

Typography as a resource of media style: cases from music youth culture

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Introduction

This paper explores the social meaning of typographic choices at the intersection of pop culture and web design. Originating in sociolinguistics and discourse analysis, the research the paper is based on is concerned with the construction of social style in media discourse. My main question is the relation of language use and text design in the media with social identity. I assume that media texts are "designed" in order to reflect and represent the taste, interests, and ideology of particular audience communities. While earlier linguistic work on this subject examined only the verbal part of media discourse, there is a growing awareness that media analysis needs to be multimodal, extending its scope to all semiotic resources that are available to communicators and interpreted by their audiences (Fairclough 1995, Kress / van Leeuwen 1996).

In extending the analytic interest from the linguistic system to other parts of the semiotic landscape, it is, in a sense, "natural" to look at typography, broadly understood as the visual organisation of written language (Walker 2001: 2). However, looking at typography from the point of view of sociolinguistics and applied linguistics implies certain restrictions vis-à-vis the typographer's point of view. In particular, I am interested less in the purely functional aspect of typography – i.e., "the use of graphic devices and space to help make the meaning of the text clear to readers" (Walker 2001: 11) – and more in what I will term the "emblematic" aspect, i.e. the use of type choices to help contextualise the socio-cultural affiliation of a text. This distinction will be discussed in more detail in what follows. Moreover, I am looking at typography not as an abstract sign system, but as a situated code choice, which is always part of a specific genre in a specific communicative situation. I thereby assume that type is only one among several resources for the expression of social identity in media discourse, alongside e.g. lexical choices.

The findings reported in this paper are based on ongoing research on youth-cultural literacy practices and language styles on the Internet.¹ Working with a combination of ethnography, genre analysis and variation analysis, the overall aim of the project is to explore the construction of social style in computer mediated communication. Analysis focuses on various aspects of language use and text design in the youth-cultural online field, and discusses the relation of language style with factors such as genre and position in an online community (cf. Androutsopoulos in press). After a brief discussion of relations between typography and popular music, this paper will examine the way typography is used on websites dedicated to contemporary youth-cultural music styles. In particular, I will look at music-related type with respect to their position in webpage layout, the styling of website logos and navigation bars, as well as at participants' awareness of the stylistic value of type choices.

Typography and popular music

Pop music and the media discourse associated with it are a particularly fruitful context for the study of typography in popular culture. Music is a form of cultural commodity that encourages symbolic distinction through every means possible. In late modernity, all music-related

¹ This research is carried out from 2000–2004 at the Institute of German Language in Mannheim; information is provided on the project's homepage, <http://www.ids-mannheim.de/prag/sprachvariation/>.

subcultures use typography as a resource for the creation and propagation of an aesthetic identity. An early example is the 1960s hippie culture with its psychedelic letter style, which spread through record covers, concert posters and the music press. One decade later, punk-rock cultivated a "typo-anarchy" (Triggs 1998) in its underground publications, which, in turn, influenced the type design of mainstream lifestyle magazines in the 1980s. A second kind of relation between music and typography can be traced at the level of the individual typographer, in the sense that font designers can be inspired by pop music. The creation of new fonts is sometimes closely related to music, as in the case with fonts dedicated to famous rock bands. Danet (2001) discusses the example of "grunge typeface", a fashionable font style in the early 1990s in the US, which was connected to other aspects of grunge style like music and fashion.

Over the years, a number of correspondences between music and type styles have evolved. As a consequence, artists, products and fans of certain music style often – though not necessarily always – chose a particular kind of type for purposes of marketing and self-presentation. As a basis for further discussion, I will assume the following four correspondences: Typical for *punk-rock* are ransom note cut-outs and old-fashioned typewriter lettering (Triggs 1995, 1998); typical for *heavy metal* are "gothic" typefaces and calligraphic scripts; artists and fans of *techno* (or electronic dance music more generally) typically choose fonts related to computer culture and the aesthetics of science fiction, whereas *hip-hop* is associated to graffiti lettering and to gothic typefaces. By way of illustration, figure 1 presents four band logos with a fairly typical type for each music style. It seems important to stress that these are *typical* correspondences, which do not exclude the possibility of other type styles being used in a particular music culture. However, they are a part of collective style knowledge within pop discourse.

Figure 1: Band logos with music related type:

- punk (*Sex Pistols*)
- metal (*Anathema*)
- techno (*Electric Universe*)
- hip-hop (*Aufnahmezustand*)



A few remarks seem necessary in order to put these correspondences into context. I view music-related typography as (a) emblematic, (b) functionally restricted, (c) recontextualised (d) polyvalent, (e) socially interpreted, and (f) subject to global spread and intertextual flow. I'll briefly take these points in turn.

The term "emblematic" suggests that the main purpose of the typographic styles in question is not to enhance legibility of the text, but to convey the socio-cultural affiliation of the text and its producers. Emblematic type contextualises the individual text within the broader discourse of pop music. At the same time, it is functionally restricted in that it is only used in quite specific text positions and for specific communicative functions, i.e. for names and titles, logos, headers and other pieces of foregrounded text.

Many current associations between typography and music are the result of a *bricolage* process, in which typefaces with a history and associations of their own are appropriated in a new cultural context. In this new context, they form relations to the broader "image" of the music style in question. For instance, the use of "gothic" fonts by heavy metal bands and their fans is related to style resources such as Nordic mythology and medieval imagery. Triggs notes that ransom note cut outs, which originally "signify a fear of the unknown author", are integral to punk's "iconography of disrespect" (1998: 20). In a similar vein, the use of computer style fonts on techno record covers, t-shirts etc. is consonant with the futuristic and technology-bound image of techno culture. As for graffiti, it has always been an integral part of hip-hop culture. Graffiti lettering (cf. figures 1, 3, 6, 7) was developed in (illegal) artistic performance and was only later converted into digital versions for media use. In any case, type choices belong to the set of knowledge and symbols that characterise every music culture.

However, the music-related use of certain letterforms does not exclude their use in other contexts. On the contrary, typefaces may be "polyvalent", i.e. have multiple associations, or "meanings", within current popular culture. For instance, "gothic" type is currently used by, and associated with, right wing extremists, football hooligans, and hardcore hip-hop bands. There is also evidence that emblematic lettering is socially recognised and interpreted, i.e. consumers of popular culture attach social meanings to typographic choices. For instance, record reviews may spend quite a lot of ink on the typography of the record's title. Finally, emblematic lettering in music culture is globally known and used, and is in a state of constant intertextual flow. Music related type styles are spreading together with the respective music styles, and that makes typography a good example for globalization trends in pop culture. Emblematic type may start off as part of art products such as record covers, but it eventually diffuses and circulates in a variety of media formats as a resource to signal cultural affiliation, or fan identity. It will be found in various parts of the media system that promotes popular music, e.g. record advertisements or logos of music magazines. It will also be found in the life world of music fans, e.g. on things such as school bags, school books and school desks. In fact, it is precisely this intertextual circulation that makes music related type a part of popular culture.

Typography on the Web

The rise and growth of the World Wide Web in the 1990s extends the amount of pop-cultural discourse and increases the chance of individual artists, journalists and fans to participate in this discourse, especially on a non-professional level. The digital revolution of the 1990s has also been a revolution in lay uses of typography. Brenda Danet (2001), who has treated the subject in some length, notes that computers and the Internet have brought about a remarkable explosion of lay interest in typography, which she refers to as "font frenzy". Danet's ethnographic work sketches out a whole range of lay appropriations of typography on the Web, involving the collection of typefaces and the design of new ones. A major feature of this trend is the value of the aesthetic qualities of typeface over purely functional ones. For non-experts, the play with letter form is more important than readability, so that "font frenzy" is also an aesthetic reaction, or even rebellion, against purely functional typography. Moreover, Danet shows how new amateur fonts are densely connected with other aspects of popular culture. For instance, typeface originally developed for films or soap operas is used to develop a complete font, collectors and lay designers organize their collections according to cultural association, etc.

Typographic choices on music related websites

A look at music-related websites quickly suggests that the traditions of emblematic typography sketched out above persist on the Web as well. Figures 2–5 display four screenshots from websites dedicated to punk-rock, hip-hop, techno, and heavy metal, respectively, featuring each culture's typical emblematic style. In cases like these, the website's stylistic affiliation is both highlighted by the choice of lettering and expressed linguistically in the site's name: *wildstylz* refers to a style within graffiti art, and is set in graffiti lettering; *route77* refers to the year of birth of punk-rock, and is set in ransom note cut-out style; in *brightness-metal* the style label is part of the website's name, which is set in a sort of gothic calligraphy; the same holds for *raveline*, which is set in a sans serif font. Further discussion in this and the next section is based on a



Figure 5: Screenshot of www.brightness-metal.de, a heavy metal website

In exploring forms and functions of music related emblematic type, I'll start with its typical positions on the webpage layout. A typical arrangement of webpages is the so called three-panel layout (Veen 2000), which includes three spaces, or frames, with distinctive functions: (a) a horizontal "brand bar" on the top, which includes the website's identification, in particular its logo and slogan; (b) a vertical "navigation bar" on the left, displaying the site's navigation structure; and (c) the main frame, or "canvas", in which verbal or visual content is placed. In this arrangement, emblematic type will generally appear in the brand and/or navigation bar, whereas text in the canvas will be set in a font that enhances screen legibility, e.g. Verdana. Though the linguistic units set in emblematic type in the website are not necessarily different than those found in a print magazine (e.g. the magazine's name and the main headers of its table of contents correspond to the website's logo and the navigation bar items), a new formal distribution of emblematic type is introduced on the Web, based on the distinction between canvas and the two peripheral frames.

A closer look at the typographic styling of website logos and navigation bars suggests an interplay of typographic distinction across music cultures and variation within each culture. In other words, though many website designers do use typical fonts in order to make the cultural affiliation of their site more salient, there is considerable typographic variation within all music cultures concerned. In the case of hip-hop, for instance, only half of the 20 websites examined feature logos and/or navigation bars that are styled in some sort of graffiti lettering. This finding does not necessarily contradict the type conventions discussed above. However, it suggests that participants aim at individuality in their design solutions, a point to which I'll return in the next section.

In several cases, emblematic type co-occurs with a more neutral type within a site's brand and/or navigation bar. Is this the case within the brand bar, chances are that emblematic type is used for identification rather than for navigation. For instance, backspin.de, the website of a leading German hip-hop magazine, is using emblematic lettering for the website's name, whereas a normal sans serif type is used for the navigation bar (figure 6). Within the website's identification, chances are that emblematic type will be used for the website's logo, whereas the slogan is set in a normal font, as exemplified by the epoxweb.de site (figure 7).

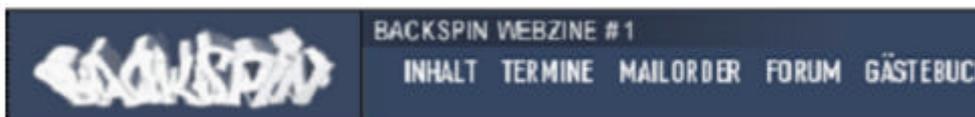


Figure 6: Logo and navigation bar of www.backspin.de



Figure 7 Logo and slogan of www.epoxweb.de

The functional division of labour between different lettering styles is nicely illustrated by hiphop.de, a large and professionally designed portal (figure 8). This website's navigation menu is presented in a circle structure, which surrounds a cartoon character. The cartoon, the visual style of which clearly follows graffiti aesthetics, presents the website's content to the reader. In a sense, it represents the website's producers. It addresses the viewer with a slogan – "recognise the real...!" – that praises the website's content as part of authentic hip-hop culture.

Significantly, this slogan is set in a graffiti-like lettering style, while sans serif fonts are used for the rest of the navigation menu. Here, emblematic type is used to relate the slogan, and thus the producers' stance, to street culture. In my view, this image would lose much of its expressive power if the slogan was set in a normal sans serif font.



Figure 8. Navigation menu of www.hiphop.de

Participants' awareness of typographic choices

In the remainder of this paper, the picture sketched out so far will be completed through a brief discussion of participants' awareness of typographic choices. In interviews with homepage producers and webmasters, typography came up either as a feature of hip-hop style on the Web or in the explicit discussion of website logos. My first example is webbeatz.de, a non-commercial "hip-hop promotion platform", which provides free webspace to newcomer rap artists. In the website's identification bar (figure 9), a mixture of fonts is used for the logo, whereas sans-serifs are used for the slogan and the surrounding menu items. In the interview, the webmaster commented on the site's logo as follows (all interview excerpts are translated from the German by the author):

Well, basically I find it relatively hip-hop unstylish, in particular the logo, but the problem is, well basically you want to have something from the graffiti context, but then again it quickly gets illegible.



Figure 9. Logo of www.webbeatz.de

This statement clearly expresses awareness of what constitutes a hip-hop style with respect to logos, i.e. "something from the graffiti context". In contrast, the site's logo is termed "hip-hop unstylish". This difference in aesthetics is connected to a difference in functionality: According to the webmaster, what conforms to community norms goes against readability, and can therefore be problematic if a wider audience is to be addressed.

My second example shows how the relation between type style and the notion of authenticity is questioned. The case here is www.mkzwo.de, the website of an established hip-hop print magazine, the logo of which does not use graffiti style either (figure 10). Instead, it is set in capitals against the background of a record player (note that "mk zwo", i.e. 'MK two', is the name of the legendary Technics turntables that hip-hop DJs use for scratching). The webmaster comments on typographic conventions within hip-hop by saying that "you've got to have a writer lettering in order to be real, and that's crap, of course". Through the use of the generic second pronoun and the choice of deontic modality ("you've got to"), the speaker presents "writer lettering" (in German: *Writerschrift*) as the norm for hip-hop related media. However, at the same time he rejects a straightforward relation between typography and cultural authenticity ("to be real"). His point is that surface markings of affiliation, such as emblematic type, are not sufficient to determine a participant's cultural knowledge and engagement.



Figure 10. Logo of www.mkzwo.de

In these two cases, a vernacular typographic norm is acknowledged, and at the same time questioned, by semi-professional webmasters with a certain level of expertise in web design. However, my data also provides evidence for the fact that typographic choices can evoke negative reactions in the reception community. I will illustrate this with a comparison between producer and audience discourse in the case of www.rhein-neckar-hiphop.com, a short-lived amateur web project. Its logo (figure 11) is set in a widely available word processor font, which vaguely resembles graffiti style. In the interview, the webmaster commented on this logo as follows:

I tried to bring the design, well the fonts in this direction, though I didn't really succeed (...) This [referring to logo shown in figure 11] is sort of a standard Windows font, one which sort of tends to be hip-hop wise, but if you read the guest book, there are some people who are complaining a bit, because it's not an individual style, like drawing something yourself and scanning it up.



Figure 11. Logo of www.rhein-neckar-hiphop.com

When asked about features of hip-hop style on his website, the webmaster pointed out the logo's letterform. With the expressions "to bring it in this direction" and "hip-hop wise", he alludes to the community's expectations about culturally appropriate type design. With the expression "if you read the guest book", he brings audience reaction into play. However, the relevant guestbook entry is a straightforward rejection of the website's logo design, and it attests a lack of style to the webmaster:

The idea to link together the Rhein-Neckar area is cool, but please please look for someone who'll give the page some style. The flyers are weak, the tags are out of some shitty font (if you need them, just do them yourselves) etc. etc.

While the webmaster vaguely refers to "people who are complaining a bit", the guestbook visitor gives to the website owners the advice to "look for someone who'll give the page some style". The webmaster's descriptive labelling, "a standard Windows font", contrasts with the guestbook's explicitly negative evaluation, "some shitty font". However, both webmaster and visitor agree on a leitmotif of hip-hop style, i.e. individuality – in the visitor's words: "just do them yourselves". Following this logic, good style has to be individual. With respect to logos, this means that a handmade lettering, which is subsequently digitalised, is preferred over the use of widely available fonts. By choosing a standard desktop font, the webmaster violates this style principle, which he himself formulates as "drawing something yourself and scanning it up".

Conclusion

This paper explored some issues at the intersection of typography, media style and popular culture, drawing on websites dedicated styles of contemporary popular music. Even if typographic experiments on the Web seem to lag behind those in printed media (as documented by e.g. Triggs 1995), type remains an important style resource in computer-mediated communication. What is particular to the Internet when compared to printed media is the increasing amount of non-expert media productivity, including lay uses of typography. As Walker (2001) points out, non-expert typography has an increasing influence on the shape of visual communication (2). What is needed, therefore, is a "growing awareness of the conventions and configurations that are used by non-expert designers and some indication of the circumstances in which they are used" (174-5). The findings of this paper indicate that conventions of emblematic typography, which originate in printed media, make their way into the graphic design of website names/logos and navigation bars. In this process, new contextual constraints are developed with regard to the medium and the genres involved (personal homepages, online magazines, and web portals). The style value of typographic choices are recognised, and sometimes challenged, by producers and their audience.

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