

# ‘LIPSTICK AND LEATHER’: RECONTEXTUALIZATIONS OF GLAM METAL’S STYLE AND SIGNIFICATION

Jenna Kummer  
University of Lethbridge, Canada

## **Abstract**

Glam metal that was once seen as alien and counter-cultural has been reconstructed and recontextualized as softer and more familiar in some respects, suggesting that it is understood differently today than it once was. In order to understand recontextualized glam metal style and its signification, this paper will consider theoretical speculations about post-postmodernity. It is hoped that by placing the historical in conversation with the contemporary, that we might begin to explore how our understandings of each are informed by the other and how each can provide important insights with respect to the practices of style and metal culture writ large.

## **Introduction**

Heavy metal assumes a distinctive style evident in the adornments, gestural components, as well as in the sound and visual repertoires performed by its artists and their followers. It includes several subgenres, each with its own subculture, stylistic formations and performance personas. As a subgenre of heavy metal, glam metal is aesthetically distinctive when it comes to its sound, visual presentations, and style. Glam metal gained mainstream presence with the popularity of bands such as Warrant, Twisted Sister, Mötley Crüe, Scorpions, W.A.S.P., and Poison in the mid- to late 1980s, although the sound associated with it was cultivated in small-scale live performances in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The distinct style associated with glam metal was widely visible and during the 1980s, it was common to see it on the stage, on the television set, on magazine covers, and by many glam metal followers donned it in their everyday lives. This glam metal look blurred and exaggerated gender markers and included bright makeup, big and long hair, spandex, leather and scarves. The popularity of glam metal music and its style was not trending for long as mainstream visibility of it quickly waned in the early 1990s.

Although there may be a revival in heavy metal more generally, Kahn-Harris (2007) argues “as the twenty-first century has progressed... There has been an increased re-evaluation and renaissance of 1980s-style heavy metal. Pop metal bands such as Mötley Crüe and Poison have reconvened... Metal has come to be thought of much more affectionately and nostalgically...” (p. 1-2). However, more research is necessary to explore how the glam metal was a key influence on style and identification for its fans during its popular years as well as how it might influence fans in its contemporary form. While the glam metal style may have posed a counter-cultural affront to normative self-presentation in the 1980s, it has returned to help sell hamburgers, vehicles, insurance and even high fibre snacks through television advertisements. Glam metal rockers and their families now appear in numerous reality television shows and entertain viewers with the daily routines that they carry out in the ostensibly intimate

settings of their homes. How can we understand the re-emergence of glam metal music, the recontextualization of the style's signification and the identity of its fans? If the glam metal style of the 1980s articulated a group identity partially anchored by localized scenes, the return of the glam metal style in new dematerialized spheres provides an opportunity to understand better contemporary modes of identification.

### **Cultural contours of style**

An idea that informs this paper is style as a structural homology. Hebdige (1979) argues that style is the site where the meaning of subculture is worked out. The objects and gestures of significance to a subcultural group simultaneously mark their differences from dominant culture (p. 2-3). Hebdige explained that, which the subcultural style may appear to be disordered, there was a homologous relationship between gesture or an object and the group's concerns, as well as a relationship between its style and broader social practices of everyday life in dominant culture (p. 114-115). To the extent that homology is concerned with the structural resonances that make up a whole within a culture or subculture, homological analysis allows a deeper understanding of the meaning of style. Willis (1978) states that, homological analysis "is concerned with how far, in their structure and content, particular items parallel and reflect the structure, style, typical concerns, attitudes and feelings of the social group" (Willis, 1978, p. 191). Hebdige describes it as "the symbolic fit between the values and lifestyles of a group, its subjective experience and the musical forms it uses to express or reinforce its focal concerns" (p. 113). Thus, style does not merely reference the superficial adornment of discrete bodies. Acknowledging that style and dispositional modes of living are mutually implicated, the stylization of glam metal must resonate with, and communicate about, the cultural conditions in which it emerges and becomes crystallized.

In order to more comprehensively consider the argument that Hebdige makes that style is a structural homology in relation to the glam metal style and its recontextualization, it is crucial to acknowledge that representations of popular music culture are considered to be more than just entertainment. As popular music scholars insist, music can contribute to the shaping of identity and can help individuals negotiate a sense of social reality. Macnamara (2006) notes that "media representations... refer to more than the physical presentation of information to readers, viewers and listeners... media representations refer to the 'media's construction of reality... the relationship between the ideological and the real'" (p. 11). Newbold, Boyd-Barrett, & Van Den Bulck (2002) state that "representation refers to the process by which signs and symbols are made to convey certain meanings" (p. 260). This argument assists in the understanding of style as a structural homology because representations link shared cultural assumptions with subjective experiences. Practices of representation are mediated and they do not merely reflect given circumstances but instead construct and negotiate shared perception of reality. As a result, practices of representation contribute to larger social change.

Since Newbold et al. (2002) argue that representation "refers to the signs and symbols that claim to stand for, or re-present, some aspect of 'reality', such as objects, people, groups, places, events, social norms, cultural identities and so on" (p. 260), the stylistic elements that subcultural fan groups combine and adopt enable analysis of their respective structural homologies. Such homologous relationships are not static, therefore, a historical awareness of representational shifts offers opportunities for more nuanced considerations. New in-

terrelationships and meanings arise between objects, people and places, and the contexts in which they are represented change.

Representation functions on a level that is above the individual to the extent that it situates an individual within language and the social fabric, making the individual relationally recognizable. While the locating function of representation makes individuals visible as members of a social group, it also has the effect of aligning individuals with identities that are generalizing and perhaps essentializing. The influences of popular music culture can also contribute to the shaping of identity and can help groups negotiate a shared sense of social reality, thus assisting in the discussion around style as a homology. If popular music culture does more than entertain by intervening into the production of identity, the strong claims that Hebdige makes concerning the signifying power of subcultural style to block dominant systems of representation (p. 90) has more salience. Despite Hebdige's understanding of style's subversive possibilities, he acknowledges that popular media tended to present to social groups "a 'picture' of their own lives" (p. 85) and that subcultural style does not stand outside of representational practices. While subcultural style has the potential to disrupt this picture, "[s]ubcultures are, at least in part, representations of these representations, and elements taken from the 'picture'...are bound to find some echo in the signifying practices of the various subcultures" (p. 86).

Another way to consider glam metal and its style and signification is by understanding postmodernism. Frith (1996) states that postmodernism "is taken to describe a 'crisis' of signification systems: how can we now tell the difference between the 'real' and the 'stimulated'? The postmodern problem is the threat to our sense of place" (p. 295). Further, he notes that "what is underplayed in such discussions is the problem of process – not the positioning of the subject as such, but our experience of the movement between positions" (p. 295). Theories proposing a postmodern turn were first developed by theorists such as Lyotard and Baudrillard in the 1970s (Best & Kellner, 1997, p. 5-6). These theorists speculated about the end of modernity due to a "break" in history that was "caused by developments in the economy, technology, culture, and society, rather than by mass struggle and revolutionary upheaval as advocated in the 1960s" (Best & Kellner, 1997, p. 6), and that made existing narratives of explanation, such as those of progress, liberalism, and Marxism both redundant and ideologically suspicious. Best and Kellner situate the emergence of postmodern critiques in the wake of the failed emancipatory hopes of the 1968 radical uprisings in Europe and in the United States and associate postmodern thought with a sense of defeat and the weakening of social movements (p. 7-8).

These observations of postmodern tendencies in the two decades following the radical 1960s can provide support for an analysis of 1980s glam metal style in terms of its subversive potential, despite its commercial appearance and appeal. For instance, Chambers (1986) observes that the "debate over modernism/postmodernism is ultimately the sign... of a debate over the changed politics of knowledge, authority and power in the present world" (p. 216).

One way to understand this is to consider music videos. Once loved by its fans, glam metal music became subject to the Parents' Music Resource Centre (PMRC) campaign for a content ratings system in the 1980s, which targeted the glam aesthetic expressed in lyrics, on album covers, in music videos, and on t-shirts as sexually explicit, violent, and morally suspect. In consideration of popular 1980s glam metal music videos such as, but not limited to: "Smo-

kin' in the Boys Room" by Mötley Crüe, "We're Not Gonna Take It" by Twisted Sister and "Bang Your Head (Metal Health)" by Quiet Riot all seem oriented toward recruitment into a cultural movement that was critical of the social institutions of education, family, and health, respectively. These videos seem to call upon viewers to join a vanguard movement, one that presents a dystopic view of dominant society and its values. For example, Mötley Crüe's "Smokin' in the Boys Room" and Twisted Sister's "We're Not Gonna Take It" videos both deliver complex scripts of identification to their viewers via young and misunderstood protagonists with whom the ideal viewer will relate. In both of these videos, the identities of the protagonists are unsettled. Sometimes the protagonist blurs with or becomes the band's lead figure. At other times, when the lead singers deliver key lines and break the fourth wall to address the viewer directly, the viewer takes on the protagonist's position. For instance, it is not just "Jimmy" from "Smokin' in the Boys Room" who is shown an inverted and thus more 'true' vision of the world from the 'other side' of the mirror in the Mötley Crüe video, it is also us – the viewers – who are given this view and issued an invitation to join. This overarching theme of recruitment present in many glam metal music videos suggests a coherent glam metal subculture, or way of seeing, into which individuals are invited to identify and to join.

While theoretical observations about postmodernism and homology may help to understand glam metal style in the 1980s, these conceptual tools are limited in their efficacy to shed light on the return of the glam metal style, which appears to have a different relationship to social identity in the present. Instead, the shift from 1980s glam metal style to its present recontextualization seems to resonate with recent theoretical speculations about the end of postmodernity and it is these speculations that require consideration.

### **Re-emergence and recontextualization**

The term recontextualization has been chosen for this paper in order to understand glam metal's revival because it considers how meanings and processes that were once established have been introduced in a new context. While Hebdige's discussion of subcultural style as a structural homology acknowledges that meanings reside in tension and are subject to change since the meaning of style is always "in dispute" (p. 3), recontextualizations initiate change in meaning and communicative purpose of a text, sign or discourse through the alteration of the parameters of the social field relevant to the social phenomena under consideration. As the understanding and meaning of texts and signs depends on the contexts in which they are placed, recontextualization implies the extraction of those signs or texts from their original contexts and/or meanings. Therefore, recontextualization occurs through a shift in perspective or through the retraction or expansion of the social context under consideration (Jenkins, 2013, p. 162-163). Semino, Deignan & Littlemore (2012) also state that recontextualization has also been used "in order to capture the strategies and processes involved in representing and adapting events, knowledge or components of social practices in different contexts" (p. 42).

Recontextualization provides a point of departure from Kahn-Harris's (2007) argument of a re-evaluation and renaissance of the 1980s-style of heavy metal and was first discovered upon review of Klypchak's (2011) article, which brings to light the contextual history of heavy metal's longstanding traditions. He states that a moral panic of heavy metal was in fact quite prevalent in heavy metal's formative stages and its traditions incited "those who found the imagery or lyrical content of metal to be obscene, blasphemous, or threatening to

youthful members of metal's audience to protestation, proposed prohibition, and attempts at political action" (p. 38). Klypchak argues that at the forefront of this moral panic were three acts – Alice Cooper, Black Sabbath and KISS – and three musicians – Alice Cooper, Ozzy Osbourne and Gene Simmons (p. 38). He finds it interesting that thirty years later, these targets of parental scorn are now ubiquitous in mainstream popular culture and have participated in family-oriented MTV series, arguably completely recontextualizing their lifestyle and thus, the music (p. 39). Klypchak attributes this recontextualization to "the diversification of rock music as an industry and the advent of diverse publicity outlets have changed the ways in which metal moral panics have proceeded and the responses both within and outside the metal community have transpired" (p. 40). Another reason for recontextualization is due to the PMRC's campaign for a content ratings system, as briefly mentioned above. This campaign's attention to glam metal is just one example that illustrates that the glam metal style disrupted normative expectations of self-presentation in the 1980s. In review of Klypchak's article I found there to be much more of interest, such as the consideration of changes in the relationship between identity, the consumption of music and style as an individual ages.

The discussion surrounding recontextualization also fits well with discussions surrounding theoretical speculations about post-postmodernity. Marked by a new aesthetic and a commodification of culture, scholars such as Jeffrey Nealon, Alan Kirby, and Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akken assert, each in different ways, assert that the concept of postmodernity cannot describe new conditions taking shape in the twenty-first century that have implications for conceptions of identity and style. Therefore, these scholars attempt to conceptualize an, as of yet, unsettled emergent cultural paradigm. Nealon (2012) suggests that we are immersed in a more intensified mode of production and consumption that he refers to as "post-postmodernism" (p. 51-52). For him, identity and authenticity are now rooted in choice and self-branding rather than in groups and localities (p. 63). Kirby's (2009) announcement of a new "cultural force field and systematic norm" (p. 2) called "digimodernity" is paradoxical since he claims that digimodernity does not exist. His point, however, is that the notion of digimodernity does not describe a new phase of history but helps to articulate recent social shifts in modernity associated with the "pseudo-politics" of Web 2.0 culture (p. 104), the belief in the open, democratic, and universally accessible virtual public sphere on the Internet. Faith in Web 2.0 politics fosters the suspension of identity (p. 106) and "a narrative form so open and haphazard in detail that it resembles the subjectively endless flux of life and unfolds as if it were (reality television)" (p. 160). Vermeulen and Akken (2010) posit the concept of "metamodernism" to capture a new narrative that responds to collective feelings of doubt, a mood of reflection, and an incitement to move forward. They argue that the latter is articulated in the (sincere) buzzword "change", which is currently favoured by politicians and CEOs, and U.S. President Barack Obama's 2008 popularly referenced "Yes, we can change" speech (p. 2). This "new narrative of longing [is] structured by and conditioned on a belief" (p. 5) in our capacity to realize an alternative future and marks the arrival of a pragmatic idealism that reacts with hope to three pervasive threats: the credit crunch, decentralization, and climate change (p. 5). Of particular interest is their emphasis on the social force of the word "change" and their insistence that a metamodern idealism relies upon a paradoxical conception of spatiality, or "a territory without boundaries, a position without parameters" (p. 12).

These theoretical speculations, which I will refer to using Nealon's terminology of post-postmodernism, have implications for the study of glam metal style's

return which may offer insight into the recent cultural shifts they observe. Nealon (2012) argues that post-postmodernism is important to consider compared to postmodernism because “rampant commodification functions as a more or less neutral beginning premise for... analysis of popular culture” (p. 63). In consideration of glam metal, rampant commodification seems to be the case as a result of the revival of the music. Nealon argues this by stating that “in embracing and recycling the rock music of the past, the current generation is simultaneously refusing the larger engine of the culture industries, the constantly updated tyranny of the culture industry’s obsolescence machine” (p. 63). This rampant commodification is now normalized in the presentation of glam metal.

Today, glam metal musicians who were once scrutinized by the PMRC, present happy, safe and loving homes to their audiences on reality television shows and their songs are frequently represented in television commercials (e.g. Fibre One and Scorpions’ “Rock You Like a Hurricane”). While these television shows and advertisements might allow fans to reminisce about the days when they listened to the music, they also invite new audiences to ‘try-on’ temporary identifications without commitment. To focus on contemporary iterations of glam metal in reality TV, there have been quite a few reality TV shows that feature glam metal musicians themselves, such as: “Growing up Twisted”, “Gene Simmons: Family Jewels”, and “Bret Michaels: Life as I Know it”. There are also reality TV shows that strictly feature glam metal musician’s families, such as “Ex-Wives of Rock”. The “Ex-Wives of Rock” is a currently running reality TV show featuring the four ex-wives of Scorpions drummer James Kottak, Warrant lead singer Jani Lane, Warrant bassist Jerry Dixon and Mötley Crüe lead singer Vince Neil. The framework of the show is based on new beginnings, family and flexibility. The ex-wives consistently discuss change in their lives: from moving homes and taking on new career opportunities to rekindling old romantic relationships to beginning new ones. Another key discussion point is their families. A narrative of the show mentions: “Once upon a time the ex-wives used to party like, well, like rock stars. Yep, they pretty much did everything their parents warned them not to do. So, you can imagine how interesting things are now that they are parents themselves” (Nelson, Bharmal & Makan, 2012). All in all, the contemporary presentation of glam metal seems to be less reflective of identification with a coherent, subcultural scene and instead offers new, flexible forms of positions.

With these contemporary examples in mind, Hebdige’s (1979) formulations of style and subculture would be relevant to an analysis of 1980s glam metal phenomena, but it does not seem to fit for the present context of glam metal’s restricted renaissance. The abrupt change in the structure of cultural production and consumption hints at a new relationship between cultural consumers and cultural products. Next, why this new relationship may be less spatially and socially located than it was in the 1980s will be explored.

Neoliberalism becomes a key consideration when it comes to the shift in the relationship between identity and style. Stuart Hall (1996) observed identity to be a “strategic and positional” (p. 3) concept denoting, on the one hand, its fractured and unsettled character and, on the other hand, its dependence upon a recognition of shared ideals, conditions, or characteristics that rely upon the construction of symbolic boundaries that simultaneously produce a symbolic region located outside of the group. With this in mind, neoliberalism provides insight into the broader social practices that have accompanied the shift from group identities in glam metal style in the 1980s to more flexible, individual

identities in the present recontextualized return of glam metal style. In other words, glam metal in the 1980s presented the appearance of inflexible identities in its surrounding subcultures that were tied to values and norms of individuals within the group. But, the return of the glam metal style does not appear to have brought such identities along with it. The development of neoliberalism (as the economic counterpart to postmodernity and to post-postmodernity in neoliberalism's most mature form), helps to explain this shift.

Considered to now be rooted in our subjectivities, neoliberalism began to change in the late 1970s according to Giroux (2008). He states that since this time, "we have witnessed... a new and more ruthless form of market fundamentalism that has been labeled neoliberalism" (p. 589). On the whole, "as a political economic-cultural project, neoliberalism functions as a regulative force, political rationale, and mode of governmentality" (Giroux, 2008, p. 549). Neoliberalism "...undermines the critical function of any viable democracy by undercutting the ability of individuals to engage in the continuous translation between public and private considerations and private interests by collapsing the public into the realm of the private" (Giroux, 2004, p. 494). Also, "within neo-liberalism's market-driven discourse, corporate power marks the space of a new kind of public pedagogy, and one in which the production, dissemination, and circulation of ideas emerge from the educational force of the larger culture" (p. 497). In this sense, Giroux states that public pedagogy "...refers to a powerful ensemble of ideological and institutional forces whose aim is to produce competitive, self interested individuals vying for their own material and ideological gain" (p. 497). This goes to show how new values, norms and identities were beginning to evolve at this time as a result of public pedagogy which can also help to explain the impact of neoliberalism on group identities.

Giroux (2004) states that the function of pedagogy by noting that "pedagogy illuminates the relationship between power, knowledge, and ideology, while self-consciously, if not self-critically, recognizing the role it plays in a deliberate attempt to influence how and what knowledge and identities are produced within particular sets of social relations" (p. 500). The shift from public to private considerations had a large impact on pedagogy and therefore, identity formation of individuals. Thus, pedagogy resulted in the reshaping of morals, norms and values. Giroux notes that "as a moral practice, pedagogy recognizes that what cultural workers, artists, activists, media workers, and others teach cannot be abstracted from what it means to invest in public life, presuppose some notion of the future, or locate oneself in public discourse" (p. 500). As a result, he argues that pedagogy is performative insofar as it is not just about deconstructing texts but also about "situating politics itself within a broader set of relations that address what it might mean to create modes of individual and social agency which enable rather than shut down democratic values, practices, and social relations" (p. 500). Further, he also discusses how powerful this public pedagogy of neoliberalism was when it first began by arguing that it is "...a powerful ensemble of ideological and institutional forces who aim is to produce competitive, self-interested individuals vying for their own material and ideological gain" (p. 497). This public pedagogy had a significant impact on what Giroux refers to as corporate public pedagogy culture because of how it has "...become an all-encompassing cultural horizon for producing market identities, values, and mega-corporate conglomerates, and for atomizing social practices" (p. 497). Moreover, "this had a significant impact not only on the construction and preservation of group identity, but on the development of new values, norms and individual identities" (p. 497). Therefore, the

construction of group identity during this decade has much to do with the political ideology of corporate public pedagogy, which was the key producer of market identities, values and so forth.

Callinicos' (1989) account of changes in the structure of the labour and commodification from Fordism to post-Fordism also provides insight into the development of new values, norms, and identities that Giroux suggests has occurred under neoliberalism as a result of public pedagogy. Callinicos observes that Fordism's emphasis on standardization of production meant that consumption was oriented towards standardized and mass goods. Fordism began to collapse under economic crises in the late 1960s and 1970s and new, consumption-led patterns of organization gradually took the place of Fordist production. Callinicos argues that under post-Fordism, niche markets that were focused on design replaced markets organized around mass-produced commodities, "commodities are no longer bought simply for the use-value they have but also for the lifestyle connoted by their design" (p. 134). This is an effect of a shift in the structure of labour that increasingly favours "flexible manufacturing systems" over the old assembly line model, which could not easily adapt to create multiple designs (p. 135). These shifts are significant to questions of identity because the role of an individual's labour has become more highly specialized than it was under Fordism. Now, "a smaller, multi-skilled core workforce capable, through quality circles and the like, of participating actively in the labour-process" works above a "peripheral' workforce [of] low-paid, temporary, often part-time, drawn from oppressed groups... shading off into the underclass sustained by a pared-down welfare state" (p. 135). More significantly, the slow rise of post-Fordism, the structure of production under neoliberalism impacts identity because, under its flexible niche production process, individuals have become accustomed to consuming the designs of commodities more than their functions. In other words, individuals increasingly consume objects and services as the signs of a lifestyle or identity as much as, or more than, they consume them for their use.

As we can see with the discussion surrounding the shift from public to private, norms and values change as well as the development of identities, this shift of political ideology is suggestive in itself of a recontextualization. Boltanski and Chiapello have considered the impacts of mature neoliberal conditions on individual subjectivities, noting that status is increasingly conferred unto to individuals who are adaptable, flexible, and intellectually mobile (Bishop, 2012, p. 215). If the capacity to move between different productive arrangements in the workplace has become a defining characteristic of a successful individual under mature neoliberalism, and if consumption is more than ever marked by lifestyle branding, then it may follow that the return of glam metal social figures and style is implicated in these changes.

### **Summary and reflection**

The observation that there has been an influx of live performances, contemporary advertisements and reality television programs that feature glam metal social figures, music and/or style suggests that the meaning of the glam metal style has been recontextualized because how the music is being presented has changed. As a result, the recent revival of glam metal does not appear to communicate the interruption of dominant culture and group identity through homology that it did in the 1980s. Instead, glam metal's contemporary revived style stands to give insight into how the meaning of style and identity is historically fluid and open to recontextualization. In a post-postmodern era, identi-



ty and authenticity are now rooted in choice and self-branding rather than in groups and localities (Nealon, 2012, p. 63). Neoliberalism and the shift from public to private considerations, which had a huge impact on reshaping morals, norms and values, helps to explain this change. Contemporary glam metal illustrates the reshaping of morals, norms and values as fans now identify with the music in its new contexts which are separate from group, subcultural experiences. As this paper recognizes recontextualization as a departure from homology to provide an understanding of contemporary expressions of style and signification for glam metal fans, more research exploring the historical context of the music as well as its contemporary revival is necessary for gaining a better understanding of how identification for fans can shift but also proliferate over time.

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