especially important during typical situations at his job in which it would be completely wrong to wear a heavy metal T-shirt. The textile artist engaged in participation similar to participation in material-based art (Berg, 2014) and art in the expanded field (Krauss, 2006). She positively evaluated the idea that the T-shirt took on new forms as textile art, which was displayed at museums, and formally became a part of a national heritage when it was purchased by a museum. She enjoyed the fact that heavy metal had spread over new fields and captured new arenas. There was also a cultural form of participation in that fans identified various subgenres within the metal practice with which they identified themselves, more or less. There were also some who felt that having a heavy metal T-shirt marked them as someone who was in a different culture than the mainstream.

Final remarks: the experience of a metal T-shirt

The study contributes to the discussion about art and design practices in TS across media platforms (Jenkins, 2010, p. 944). The metal culture operates

with TS through concerts, albums, t-shirts, clothing, and various communication by symbols to share common interests and beliefs. The study exemplifies how products, such as the metal T-shirt, are experienced by the users and how they become an essential part of marketing strategies in which music, products, identity, and branding fuse into an aesthetic experience.

The T-shirt is thus an extension across media platforms and modalities in which ideology and music come to manifest a heavy metal performance. The extension of the performance to a culture is therefore carried out not only by the musician in heavy metal, or their marketing people, but also by the audience through this TS. The tensions between different modes of engagement emerge by wearing T-shirts with a variety of visual imagery, as a sign of group membership, and by truly endorsing and living the depicted myths.

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