

From “Koureion” [«Κουρείον»] to “Barbershop”: modernising local tradition through global trends

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Abstract

Following its accession to the European Union in 2004, Cyprus underwent a number of transformations – including that in its visual language – which have been noticeably influenced by intercultural trends. Over the last decade or so, traditional barbershops, locally known as “koureion”, have been in decline, progressively replaced by Westernised hipster barbershops, a phenomenon that has altered the Cypriot landscape both linguistically and visually. The visual landscape, which comprises colour, typography, and distinct graphic elements, has been particularly affected, especially regarding barbershop signs. This new trend is worth observing for further semiotic analysis and interpretation. The evolving visual language appears to be strikingly gendered, based as it is on stereotypes and other features that promote contemporary representations of masculinity. Similarly, the use of English as a lingua franca on newer barbershop signage seems to embrace Europeanness, which reveals the increasing relevance of and stimulus from the West. Based on empirical research, using primary as well as secondary data, this study examines the shift in the local typographic landscape. With the aid of semiotic analysis of both graphic and linguistic communication, the present work investigates the ways in which the local visual language follows European cultural trends and adapts to globalisation in order to keep up with the zeitgeist.

Keywords typographic landscape, barbershop signs, multimodal typography, gendered design, cultural trends, graphic design

Introduction

The multitude of changes that Cyprus underwent following its accession to the European Union in 2004 have reflected the country's slow but steady compliance with European cultural trends and its efforts to adapt to the spirit of globalisation. In this vein, and defined by their consumerist choices, their attitude, their mimicking-the-past individuality, and their elitist aesthetics, "hipsters [...] are perfectly integrated into post-modern late-capitalism" (Kinzey, 2012). Over the last few years – and with a notable time delay – hipster "mainstream-subculture" has gradually permeated the Cypriot society, too.

One trademark feature of the hipster is meticulous grooming, specifically with regard to haircuts and facial hair; in Cyprus, this has facilitated a shift in the male grooming industry, as existing barbershops were unable to accommodate hipsters' particular needs and unusual demands. Reflecting the growing influence of hipster aesthetics as a trend in local culture, a significant number of new, trendy grooming parlours have thus emerged, employing younger barbers who specialise in hair and facial grooming. Designed and decorated in line with hipster aesthetics, modern barbershops offer more than hair styling services; they provide a holistic experience – in the context of a male community that highly promotes masculinity – which includes lounge areas, chillout background music, retro gaming consoles, drinks and/or food, additional grooming services, and a wide range of haircare products, thus supporting the pro-consumerist aspect of hipsterism.

These manifestations of hipster aesthetics, which are typical of modern local barbershops, involve old-fashioned style and false nostalgia, cultural appropriation, and retro technology (Steinhoff, 2021). Both hipster aesthetics and masculinity markers are clearly depicted on barbershop signs, which is the main focus here; this study examines the shift in the local typographic landscape as depicted in local barbershop signs. Graphic design research provides a framework in which we can observe, record, and interpret – via semiotic analysis – the developments and changes in the codes related to the typographic landscape of Cyprus. The juxtaposition of traditional barbershops with the trendier establishments that have recently begun to proliferate is a prime example of the transition from the old to the new, of the modernisation of graphic language, and the rapid transformation that the Cypriot typographic landscape is currently undergoing (see fig. 1, next page).

The study examines traditional and modern barbershops operating in Cyprus focusing on the visual identity of their signage. More specifically, it looks at the use of language, at morphological typographic features and visual elements that are incorporated in the design of barbershop signs, while analysing the gendered nature of their graphic design.



Figure 1: Left-hand side: traditional barbershop sign and work bench. Right-hand side: modern barbershop sign and work bench.

The beard as an indicator of trendy masculinity

Masculinity (Kaufman, 1987), as both a fixed behaviour and a social construct, dominates modern Cypriot barbershop signs, indicating a male-dominated public space that helps shape the present-day cultural and social context of the linguistic landscape (Shohamy et al., 2010). Representations of trendy men in modern barbershop signs reveal: a) an adherence to the practice of projecting gender via globalised visual clichés, which, in turn, influence the “construction and enactment” (Connell, 2005) of modern masculinity in Cyprus, and b) the emotionally neutral face of traditional hegemonic masculinity (Sattel, 1976; Winter & Robert, 1980 in Brod & Kaufman, 1994), thus indirectly reinforcing the narrative of the “good old days” (McBee in Barber, 2016), which will be further explored in this analysis. At the same time, typography as a multimodal means of visual communication can go beyond visual symbolism, with the use of specific morphological features, such as design, layout, and colour. As individual elements of typography interact, intersemiotic processes provide a more rounded understanding of the full extent of visual communication (O’Halloran, 2004; Van Leeuwen, 2006).

A very fashionable accessory in recent years – thus widely featured on modern barbershop signage –, the beard has also long been the focus of academic research. Ac-

According to Oldstone-Moore (2016), Darwin was the first to define the beard as a secondary sex characteristic, that is to say, a male trait that is attractive to women. When some anthropologists pointed out, and rightly so, that men from certain tribes seem to grow little or no facial hair, Darwin responded by asserting that certain traits – like the beard – were passed on through evolution in response to the preferences of women. Researchers looking to demystify the phenomenon of the beard have come up with three main theories. The first, and the simplest one, which says the beard is an evolutionary accident with no real purpose, has been rejected by Darwin himself. The second one, which considers the beard a secondary sex characteristic designed to attract women, has been supported and expanded on by studies in psychology and biology that focus on female preferences. The third one runs very much counter to the first two theories, stating that the beard is, in fact, an intimidating characteristic whose key purpose is to exert dominance over rival men. The theory thus asserts that women are not attracted to the beard itself, but rather to the social power that the former signals regarding the men who have it.

Oldstone-Moore (*ibid*), having closely studied the evolution and meaning of the beard – its presence, as well as its absence – came to the conclusion that beards are not inconsequential fashion statements. They are in fact an important indicator of masculinity, with cultural, economic, social, and family dimensions that mark each passing era.

From “koureion” to “barbershop”

The old-fashioned barbershop, or “koureion” as it is known in Greek, has traditionally been a male-dominated space that is more than just a place for men to get haircuts in. As they wait their turn, customers chat, drink coffee, thumb through the day’s newspaper, talk politics, and put the world to rights. Passers-by will often stop in for nothing more than a chat and a catch up. The koureion welcomes all generations of men, with waves of customers arriving and departing throughout the day. As it became evident in the course of this research, Mondays and Tuesdays are the quieter days of the week, and thus the ideal time for taking photographs, and collecting material for this study. By contrast, the koureion tends to buzz with activity on Wednesday afternoons, when most other shops are closed, late on Friday afternoons, and all day long on Saturdays. It seems that barbers who have previously lived and worked in the UK enjoy the most prestige. To this day, the words “of London” on the shop sign remain a mark of quality. Traditional barbershops tend to lack a curated interior: they have basic equipment, as well as minimal and functional furniture (fig 2, next page). These features are quite typical of traditional male-dominated spaces, as discussed in a previous study of the author of this article (Papadima, 2019).

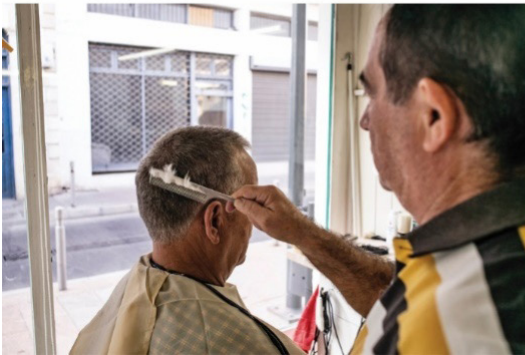
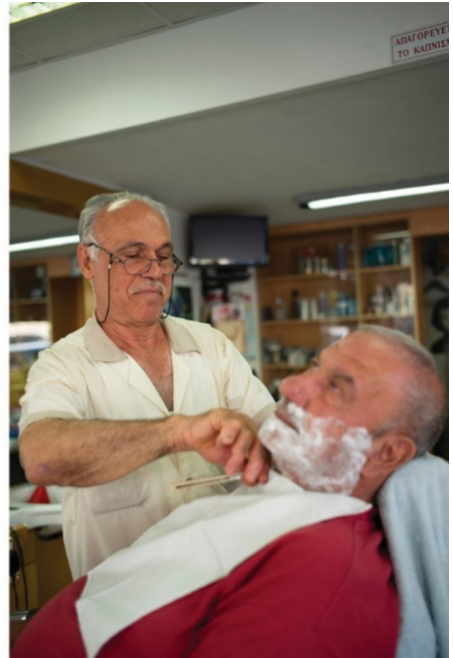
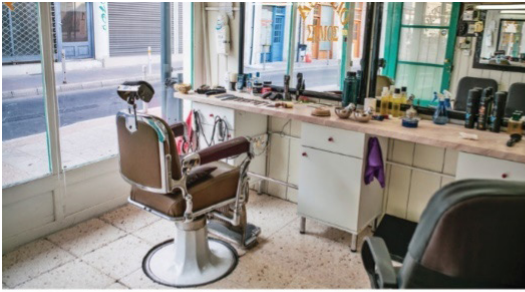


Figure 2: Traditional koureion scenes. Photos: Nicholas Constantinou.

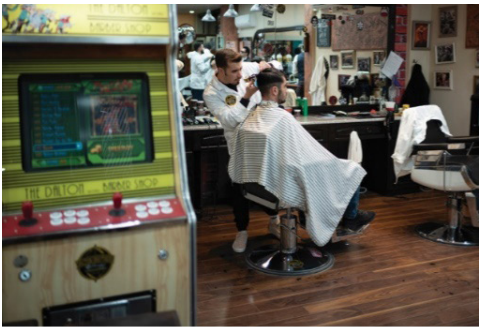


Figure 3: Modern barbershop. Photos: Nicholas Constantinou.

More recently, modern, Westernised barbershops have been springing up across neighbourhoods in Cyprus. They target a predominantly younger male clientele, and, contrary to their predecessors, almost always use the English word “barbershop” on their signage. They feature high-end equipment, specialised lighting, stylish and uniform-looking staff, and interior décor that is both hip and professional. As they offer a wider variety of products and services compared to their more traditional counterparts, they can more accurately be characterised as grooming parlours for men. As such, they move away from the old-fashioned concept of barbershops to adhere more closely to Western standards, as it will be seen below (fig. 3, previous page).

According to David Colman (2010), a *New York Times* journalist, the first barbershop to style itself as a new kind of ‘grooming parlour’ was F.S.C. Barber, a trendy establishment founded in 2006 on the premises of a Manhattan-based department store called Freemans Sporting Club. It channelled barbershops of days gone by, complete with traditional seating, old lighting, and electric shavers. More importantly, it signalled the comeback of the old-school neighbourhood barbershop. In the years that followed, barbershops with the same aesthetic and philosophy began to pop up, peddling a sort of “false nostalgia” (ibid) to younger generations who had not been around to experience the real thing. These establishments combined a nostalgic sense of masculinity with a new sense of progressiveness; places where men could gather and create a real community feel, an activity that is integral to health and wellbeing, as asserted by sociologist Kristen Barber (Barber, 2016). McBee went further by stating that “these new barbershops primarily act as places where men can channel a form of masculinity that supposedly existed unfettered in the ‘good old days’”; a particularly valuable offering nowadays, “when traditional definitions of masculinity are in flux” (McBee in Barber, 2016). Ultimately, the modern barbershop emerged to address the need to support, visually transform, and groom the post-modern hipsters of the 21st century.

While “hipster” originally emerged as a term in the 1940s, in the waning days of African-American jazz culture, it has evolved to represent both authenticity and eclecticism in the present-day “cultural decadence or fatigue” caused by increasingly “saturated cultural forms”; as such, hipsterism treads the fine line between individuality and imitation, but also carries an element of irony that stems from the two concepts essentially being in opposition (Schiermer, 2014). Modern hipsters aim to project traits of authenticity and uniqueness through their appearance, an effort automatically undermined by the fact that, in doing so, they try to assimilate into a certain group; the development of a distinct, individual identity is therefore more fluid than it appears at first glance, to the point of, perhaps, being impossible (Bauman, 2004). Discussing the complicated interplay between culture and identity (Baker, 2015), Brewer supports that individuals seek to participate in groups that meet both of these opposing goals: similarity and uniqueness (M. B. Brewer, 1991). Schneider (2005), meanwhile, points out the ideological signifi-

cance of facial and head hair as controlled characteristics that determine a stereotypical look. Typical hipster hairstyles, according to trend spotters, tend to be “inspired by sophisticated, vintage and retro looks and mixed with a relaxed yet edgy, modern appeal”; the look is considered “cool and creative, and perfect for any man who needs a style update” (T. Brewer, n.d.).

It took a decade for the trend to arrive in Cyprus, as modern barbershops started to proliferate across the island around 2018. The beard now enjoys near universal acceptance as *the* sign of manliness amongst young Cypriot males, keeping multiple barbershops in business, and the trend very much alive. In a relatively short time, neighbourhoods have filled up with trendy barbershops – new businesses, by new blood. As a result, barbers of the older generation (and philosophy) are scrambling to modernise in an attempt to stave off the sudden competition. One quick and easy trick: changing the name of their “koureion” to “barbershop”! The English language, as lingua franca and a key player in modern-day economic and cultural globalisation (Schneider, 2007), has taken on the role of helping transition from the outdated, local past to the modern, European present (see figure 4). The near exclusive use of English on barbershop signs, as the analysis will show below, signals a non-native trend, and reveals an affinity to a borrowed Western world, as well as an increase in multiculturalism in the day-to-day lives of Cypriots (Panagiotou, 2011). Moreover, it shows the influence of globalisation, not only in the spoken and visual language, but also in the décor and branding of new businesses.



Figure 4: Modern barbershop signs in Cyprus.

Research findings

This study was based on collecting samples of shop signs and other elements of visual identity from diverse barbershops between 2018 and 2019 for use as research material. Based on convenience sampling, the material was collected from a number of districts in the Republic of Cyprus, including: a) samples from traditional koureion establishments (38 entries), and b) samples from modern barbershops (63 entries). The samples underwent content analysis, and were then coded for further processing and study. The visual identity of traditional barbershops was limited to the use of basic, simple typographic arrangements on shop signs that tended to be purely informative. As a result, samples from these barbershops are exclusively made up of the shop signs themselves. By contrast, the visual identity of modern barbershops tended to be based on stylised logos. This kind of deliberate branding would appear not only on the shop signage, but also across other real-life and digital mediums, such as on the interior shop walls, as well as on business-related social media. The research samples, therefore, went beyond shop signs to also include logos and branding of modern barbershops. That said, these were documented collectively per business, and were not differentiated from shop signage for the purposes of this study.

In the analysis of the koureion, the most significant quantitative findings include the use of colour (92%), and upper-case characters (79%). The majority of signs (60%) are bilingual, and use sans serif characters (58%) of a consistent size (47%). Around half of the signs (45%) incorporate more than one typeface. Images are used sparingly (26%), and decorative or linear elements are similarly rare (10.5%). The word “koureion” (in Greek letters) dominates, featuring in 73.5% of the samples. There are also infrequent instances of a secondary business name, such as «Χρυσή Χτένα» (“The Golden Comb”), “Goldfingers”, and “La belle époque”. Curved lettering is often used, specifically on the word “koureion” (37%), although it should be noted that this trend is not limited to that particular industry, appearing just as frequently in business signs belonging to butcher shops, pharmacies, and other traditional business sectors. Overall, curved lettering points to a trend that dominated decades ago, which relied heavily on hand-crafted designs on shop windows (fig. 5, next page).

Traditional barbershops are clearly unconcerned with design consistency in their visual identity. This is unsurprising as a targeted design approach was historically lacking in Cyprus; design-minded professionals didn’t start impacting the scene until the 1990s, after the first Graphic Design courses were established. The results of hiring a sign-maker or sign-painter to put up text on a shop window or sign could produce varying results: some would simply print the information using a direct, no-fuss style, while others took the time to lovingly craft an attractive arrangement of lettering.

Barbershop signage was not limited to lettering on the display windows. Samples also include elements such as a) vertically-oriented signs that are both eye-catching and



Figure 5: A hand-crafted design on the display window of a traditional barbershop.

at eye-level for passers-by, which may or may not make use of vertical lettering, b) outdoor signs, either hung from a bracket on the wall, or on a free-standing pole on the pavement, some of which may also be illuminated, and c) printed awnings. Whatever the case, a variety of fonts, colours, typographic arrangements and materials were noted, revealing work carried out in successive periods by different sign-makers, which met the particular needs and demands of the barbershop, paying no mind to a coherent design approach. Nevertheless, the research samples also reveal techniques that support the visual clarity of the signs, for example, large lettering, frequent use of upper-case letters, colouring, shading and outlines that support legibility. All these have been incorporated into that particular typographic context, as visibility from a distance is of utmost importance (Luna, 2018). While traditional barbershops use Greek in their signs, the English word “barbershop” is also often incorporated, albeit in a typographically inferior position, as indicated by the size, arrangement, and colouring of the wording. Modern barbershops, on the other hand, overwhelmingly rely on the use of English on their signage (95%), with just two samples featuring the Greek-Cypriot dialect.

Regarding the typographic characteristics of modern barbershop signs, great variation in the characters used, and combinations of fonts (at a rate of 76%) were noted; meanwhile, half the signs (50%) featured calligraphy or other decorative elements. Lettering using different font weights is observed a little over half the time (58%), as do serif characters (57%). Most signs use upper case characters (64%), while to a smaller yet not insignificant proportion (46%), curved lettering is also applied. Finally, a notable number of signs are exclusively monochrome, i.e., black and white. Modern barbershops also make use of a relatively limited and uniform colour palette: black, white, blue and red

being the primary hues deployed, whether alone or in some combination. Yellow might also make a (rare) appearance, mostly to give an artificially 'weathered' feel to the sign, as if it has faded over time.

Of the 63 samples, only four exclude visuals altogether. The other 59 incorporate visuals in the wording or, if distinct from the wording, in the logo. The most popular visuals are scissors (57%), followed by the straight razor (47%). An abstract image of a male hipster also makes a relatively frequent appearance (30%), as does the decorative barber pole (29%). The pole is often presented with its traditional diagonal lines, in alternating colours: red, white and blue. Less frequently, we come across the comb (23%), the ornate, upturned and tapered handlebar moustache (20%), and even less frequently we see the bowler hat (6%) – round and pompous, a symbol of bourgeoisie (Crane, 2000) or the top hat, a formal symbol of high society, polished appearances and good taste. Next, there appear the shaving brush or electric shaver (3%) as secondary tools of the trade. In rare instances, we also observe uncommon visuals, like a cowboy hat and pistols, linear illustrations or cast photos from the film *Goodfellas*.

Modernising barbershops through gendered design

A basic online search, for the purposes of a visual introduction and sample gathering of modern barbershop logos, reveals a vast bank of templates, images, and platforms offering an array of creative work, in categories such as: modern, classic, old-fashioned, vintage, retro, old school, hipster, gentlemen, skulls, etc. Cypriot design proves to be immensely swayed by global trends. The vast majority of study samples reveal: a) clear influences of trends from abroad, both in design and the language used, b) commercial logo templates that have been adjusted to represent the business in question, and c) blatant imitations that breach intellectual property laws.

Other than the listed services on offer, modern Cypriot barbershops mimic the culture of old-school American barbershops, a place where men get together to socialise and have a few drinks. The blended business model offers a variety of additional services – from alcohol and food to tattoos – and is often backed by or is promoting a particular brand. There is a sense of nostalgia for an imported past, which is often indicated a) through language, with business names like "Oldboy" (an American franchise that now has a branch in Cyprus), "Old School", "Barber Stories", "The Old Barber House", and "Good Old Days"; and b) through the visuals, which include old-fashioned accessories, like top hats, monocles and other ornate retro adornments. These elements serve as markers of the past, while also projecting a certain level of foreign class. The contrast, then, between modern barbershops in Cyprus and their more traditional counterparts could not be more stark. The former, with their sense of faux nostalgia – deployed in multiple aspects including the overall design of the signage, as well as the interior décor and style – operates on a completely different visual level compared to that of the

koureion, which is characterised by austerity in its style, equipment, décor and overall aesthetic to the point of asceticism, which reflects true community roots. The narrative that the modern barbershop offers is therefore entirely artificial; it mimics foreign trends and attempts to make a place for itself in the local market through targeted visual and linguistic elements, boisterous vintage décor, high-end equipment, and the ubiquitous barber pole (fig. 6), which seems to be a key part of modern barbershop branding.

The barber pole bears influences from as far back as the Middle Ages. At the time, barbers offered more than just male grooming. Skilled as they were in handling sharp objects with precision, they also carried out basic medical procedures, for example tooth extraction and bloodletting, dabbling in therapies for an entire range of maladies, from headaches to cholera. The surgeon-barber would ask his patient to grip a short wooden stick to make arm-veins more prominent for bloodletting purposes. The wooden stick, or pole, propped in front of a barbershop, thus became the first rudimentary sign for illiterate passers-by, particularly as the bowl that collected discarded blood – which had previously served as signage – was progressively deemed as distasteful and unhygienic, and was eventually banned. Historical reasons underlie the choice of red, white and blue colouring on barber poles as well. Red colour symbolises blood, white symbolises the bandages used to stop post-procedure bleeding, and blue – which only emerged later – represents the colour of veins, or according to more apocryphal telling, the blue featured



Figure 6: Barber poles indicate that an establishment is a barbershop.



Figure 7: Gendered design: trendy barbershops use stereotypical images of modern man on their signs.

on the American flag (Cohen, 2018; Nix, 2018). The downward spiral motion on modern barbers poles “indicates the direction of the aortic blood flow in the body” (Harvey, n.d.), while the curved metal caps that top and tail the pole are references to the bowls that collected blood.

The graphic language of this male-dominated space has clearly developed in a gendered fashion, based on stereotypical constructs and visual elements that put forward modern representations of masculinity (Withey & Evans, 2018). The desire to project a sense of masculinity is apparent not only in the gendered linguistic choices, such as “Mr. Barber”, “Hombres”, “Gents Cuts”, “The Gentleman”, “Headmens”, and “Gorilla”, but also the targeted imagery that makes use of specific symbols (see fig. 7). The logos rely heavily on visual elements, distinctive typography and colour in order to stand out, favouring visibility over legibility (Bringhurst, 2008: 49). The imagery used in the signs represents a visual reality that reflects current trends set in a specific cultural and conceptual framework. It goes beyond the limitations of language, though, to transmit information in a clear and concise manner (Bolter, 2001; Neurath, 2010). The abstract image of a bearded man and the use of disembodied male characteristics, such as the moustache or the beard, mark stereotypical representations of modern man. The stance that these representations often adopt – for example, arms crossed, sleeves rolled up the forearms – can often be interpreted as aggressive. When combined with a stern, forward-facing look, the overall feeling that is projected is one of dominance or aggression (Pease & Pease, 2008). Large sunglasses that hide emotion and restrict a full view of the face, coupled with a perennially serious or unemotional facial expression are also hallmarks of machismo.

One particularly interesting aspect of modern barbershop signs is their paradoxical use of decorative – as opposed to functional – typefaces, and ornate lines and imagery on the one hand, and their spare, minimal typographic approach, on the other. This on-

ly serves to highlight our aforementioned assertion regarding the fluidity that permeates established notions of masculinity (Barber, 2016).

The multimodal typographic messages that appear on the signs are “no longer just about letter forms [but] integrated with other semiotic means of expression” (Van Leeuwen, 2006: 144); decorative typography is used as a visual reference to the artificially nostalgic notion of barbershops of days gone by, while the unpretentious typefaces on the more straightforward and informative signs reinforce the neutrality of the typographic message (Samara, 2007: 122). Typographic design enhances the semantics of the wording used (Kunz, 2003): the upper case lettering encountered in the content analysis of this research, for example, is meant to project gravity (J. White, 2003), formality and discipline (Samara, 2006; Young & Zapf, 1999), as well as emphasis (Moriarty, 1996; A. White, 2005; J. White, 2003). Black, a colour that dominates modern barbershop graphic language, is deployed as a trendy, sought-after and elegant visual feature that enhances the hyperbolic and dramatic style hipsters are partial towards; it also suggests maturity and confidence – prized traits in the modern male – while also highlighting the austere style favoured in male-dominated spaces (Adams, 2017; Clair, 2018). Additional visual reference points, such as electric or straight razors, moustaches, and scissors, evoke the action that takes place in modern-day barbershops (fig. 8).

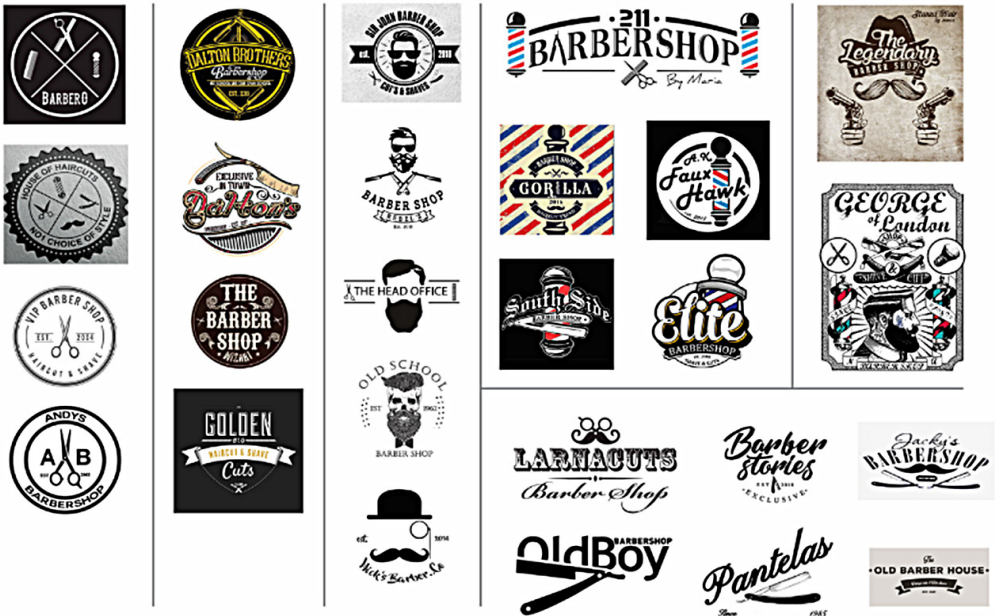


Figure 8: Multimodal messages in the graphic language of modern Cypriot barbershops.

Conclusions

Graphic language is a key component of visual communication and the production of meaning; its multiple modes of expression “evoke emotions or suggest associations with familiar experiences and memories”, (Rabinowitz, 2006: 346), making it a rich field of observation, reflection, and decoding.

In summarising this study’s findings and analysis, a number of observations can be made concerning the graphic language related to modern barbershops that have recently proliferated across Cyprus. First, graphic language is rapidly changing the Cypriot visual landscape, offering new codes of visual communication (fig. 9). As a result, modern barbershops in Cyprus have – virtually indiscriminately – adopted a new set of visual symbols. Furthermore, hipster aesthetics that promote faux nostalgia deriving from cultural appropriation prevail across both visual and linguistic elements in modern barber-shop signs, thus constructing a retro narrative. Finally, the emergent graphic language favours gendered linguistic and design standards that project masculinity.

At the same time, the use of the English language as lingua franca is revelatory in itself. It highlights the “symbolic” power of language in the context of modern culture (Moschonas, 2004), it reinforces the relationship this power has with political and economic hegemony (Mühleisen, 2003; Schneider, 2007), it supports the identification and expression of solidarity with its target audience (Schneider, 2007), and confirms the country’s increasing commitment to the West, as well as its adherence to the standards of globalisation.

In conclusion, the rapid shift from the old-school koureion to hipster barbershops indicates the demobilisation of the *traditional* as obsolete, as well as the urge of the local Cypriot population to evolve and follow the zeitgeist. In fact, the abrupt increase of modern barbershops in recent years reflects an equally fast and mostly unthinking adoption



Figure 9: The Cypriot typographic landscape transforms via ideological narratives and symbolism. On the left, the traditional barbershop is named “Δεν ξεχνώ” (“Never forget”), a reference to the invasion of Cyprus by Turkish troops in 1974, and the continuing partial occupation of the island. On the right, a modern barbershop chooses to refer to the Republic of Cyprus as the “South Side”.

of Western trends, involving hasty adjustments not only to physical appearances and general aesthetics, but also to key cultural indexes, such as habits and behaviours, language and visual communication. Finally, this study reveals the impact of Western culture on younger Cypriot generations, which has been expedited due to globalisation.

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