Multimodality in visual media: the meaning of typography in Taylor Swift's lyric videos

Multimodalidade em mídias visuais: o significado da tipografia nos lyric videos de Taylor Swift

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ABSTRACT: Following the evolution of digital technologies, communication is opening more space to visual elements, recognizing them for their semiotic functions. Among those elements, typography plays a significant role since, as van Leeuwen (2017, p. 9) states, "writing of all kinds now has to 'look good'". This affirmation can also be associated with the popularization of lyric videos — videos that show the lyrics and the audio of a song synchronically — which have been gaining recognition as a promotional tool in the music industry (McLaren, 2018). Considering that, this paper aims at presenting and discussing typography as a multimodal aspect of lyric videos of Taylor Swift's songs that, when integrated to other visual elements present in those videos, may help the viewer to understand the context in which they were produced, the meanings behind the lyrics, and consequently, promote visual literacy. To do that, in a qualitative and exploratory study, we selected 7 (seven) lyric videos published on Taylor Swift's official YouTube channel and took screenshots of three lines of each song: the first line of the song, the first line of the chorus, and the last line of the song, totaling 21 (twenty-one) screenshots. Then, the screenshots were cataloged in a spreadsheet, in which the characteristics present on the typographic elements were organized based on van Leeuwen's (2006) and Serafini and Clausen's (2012) descriptions. The last step was to analyze the data obtained and identify the meaning-making possibilities brought by this semiotic mode. Results showed that typography in Taylor Swift's lyric videos plays a significant role in the meaning-making process. Features such as (it)regularity, (in)formality, framing, and color may have been used to convey messages of love, heartbreak, and grudge. We could understand that a possible implication of this is the use of lyric videos in the educational context, which might bring a new contribution to the English learning process and to visual literacy promotion through typography.

KEYWORDS: Multimodality. Typography. Lyric videos. Visual literacy.

RESUMO: Seguindo a evolução das tecnologias digitais, a comunicação vem abrindo espaço para elementos visuais, reconhecendo-os por suas funções semióticas. Dentre estes elementos,

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a tipografia possui papel importante já que, como apontado por van Leeuwen (2017, p.9), "escritas de todos os tipos agora têm que ter 'boa aparência'". Essa afirmação também pode ser associada à popularização de *lyric videos* — vídeos que mostram a letra e o áudio de uma música simultaneamente — que vêm ganhando reconhecimento como uma ferramenta promocional na indústria da música (McLaren, 2018). Levando isso em consideração, este artigo busca apresentar e discutir tipografia como um aspecto multimodal dos *lyric videos* de músicas de Taylor Swift que, quando integrado a outros elementos visuais presentes nesses videos, podem ajudar o espectador a entender o contexto em que foram produzidos, os significados por trás das letras e, consequentemente, promover letramento visual. Para tanto, neste estudo qualitativo e exploratório, selecionamos 7 (sete) *lyric videos* publicados no canal oficial do YouTube de Taylor Swift e fizemos capturas de tela de três versos de cada música: o primeiro verso da música, o primeiro verso do refrão e o último verso da música, totalizando 21 (vinte e uma) capturas de tela. Após essa etapa as capturas de tela foram catalogadas em uma planilha na qual as características presentes nos elementos tipográficos foram organizadas com base nas descrições de van Leeuwen (2006) e Serafini e Clausen (2012). O último passo foi analisar os dados obtidos e identificas as possibilidades de produção de significado trazidos por este modo semiótico. Os resultados mostraram que a tipografia nos *lyric videos* de Taylor Swift possuem papel importante no processo de produção de significados. Características como: (ir)regularidade, (in)formalidade, enquadramento e cor podem ter sido usados para transmitir mensagens de amor, coração partido e mágoa. Pudemos entender que uma possível implicação disso é o uso de *lyric videos* no contexto educacional, que pode trazer novas contribuições para o aprendizado de inglês e para a promoção do letramento visual através da tipografia.

1 Aesthetic and functionality of typography: an introduction

Visual elements have been increasingly taking part in people's daily life (Callow, 2013). From cave paintings to social media as we know it today, it is noticeable how much our lives have become more and more visual. Due to the evolution of digital technologies, elements such as drawings, photographs, typography, and many other semiotic resources have become even more intrinsically connected to contemporary communication.

Despite images being the most common example of visual elements, another visual semiotic resource that has been attracting the attention of researchers in the current century is typography. Van Leeuwen (2006) affirms that the 'page media' are becoming more visual and the Internet has become more oriented towards written

words, which can be related to easier access to digital technologies. Besides that, this easiness benefited the production of new fonts (Serafini; Clausen, 2012), whereas the creation process is no longer manual, and they can be more easily manipulated by a bigger number of users, not being restricted to specialists anymore. As stated by van Leeuwen (2017, p. 9), "writing of all kinds now has to 'look good'", and that reflects on media like magazines, book covers, album covers, and lyric videos, among other media, which have been exploring different typographic features and bringing new contributions on their meaning-making potential.

Typography as a semiotic mode has been investigated by different researchers considering its function in the meaning-making process of different media. We can see this aspect in Serafini and Clausen's (2012) work, in which they discussed how typography is not only a conduit for the written language but also works as a visual resource with its own meaning potential and exemplified that by analyzing its use in contemporary picture books. Silva (2020), considering the various typographic features present in digital games, also analyzed the semiotic potential of this resource and also the integration with other elements present in the game *Plants Vs. Zombies.* Rufí (2018) analyzed the graphic design and typographic features that compose lyric videos focusing on its commercial role. Arruda, Santos, and Barbosa (2022) discussed the evolution of the use of typographic resources in Applied Linguistics' book covers and summaries published between 2000 and 2020, being able to observe a shift in use of characteristics from as formal and simple as possible to unusual colors and informal types, which may bring a more high-spirited energy to the teaching process. Santos and Barbosa (2024) extended their interest in typography by investigating its semiotic potential in another media, contemporary picture books, which is also related to education, being used as teaching resources, especially in initial years. The results highlighted the role of typography in storytelling, where it took part in such as defining the participant speaking and establishing relations between words and their meanings in that context (Santos; Barbosa, 2024). The outcomes of the works on

typography published in the past 13 years, going from Serafini and Clausen's (2012) to Santos and Barbosa (2024), have contributed to the studies on the semiotic potential of this mode and the expansion of researches on the topic, motivating papers like this one.

Those studies highlighted the capability carried by typographic characteristics in different media, showing how this semiotic mode can do much more than just being an intermediate for verbal language or an adornment for its page, although aesthetic is also relevant in writing, as asserted by van Leeuwen (2006). Exploring the possibilities offered by many types of media might contribute to promoting visual literacy when used in the educational context, for example, which is essential considering the number of visual elements that people use and are exposed to every day. An example of a medium that carries typography in its composition is the lyric video; a type of video in which the lyrics of a song are shown on the screen synchronized with the audio of it. Besides the typography in the video, other elements like images, colors, and movement also make this type of resource even more visual and might contribute to meaning production.

Following the aspects mentioned, this research aims to understand the use of typographic characteristics in Taylor Swift's lyric videos. To do that, we are guided by the following questions: how typography is used along with other visual elements to convey meaning in the context of Taylor Swift's lyric video production, and what are the possible implications of the use of these videos when we consider the promotion of visual literacy in the educational context. To accomplish these goals, the use of typographic elements in Taylor Swift's lyric videos was described based on the characteristics provided by van Leeuwen (2006) and Serafini and Clausen (2012) and analyzed according to a social semiotic perspective of multimodality (Kress, 2010), conceptions on visual literacy (Callow, 2013; Barbosa, 2017), and studies on typography (van Leeuwen, 2006; Serafini; Clausen, 2012), which we discuss as follows.

2 How multimodality interacts with lyric videos: theories and reflections

Aiming at a better understanding of multimodality, and more specifically multimodality in typography, contributes to the new concepts of reading and communication in the 21st century, in this section we present ideas and reflections on: multimodality, discussed by Kress (2010), van Leeuwen (2005), Barbosa (2017); typography, exploring the characteristics described by van Leeuwen (2008) and Serafini and Clausen (2012), and lyric videos, with considerations by McLauren (2018) and Lems (2021).

2.1 Multimodality

The term communication, derivative from the Greek word *communicare,* can be defined as "a process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs, or behavior" (Communication, 2021). Human civilization has one of the most complex communication systems among animals, evolving and refining itself day by day in a non-stop process. In relation to that, Kress (2010) affirms that the normal state of human communication is multimodality, conceptualized by van Leeuwen (2005, p. 281) as "the combination of different semiotic modes — for example, language and music — in a communicative artifact or event". It is also necessary to highlight our support on the social semiotics theory, which affirms that meaning production is not arbitrary and it happens according to the environment (Hodge; Kress, 1988; Kress; van Leeuwen, 2006). Therefore, to represent a message, different semiotic modes may be used according to the context and specific needs of those who produce and read texts. When different modes are united to create a text, multimodality is shaped, allowing the growth of the number of existent possibilities in meaning production.

Following those ideas, Barbosa (2017) states that multimodality has been part of human life since our first means of communication, with sounds, gestures and rudimentary paintings, and following human evolution, new modes have been

included in this list. The development of communication has brought different needs, such as means of distributing information, which have demanded improvements and adaptations from humankind. Examples of those were men creating papyrus, books, woodcutting, computers, and also the Internet, which plays an essential role in today's world. Through new information and communication technologies, we are increasingly being exposed to a bigger variety of texts, which can be found physically or digitally. Tools like Google Images, YouTube and Photoshop, for example, allow people with access to computers or smartphones to be able to search, see and create visual and multimodal content. Adami (2016), discusses the social impact that these technologies had on the past years, stating that they brought an unbelievable number of means to produce meaning, using simple and online platforms which enable the production and distribution of multimodal texts to diverse audiences.

Among those audiences, there are students from different levels, who are always consuming and producing multimodal texts during their school life. Even with the written language having a highlighted spot in the educational context, it is possible for them to get in contact with and produce meaning using various modes, including visual resources like video lessons, comic books, performances, and many others. This ability to understand and use visual elements in communication, also known as visual literacy, is discussed in the following topic.

2.1.1 Visual literacy

The educational scenario can be considered a preview of what society is dealing with in terms of economy, politics, and also communication. As a consequence of living in the 21st century, a digital and visual era, it is also relevant to talk about visual literacy, defined by Metros (2008, p. 103) as "the ability to decode and interpret (make meaning from) visual messages and also to be able to encode and compose meaningful visual communication." This literacy is currently considered essential to human beings, since the new digital technologies have made it possible for visual resources to

be more present in our daily life and to have more functionalities which go beyond the illustrative purpose, being increasingly used in advertising, products packaging, books and other texts, as a communicative resource. Consequently, the ability to read critically and produce these texts gives power to those who know how to use them, because they can now read and understand the message even when it is not explicitly presented and are also able to produce texts using this type of resource with a clear and objective mind.

However, in the educational context, for example, Barbosa's (2017) reflections allow us to infer that, not only in basic education but also in teacher training, there is still a lack of subjects that discuss and investigate visual literacy in an efficient way. Because of this educational deficiency, students usually finish their formal education not knowing how to make full use of visual resources. Understanding the use of different semiotic modes, like images, colors, layout and typography thus, would help them use those visual resources efficiently. The Grammar of Visual Design, by Kress and van Leeuwen (1996; 2006; 2021), is a reference work in this aspect, and it is briefly addressed in the next topic.

2.1.2 The Grammar of Visual Design and its interactive metafunction

Based on the metafunctions concepts proposed by Michael Halliday in the Systemic Functional Grammar, Kress and van Leeuwen formulated the Grammar of Visual Design, which has as its main purpose to describe the "images syntax", in other words, the structure that composes images as we know. Just as words can be organized in sentences, they believe that elements, such as people and places represented, can be rearranged to create a broader meaning (Kress; van Leeuwen, 2006). Thus, the authors aimed to provide descriptions of visual elements that are considered the standard throughout the history of western visual semiotics, and to analyze how they are used in meaning-making (Kress; van Leeuwen, 2006).

Following Halliday's ideas, Kress and van Leeuwen started to use the terms representational, interactive, and compositional metafunctions to describe the organization of various semiotic modes, not only written and spoken language. In this research, we focused on the interactive metafunction, which is related to how we perceive and understand the interaction between visual elements "based on our embodied knowledge of everyday non-verbal communication" (Kress; van Leeuwen, 2021, p. 115). This interaction, according to Kress and van Leeuwen (1996; 2006; 2021) is represented by narrative structures with interactive participants, who "speak and listen or write and read, make images or view them" (Kress; van Leeuwen, 2006, p.48), and represented participants, "who constitute the subject matter of the communication" (Kress; van Leeuwen, 2006, p.48). This metafunction was chosen with the purpose of describing the possible meanings brought by visual elements aside from typography, such as (still and moving) images and color, and their relation to the producer and audience connection. All of these resources can be found together in some media, like lyric videos for example, which are explored on the next topic.

2.2 Lyric videos

Along with digital technologies' evolution, many types of media have changed, and new ones have been created. As an example, the musical industry, which at the beginning was focused only on radio and records distribution, followed the trend that was brought by television as a publicity booster, leading to the creation of specific music channels, like MTV in 1981, making music videos a popular method to promote songs on TV. After that, many variations of music videos were created, and one of them is the lyric video. A definition of the lyric video says that this type of media offers "a visual treatment of the lyrics of a song, presented in synchronization with the recorded music" (McLauren, 2018, p. 2). Through time, it is possible to observe how lyric videos first appeared and how they became a popular strategy to promote a song. Back in 1987, Prince, one of the biggest references in Black Music, owner of the hit

songs "Kiss" and "Purple Rain", released the official music video of "Sign O' The Times", a colorful video in which the lyrics of the song would appear on the screen in sync with the audio, as shown on Figure 1[1].

Figure 1 – Screenshot from "Prince - Sign O' The Times (Official Music Video)" on YouTube.

Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8EdxM72EZ94

In this part of the lyric video, the words appear horizontally, from the right to the left, in a dark gray background, which is somehow interpolated with a big letter 'M' in a purple square. The lyrics, represented in white color and formal font, are also framed by black triangular shapes on the sides, highlighting the typographic element of the video. An interesting characteristic present in this screenshot is that the same letter represented in a gigantic size — M —, is capitalized in the word "Man", calling attention to it.

Only much later, after the popularization of YouTube as a platform of video distribution, official lyric videos became popular and started being produced and uploaded on the artists' official channels (McLauren, 2018). The evolution of editing programs also contributed to the production of those videos. McLauren explains that

> The experimentation with the movement, placement, and font of the lyrics, through kinetic typography or other editing styles allowed the

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[1] All the lyric videos mentioned and represented by screenshots in this paper can be watched through the links presented as the source of the figures.

music to be visualized more clearly, and for additional storytelling opportunities to appear (McLauren, 2018, p.68).

An example of this experimentation can be seen in Figure 2, which shows how movement[2] of the lyrics is used in Katy Perry's lyric video to convey a dynamic sensation to the viewer.

Figure 2 – Screenshot sequence from "Katy Perry - Part Of Me (Lyric Video)" on YouTube.
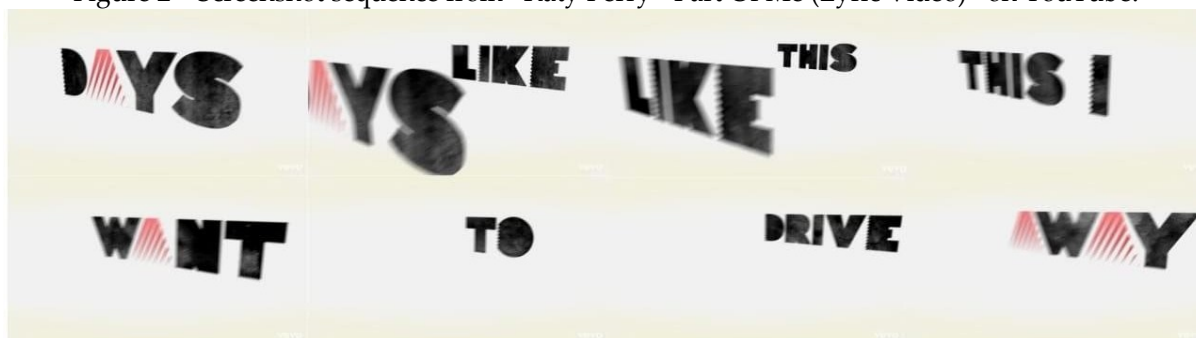
Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Fko7_SV3Lc

At the beginning of the lyric video of the song "Part Of Me", the words show up on the screen in sync with the beat of the song and proceed to move diagonally from the right to the left, which, based on its lyrics ("Days like this I want to drive away"), can be interpreted as the movement done by a car dislocating from a location to another.

Beyond typographic features, many elements were further becoming part of lyric videos, such as "physical objects, text messages and emojis, and the words were often set against video footage rather than an image or patterned background." (McLauren, 2018, p. 88). This was also relevant to expand the number of visual elements that can be used in this type of video, making it more diverse, multimodal, and eye-catching to the new generation, which also might expand the functions associated with this medium. An example of an artist who uses the most diverse modes in her lyric videos and also is part of the creative production of her videos and

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[2] The idea of movement present in the video can only be described in this paper, since these are just screenshots, but in the video itself, the movement of the words is clearly represented.

songs is Taylor Swift, whose visual production we briefly discuss in the following topic.

2.2.1 Taylor Swift's lyric videos and her work in visual production

Taylor Alison Swift is a popular American singer and the first female solo to win four times the Grammy Award for Album Of The Year, with *Fearless* in 2009 edition, *1989* in 2015, *folklore* in 2020, and *Midnights* in 2023. Besides being a singer and songwriter since 2006, according to the website IMDb (2021), Taylor Swift started her path as a music video director in 2008 with the video of the song "I'm Only Me When I'm with You". In the following years, she continued to be involved in video production, like in the lyric video of the song "Look What You Made Me Do", co-produced by Joseph Kahn, in 2017. More recently, in 2020, she received the MTV Music Video Awards prize for best direction for the music video "The Man", a video that marked her debut as a solo director (Rudolph, 2020). Ever since, she has directed ten more music videos, one documentary, and one short film over the period of four years. Her deep connection with her video production and direction gives her a different level of power as a meaningful producer, considering how much control she has over her own art.

Lyric videos like hers carry a big multimodal potential, including the possible role as a teaching resource, which is discussed in the next topic.

2.2.2 Lyric videos in the educational environment

Lyric videos are not officially considered teaching materials since that is not their primary function when produced. However, due to their semiotic potential, bringing this type of media to the educational environment might enhance the possibilities of contribution not only to visual literacy but also to language teaching, particularly, in the scope of this work, English language. According to Lems (2021, p. 2), in this type of video "the song, the visual images, and the kinetic typography

overlap with one another, giving the learner access to an aesthetic product that is much greater than the sum of its parts".

This combination of modes can make these videos more and more multimodal, which enhances the possibilities of their use. In general, lyric videos contain at least three semiotic modes: the song, images, and verbal language, which is intrinsically connected to typography. Songs are already commonly used in English as a second language classroom as teaching resources. This audio element contributes to better understanding the pronunciation, grammar structure, vocabulary, expands cultural knowledge, and much more (Lems, 2001). Images are also an example of that since they come to supply society's needs in the contemporary context, whereas visual communication has become more popular and accessible, going against the stereotype of being only the work of specialists (Kress; van Leeuwen, 2006) and reaching ordinary people, including students and teachers, who have access to smartphones, editing programs and applications. Beyond that, the typographic feature, being kinetic or not, is now seen as a "means of communication of its own right" (van Leeuwen, 2006), being used to produce meaning and many other functions.

Therefore, lyric videos can be useful resources in English classrooms because of their potential to provide meaningful learning opportunities. The solid influence of songs in this environment and the potential held by other semiotic modes present in them can contribute to enhancing their multimodal character, like typography, for example, which has some of its ideas and characteristics explained in the next topic.

2.3 Typography

By integrating different modes, such as color, texture, three-dimensionality, and many others, typography is no longer related exclusively to the shape of the letters and has started to be recognized as multimodal (van Leeuwen, 2006). This "art and technique of arranging type to make language visible" (Serafini; Clausen, 2012) is now considered a semiotic mode of its own, owning the function of representing actions,

ideas, establishing relations, highlighting elements etc. (van Leeuwen, 2006). This change of point of view towards typography is intrinsically related to advances in digital technology, which allowed an easier way to execute the slow and hard work of handwriting and woodcutting through the use of computers. Considering that, one of the many benefits brought by those devices was the possibility of manipulation and use of fonts even by those who are not professional designers (Serafini; Clausen, 2012), it is possible to infer that the democratization of this resource, which is happening faster and faster, can contribute to increase the power typography carries in communicative processes.

Among the elements that compose typography, the font is considered a basic element and is defined by Serafini and Clausen (2012) as "the vehicle through which written language is materialized for sighted readers." It is also discussed as a visual element and semiotic resource with its own signification potential (Serafini; Clausen, 2012). The diversity of the current existing fonts gives freedom to designers, writers, and laypeople, allowing them to create a bigger variety of combinations with other modes, increasing the number of ways that messages can be produced. These changes have been arousing the interest of visual semiotics researchers, like van Leeuwen (2006) and Serafini and Clausen (2012), who, considering the characteristics present on fonts and their possible meanings, described some of them in order to make it easier to understand its use.

Van Leeuwen (2006) described eight characteristics present in fonts: weight, expansion, slope, curvature, connectivity, orientation, regularity, and non-distinctive features, represented in Table 1. He highlights that this categorization is not a rule or a dictionary, it is a proposal to 'semioticize' typography since it is now considered a semiotic mode.

Table 1 – Typographic characteristics described by van Leeuwen (2006).

Characteristics	Visualization	Description
Weight	**Bold** or regular typefaces	Besides being used to increase salience, weight can also mean 'daring', 'assertive', or 'solid' and 'substantial', and its opposite can signify 'timid' or 'insubstantial'.
Expansion	Condensed or expanded	Since it is related to space, condensed typefaces may be seen as overcrowded, restrictive of movement. On the other hand, wide typefaces are seen as providing room to breathe, room to move.
Slope	*Sloping* or upright	This feature can be leant to the right or left and brings the idea of 'organic' and 'personal' writing, contrasting with the 'mechanical' and 'impersonal' of its absence.
Curvature	Curvy or ANGULAR	The roundness of a font can convey an idea of 'smooth', 'soft', 'natural', while the angularity represents 'abrasive', 'harsh' and 'technical'.
Connectivity	*Connected* or separated	This feature is associated with handwriting, similar to 'slope'. Disconnection can suggest 'fragmentation', while connection can suggest 'wholeness' or 'integration'.
Orientation	**Flattened** or vertical oriented	Verticality and horizontality are related to our experience with gravity. Flattened fonts can suggest 'heaviness', 'solidity' and 'inertia', while vertical orientation can suggest 'lightness' or 'instability'.
Regularity	*No* pattern, inconstant	Irregular fonts break the commonly known pattern, suggesting an idea of modernity.
Non-distinctive features	*Flourishes*, curves, serifs	Elements like serifs, curves at the end of the letters and other elements can also convey meaning related to other features, previously described.

Source: adapted from van Leeuwen (2006).

In relation to the characteristics pointed out by Serafini and Clausen (2012), the authors focus not only on the font elements but also on the composition and graphic design elements. They have as a foundation the inventory of meaning potential related to particular typographical designs created by Machin (2007). From that inventory, they described seven characteristics: weight, color, size, slant, framing, formality, and flourishes, briefly presented in Table 2.

Table 2 – Typographic characteristics described by Serafini and Clausen (2012).

Characteristics	Visualization	Description
Weight	**Bold** or regular typefaces	Increasing the weight of a font can increase its salience or level of importance, while the opposite can diminish the attention given to a particular typographical element.
Color	Color use	Colors can be used for classifying, discriminating, and developing associations across elements. It also has connections to particular emotions and social meanings.
Size	Small, medium, or big	Font size provides emphasis and adds salience to particular aspects of the written text. Words that are relatively bigger are noticed more readily than those that are relatively smaller.
Slant	*Sloping* or upright	In general, formal fonts are rendered straight up and down, while handwritten scripts have a particular slant suggesting human touch or a more dynamic presence.
Framing	Use of frames	Framing is used to separate and connect particular visual elements in a multimodal ensemble. It can be done with colors, white space, and relative position.
Formality	Formal or *informal*	The choice of a traditional font or a handwritten, graffiti-like font convey different ideas about the formality level of the text.
Flourishes	Serifs, *handwritten circles*	Flourishes, like serifs, add a sense of formality to the text. While hand-drawn circles can add informality to a text.

Source: adapted from Serafini and Clausen (2012).

The characteristics presented and explained by van Leeuwen (2006) and Serafini and Clausen (2012) allow us to take the first steps towards the initial semiotic discussions on typography as a semiotic mode, which includes this research. The methodological procedures to take these first steps are introduced as follows.

3 Analyzing lyric videos: methodological procedures

This is an exploratory and descriptive research that adopts qualitative procedures to analyze how typography is used in integration with other visual elements to convey meaning in the context of Taylor Swift's lyric videos production and to identify possible implications of the use of these videos when we consider the promotion of visual literacy in the educational context. The first step of this study was

to get familiar with theories on multimodality, visual literacy and typography as a semiotic mode, and also to understand the historical background of lyric videos.

After that, the next phase was the selection of the corpus. Among the variety of lyric videos published on YouTube, Taylor Swift was chosen as the singer whose videos would compose the corpus, not only for personal taste, but also for some aspects of her career mentioned in the theoretical background of this research, such as her history in visual media production along with her freedom to make music. Based on that, seven of Taylor Swift's official lyric videos were selected as the corpus of this research. The criteria to choose among over one hundred lyric videos published on her YouTube channel, by the time we selected the videos, was to consider only the songs released as lead singles from her original albums, since these were the songs chosen to represent a specific era. Among the eleven[3] albums released during Taylor Swift's career, seven of them have official lyric videos published for their lead singles, they compose the corpus of this research and are stated in Table 3.

Table 3 – Taylor Swift's lyric videos selected to our research.

Song name	Album	Year of release	YouTube link
We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together	*Red*	2012	https://youtu.be/gcMn_Eu-XTE?si=LUy9GejkCrifZF2F
Look What You Made Me Do	*reputation*	2017	https://youtu.be/3K0RzZGpyds?si=a33T--g1UGnlRH5U
ME! (feat. Brendon Urie of Panic! At The Disco)	*Lover*	2019	https://youtu.be/S--WI8PUVVo?si=T28br2fW2fswC301
Cardigan	*folklore*	2020	https://youtu.be/zLSUp53y-HQ?si=rUqQSomyrYOCwSpA
Willow	*evermore*	2020	https://youtu.be/7EvwIw4gIyk?si=ts-lQdodURCUp3LH
Anti-Hero	*Midnights*	2022	https://youtu.be/XqN2qFvY64U?si=KYD2oknzEPMh41cT
Taylor Swift - Fortnight (feat Post Malone) (Official Lyric Video)	*The Tortured Poets Department*	2024	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HzsQHfBA3MY

Source: created by the authors.

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[3] In this research we only considered the original release of the albums, not the re-recordings.

Following the corpus selection described, the next step was capturing screenshots of three specific parts of each video: the first line of the song; the first line of the song's chorus; and the last line of the song. Due to the focus of this study analysis only these parts of the video were considered in the analysis. Moreover, despite the presence of kinetic movement in the videos, in this study we chose to focus on still images only.

After that, those screenshots were cataloged in a spreadsheet, in which their elements were described and their typographic features were organized according to some categories, such as color, formality, boldness etc., based on the characteristics described by van Leeuwen (2006) and Serafini and Clausen (2012). Following this organizational and categorizing phase, the next one was to discuss the results, which consisted in the description of how typography was possibly used in the videos to produce meaning. Other visual elements present in the videos were described based on the interactive metafunction, proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006; 2021) in the Grammar of Visual Design. Finally, inferences were made according to this description, considering its possible implications on visual literacy, and the results of it were discussed.

4 Meaning potential of typography in lyric videos: results and discussion

This section aims to discuss how the typographic elements present in the selected lyric videos were used to produce meaning in the videos and discuss their relevance to this process. To do so, we organized it in three subtopics in which the semiotic potential of visual elements may express romantic feelings, anger and grudge, and neatness and simplicity.

4.1 Handwritten feelings: We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together and ME!

The songs "We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together" (acronymized as WANEGBT) and "ME!" were released in 2012 and 2019, respectively. The first one, the

lead single of the album *Red*, talks about a *yoyo* relationship, in which the lovers constantly break up and go back together in a vicious cycle. However, at some point, the persona decides that, at that time, they are going to break up for real, and never (ever) get back together. The second song, the lead single of the album *Lover*, on the other hand, offers the listener a joyful sound, about an in-love couple, who know that, despite their flaws, they are the right person for each other.

Even though the songs are from albums released seven years apart, they share some typographic features that can be considered similar. The informality (Serafini; Clausen, 2012) and the absence of regular types (van Leeuwen, 2006) might have been used to provide the viewer with the idea of a handwritten font, as represented in Figures 3 and 4.

Figure 3 – Screenshot of the last line of the lyric video "Taylor Swift - We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together (Lyric Video)" on YouTube.
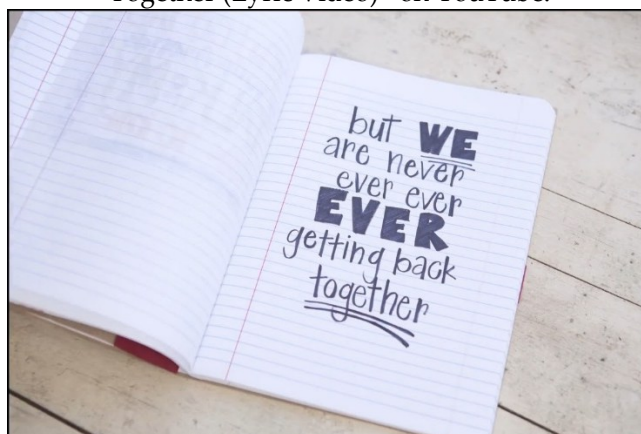
Source: https://youtu.be/gcMn_Eu-XTE

Figure 4 – Screenshot of the last line of the lyric video "ME! (feat. Brendon Urie of Panic! At The Disco) (Lyric Video)" on YouTube.

Source: https://youtu.be/S--WI8PUVVo
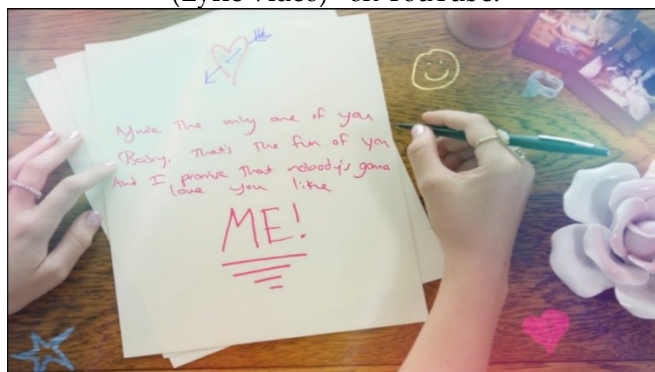
The idea of artisanal work is presented in both lyric videos, which might help the feelings shared in the song reach the viewer on a more personal level. In WANEGBT this feeling is communicated through the fact that the lyrics are represented as part of some sort of scrapbook or diary, in which some characteristics, such as blue color (Serafini; Clausen, 2012), irregular letters, and inclined writing (van Leeuwen, 2006) are used to convey the idea of a handwritten message. On the lyric video of "ME!", released five years later, the meaning-making resources were used to convey the same feeling. The lyrics are shown on the screen as, apparently, Taylor herself, writes them down on a piece of paper, which reinforces the handmade aspect of the font.

Even though the songs have very different situations being represented — a breakup vs a romantic relationship at its peak — they are both love songs. Alongside the characteristics that make the font look like something personal, the pronouns "we" in Figure 3 and "me" in Figure 4, highlighted with bold letters and underlines, also reiterate the intimacy of the singer and the story told in the song (Serafini; Clausen).

To sum up, in WANEGBT and "ME!" the lyrics carried personal feelings related to love, also represented in the fonts chosen to materialize it. In addition, intimacy is also reinforced by other visual elements, such as the representation of private diaries and scrapbooks, for example, which reflects the idea of something handmade. Therefore, the personal character of these songs was represented also through the fonts chosen for the video.

4.2 Anger illustrated: "Look What You Made Me Do"

The song "Look What You Made Me Do" was the one chosen as the lead single of *reputation*, stylized in lowercase, an album that represented an important moment in her career. Breaking the pattern of showing the public one album every two years, *reputation* was only released three years after her previous work, *1989*, and it was Taylor's response to all the hate she had been receiving since 2016. During that time,

she received the insulting nickname "snake", which ended up being the biggest symbol of this era, as seen in Figure 5, in which illustrations of snakes biting their own tails appear to compound the lyric video, creating repetitive Ouroboros, as if it were echoing her voice. Through many songs, including "Look What You Made Me Do", she spoke her truth and replied with autobiographical lyrics to the ones who damaged her image for nothing. In this song, specifically, Taylor poured out the feelings of being betrayed by someone considered a friend, as well as her reaction to that, getting up after being knocked down.

Figure 5 – Screenshot of the first line of the chorus of the lyric video "Taylor Swift - Look What You Made Me Do (Lyric Video)" on YouTube.

Source: https://youtu.be/3K0RzZGpyds

The lyric video of this song contrasts a lot when put together with the other videos analyzed. It is relevant to mention that this is the only one without real elements (not drawn); the whole video is composed of digital art. The colors have their part in catching the viewer's attention as well (Serafini; Clausen, 2012), with the predominance of black, red, white, and gray, not only in typography but also in other visual elements present in the video, also demonstrated in Figure 5. This choice of colors creates a stronger impression, somehow aggressive, which fits the message of the song.

About the choices related to design, in the first line of the chorus, in Figure 5, the lyrics are represented by an irregular font, in big, angular, and red capital letters,

making the types similar to the ones made with rough strokes of a thick paintbrush. These letters are inside figures of snakes biting their own tails, which are called Ouroboros, a symbol of eternity, representing something or someone that "never disappear but perpetually change form in an eternal cycle of destruction and re-creation" (Ouroboros, 2020). Relating this figure with the chorus that repeats "Look what you made me do" a couple of times, we can infer that Taylor had to re-create herself over and over, because of all the things she had been through.

Through the parts of the song selected as part of the corpus, we could see that the font chosen to represent the lyrics is framed by different illustrations besides the ouroboros, such as chess pieces, as seen in Figure 6. Inside those frames, the lyrics were molded and sometimes slightly distorted, with the words seeming to squeeze to fit in the shape of the knight, the bishop, and the black pawn. These choices worked as a way to connect the lyrics and the video in a closer level.

Figure 6 – Screenshot of the first line of the lyric video "Taylor Swift - Look What You Made Me Do (Lyric Video)"on YouTube.

Source: https://youtu.be/3K0RzZGpyds

Another interesting use of illustration in this figure, is the use of the rook as the initial "I" of the song. A possible interpretation of this is that Taylor felt manipulated, like a chess piece in the middle of a game, hence this "I". The types in this part of the video are very similar to the one used in the first line of the chorus, with irregularity and angularity in capital letters, but in a smaller size, to fit in the frames.

These choices of typography and design match perfectly the first line of this song, which says "I don't like your little games". The last word of this line, "games", calls attention using the red color (Serafini; Clausen, 2012), emphasizing the idea also brought by the general drawing of a chess game. The chess reference, which is commonly associated with strategy and intelligence, also shows how calculated this song, the design, and the typography choices were.

4.3 Neatness and simplicity: cardigan, willow, Anti-Hero, and Fortnight

Starting in 2020, Taylor's albums have been released simultaneously to the lyric videos of their songs on YouTube, which means that all songs from her last four albums have their own video of this kind. "cardigan" and "willow" are, respectively, lead singles from *folklore* (2020) and *evermore* (2020), sister albums, written and produced during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic, and released in a short interval of five months. These albums bring back the lowercase style seen in the *reputation* album name, this time reaching the title of all songs in *folklore* and *evermore*. Unlike her previous albums, these two are not composed only by autobiographic songs. Taylor stated[4] in a letter, released along with the album *folklore*, that she created stories from the perspective of other people, fictional and real.

On the other hand, "Anti-Hero", lead single of *Midnights* (2022), goes back to her roots and talks about Taylor's life and experiences. Its general theme goes around the idea of songs that were written in the middle of sleepless nights, when good or bad feelings kept her awake, surrounded by thoughts. *The Tortured Poets Department* (2024), and its lead single "Fortnight", are responsible for continuing this pattern, reminiscing Taylor's view on her most recent breakup.

In the lyrics of "cardigan", we get to know the memories of someone's breakup, in which the persona had their heartbroken after feeling used like an old cardigan by

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[4] Taylor's letter published on *folklore*'s release day
https://twitter.com/taylorswift13/status/1286513561553047557

a cheating lover. Taylor brings us in "willow" the perspective of a person in love and willing to follow her lover anywhere he goes, demonstrating trust and pure interest in that person. In "Anti-Hero", representing the theme of *Midnights*, she talks about her insecurities, feeling unfitted in this world, and recognizing that she is the problem. Finally, on her most recent lead single, "Fortnight", she describes a brief relationship that left a strong mark, complicating the process of moving on. Figures 7, 8, 9, and 10 show screenshots of the lyric videos of "cardigan", "willow", "Anti-Hero", and "Fortnight" respectively.

Figure 7 – Screenshot of the last line of the lyric video "Taylor Swift - cardigan (Lyric Video)" on YouTube.


Source: https://youtu.be/zLSUp53y-HQ
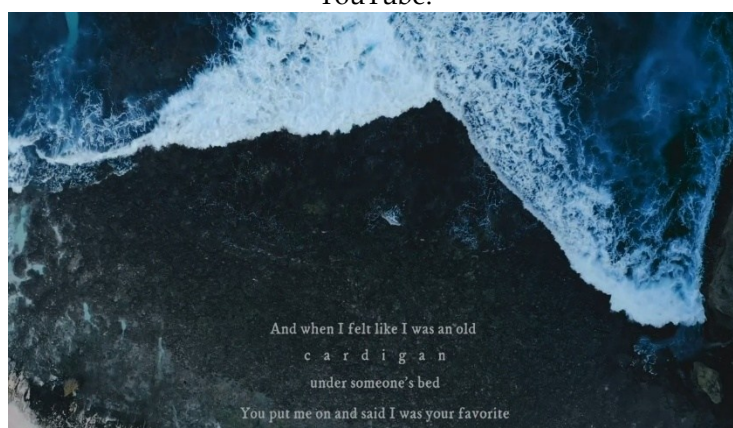
The typography used in these videos contrasts a lot with the ones mentioned on the previous topic. The font chosen for "cardigan" reminds us of typewriter fonts, with its regularity (van Leeuwen, 2006) and formality (Serafini; Clausen, 2012), represented in Figure 7. The color white pops in the somber background of a dark sand beach, that is constant during the whole video.

Also in Figure 7, we can see the title of the song, "cardigan", highlighted with the use of disconnection between the letters, distancing them from each other, conveying an idea of fragmentation (van Leeuwen, 2006). This choice made by the producer calls attention to the title, but also relates to the lyrics, and can be interpreted as something that is dissipating like an old memory.

Figure 8 – Screenshot of the last line of the lyric video "Taylor Swift - willow (Lyric Video)" on YouTube.

Source: https://youtu.be/7EvwIw4gIyk
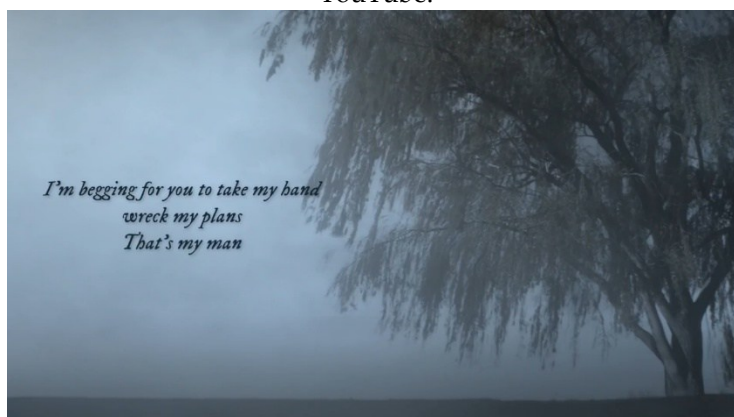
In Figure 8, representing the lyric video of "willow", the font has some inclination and serifs, which are usually associated with human interference (Serafini; Clausen, 2012). However, the regularity of the types, perfectly aligned in every trace, is something done by machines (van Leeuwen, 2006). The flourishes and serifs, more visible on the letters "w", "k", and capital "T", also bring a light reference to classical fonts (van Leeuwen, 2006), as the ones seen in Old English writings.

It is also relevant to mention the position of the lyrics on the screen. For the verses, which are most of the song, it is presented on the bottom of the screen, right above the ground, but for the chorus lyrics it is presented on the center-left section, as seen in Figure 8, that is the last line of the song, but it is also a repetition of the chorus. The letters in black against the gray fog that surrounds the big willow in the background demonstrate a polar opposite of the contrast in "cardigan", but both share melancholic energy through these compositions.

In Figure 9 we see a screenshot of the first line of "Anti-Hero". The background is a picture of a living room with an abstract painting hanging on a wood wall, two lamps siding a teal sofa, and a center table with some shot glasses, books, and an ashtray. An interesting fact is that this background image, as well as the other backgrounds present in this lyric video, is a photograph of the set of the "Anti-Hero" music video.

Figure 9 – Screenshot of the first line of the lyric video "Taylor Swift – Anti-Hero (Official Lyric Video)" on YouTube.


Source: https://youtu.be/XqN2qFvY64U?si=KYD2oknzEPMh41cT

The lyrics are represented in a regular, formal, small font. The color, a dirty yellow, contrasts against the teal sofa, allowing the legibility of the words and matching the color palette of the image as a whole (Serafini; Clausen, 2012). The typographic characteristics in this video font are the simplest among those analyzed in this study. It is very discreet, there is an absence of flourishes, framing, slope, or anything that could draw attention to the typography itself.

Figure 10 represents a screenshot of the beginning of the chorus of the song "Fortnight". The image present in the background, similarly as in the lyric video of "Anti-Hero", is also a photograph of the music video set. It is possible to see, in a very saturated photo in black and white, a place that resembles an office, with multiple desks aligned with typewriters on top of them. We can see many fan ceilings, but the other details are not so clear due to the lack of clarity in the image.

Figure 10 – Screenshot of the first line of the chorus of the lyric video "Taylor Swift – Fortnight (feat Post Malone) (Official Lyric Video)" on YouTube.

Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HzsQHfBA3MY
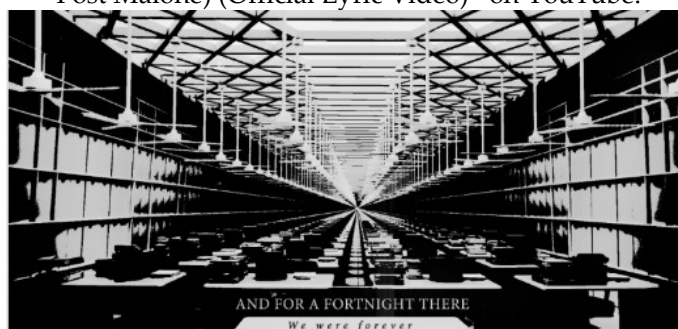
The lyrics of the first line of the chorus of "Fortnight" are presented in two different fonts. The first one is a more formal font, typed in capital letters, in the color white, contrasting against the black background. The other one, presented in black, has some characteristics similar to the font used in "willow", with serifs and slope, but with letters with a great space between them. The contrast between these two fonts leads us to interpret the second one as more romantic and hopeful. The typographic choices for the lyrics "We were forever" are similar to the ones present on the lyrics of "cardigan", with disconnection between the letters, making it seem that the words are dissolving, disappearing, fragmenting (van Leeuwen, 2006), just like the relationship described in the song, which came to an end.

Those aspects of typography lead to some sort of distancing between Taylor and this type of video. Comparing these lyric videos to the "We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together" and "ME!"'s ones, we could see that "she" took a step back and typed the stories, as if they did not belong to her, following the idea of *folklore* and *evermore* being albums a little less personal. But *Midnights* and *The Tortured Poets Department* do not fall into this category, since they are full of her thoughts and feelings, however, the tendency of simpler typographic choices continued. This fact leads us to think about the practical side of producing and releasing dozens of lyric videos at once, considering the mass production of the lyric videos that started with *folklore* and how picking simpler fonts – when comparing to the previous lyric videos, would make the process faster and easier.

5 Reflections on the use of typography in lyric videos: final remarks

In this paper, the use of typography as a semiotic mode was analyzed in Taylor Swift's lyric videos with the goal of understanding its role in meaning production when used integrated with other visual elements and identifying possible implications of their use considering the promotion of visual literacy in the educational context. To do that, seven videos were examined considering characteristics such as size, color,

slate, and weight, following the categories described by van Leeuwen (2006) and Serafini and Clausen (2012).

The data analyzed showed how those characteristics worked to express a message along with the lyrics present in the videos, thus indicating the potential meaning of that mode. Features like irregularity (van Leeuwen, 2006), color, and informality (Serafini; Clausen, 2012) could enhance the meaning of Taylor Swift's songs. Messages of love, heartbreak, and grudge were conveyed using fonts that resembled handwritten or typed letters, fonts that were highlighted with underlines or different frames, and also with fonts that brought ideas of intimacy or a certain distance between the songwriter and the lyrics. Besides that, the typography also inspired reflections on the production of these videos and the implications of releasing multiple lyric videos at the same time. The simplicity of the typographic choices seen on the lyric videos of "cardigan", "willow", "Anti-Hero" and "Fortnight" might have made it easier to meet deadlines and establish some sort of pattern.

Based on that, this study allowed us to better understand the relevance of the use of typographic elements in lyric videos. We could see that messages, such as the storyline of the songs, were shared not only through the verbal language, but also through the visual elements, which include the visuality of writing materialized by typography, making it possible to understand more of the context that may go unnoticed for those who do not know the behind the scenes of the song and video productions. The combination of multiple semiotic modes allowed a more complete reading of the songs and their messages.

Therefore, the results direct to the understanding that typography in lyric videos plays an important role in the meaning-making process, which might be also responsible for promoting visual literacy, in the sense that the typographic characteristics could convey messages not explicitly shown in the lyrics alone. A possible implication of the use of typographic features in these videos is that the songs can reach a larger audience, even being used in the educational context, where songs

are a popular resource when teaching English as a second language. Adding visual elements to songs, that are already very present in this context, might enhance skills beyond the listening and reading abilities, promoting visual literacy as well.

In sum, Taylor Swift's lyric videos, which carry a strong multimodal character, containing verbal language, images, typography, colors, and other modes, might bring a new contribution to the language learning process. Since the typographic elements produce meaning that goes along and beyond written language, this combination represents an opportunity to use these videos in a context different from the original one. Features like color, size, framing, and many others might imply a certain potential to help students to intuitively understand the context of a song, even when they do not know the meaning of all words, and also to practice and get to know more about grammar and vocabulary under teacher's guidance.

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