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6. Social Semiotic Multimodality

Abstract: This chapter gives an introduction to social semiotics, its conceptual origins in linguistics, notably in the work of Halliday, and how it has been developed as an approach within multimodality. The key principles of this approach are discussed, and five key concepts are outlined. The chapter illustrates the application of a social semiotic multimodal approach to the social media platform *Pinterest* to explore users' multimodal design of their homepages to construct style, with a focus on their construction of gendered style. The resources of image, colour, and writing are examined, with attention to how their use is shaped through the interaction of social norms and the designed affordances of *Pinterest*.

1 A History of Social Semiotics: From Language to Multimodal Sign-Making

This section provides a brief overview of the development of multimodal social semiotics, sketching the larger theoretical framework from which this approach is derived. Social semiotics is concerned with meaning making and meaning makers. It studies the media of dissemination and the modes of communication that people use and develop to represent their understanding of the world and to shape power relations with others. It draws on qualitative, fine-grained analysis of artifacts, and texts, as records of meaning making, to examine the production and dissemination of discourses across the variety of social and cultural contexts within which meaning is made. It also describes Social Semiotics as a theoretical approach to multimodality by tracing its development from a concept used to refer to language, to a broader use of social semiotics to define a field, and to its latest developments in relation to multimodal communication.

Social Semiotics has its origins in Functional Linguistics, more specifically in the work of Michael Halliday (1978), and has been later developed as a theory of multimodal sign-making in the works of Robert Hodge, Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (e.g. Hodge/Kress, 1988; Kress/van Leeuwen, 2001; van Leeuwen, 2005;

Kress, 2010). In Hallidayan theory, language is a product of social processes; the resources of a language are shaped by the functions it has developed to satisfy the communicative needs of people's lives. Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress (1988), in their book *Social Semiotics* extended Halliday's approach from language to sign-making more broadly, and argued that societies develop and shape *all* semiotic resources to fulfil given social functions, express a social group's values, systems of knowledge (i.e. discourses), structures and power roles. They discuss examples from a range of social contexts involving a range of modes, but focused primarily on writing and image in 'print' media (e.g. magazines, billboards). Kress and van Leeuwen extended Halliday's work, notably the idea of meaning as choice, to develop a social semiotic approach to the visual, and to theorize the visual as a mode, culminating in their seminal book *Reading images: The grammar of visual design* (Kress/van Leeuwen 1996). This opened the door for multimodality in the way that it discusses key concepts such as composition, modality and framing. The issue of mode and multiple modes became increasingly foregrounded in social semiotic work in the early 2000s and led to an expansion of multimodality, questioning the boundaries of individual modes and examining common principles underpinning multimodal communication, notably, *Multimodal discourse: The modes and media of contemporary communication* (2001), Kress/van Leeuwen. Multimodal analysis has, as this handbook illustrates, been approached through different perspectives, each with a specific interest in the investigation of modes and multimodal representation (Jewitt 2013). Kress's book *Multimodality* (2010) and *Introducing Multimodality* (Jewitt/Bezemer/O'Halloran 2016) bring together all of this work to outline a social semiotic approach to contemporary communication.

2 Social Semiotics

Applying the theory of social semiotics shapes the way in which multimodal analysis is conceived and conducted. This section outlines the operating principles of this approach to multimodality, defines the key concepts central to a Social Semiotic analysis, and explains how these concepts are applied in the analysis of texts.

Social semiotics sets out to understand how representations are produced by and contribute to cultural settings, that is, to get at their social function and meaning potential in the communicative landscape. Their textual features are analyzed in order to comment on social relations, power, signification, the interests of sign makers, the imagined audience, and the social purposes realized by texts. The example discussed in section 3, draws on the inductive analysis of *Pinterest* homepages focused on how style is semiotically materialized in the social media platform *Pinterest*, combined with a deductive analysis employing theories of gender. The interest in gender arose directly from the *Pinterest* texts, as the preliminary analysis of image, colour, and

writing clearly point to the gendered character of the text. The five theoretical concepts introduced below provide a starting point for the application of a social semiotic approach to a wide range of multimodal communication.

2.1 Semiotic Resource

Semiotic resource refers to "the actions, materials and artifacts we use for communicative purposes" with

> A meaning potential, based on their past uses, and a set of affordances based on their possible uses, and these will be actualized in concrete social contexts where their use is subject to some form of semiotic regime (van Leeuwen 2005, 285).

A person 'chooses' (as discussed in section 2.4 this choice is situated and constrained) a semiotic resource from the available system of resources. They bring together a semiotic resource (*a signifier*) with the meaning (*the signified*) that they want to express. In other words people express meanings through their selection from the semiotic resources that are available to them in a particular social situation and moment in time: in short, meaning is choice from a system. This choice is always socially located and regulated, both with respect to what resources are made available to whom, and the discourses that regulate and shape how modes are used by people. These solidify into various kinds of normative discourses or 'rules' for the use of semiotic resources; rules that are socially made, and sometimes broken; rules that have the potential to be changed through social interaction. This leads to a view of signs, modes, and meaning making as being, at least potentially, fluid and dynamic. The semiotic resources of a mode are susceptible to change both at the level of 'grammar' and meaning. This opens up new possibilities for semiotic resources to come into the 'modal stock' of meaning making potentials. The illustrative example discussed in section 3 of this chapter, analyzes how the semiotic resources of image, colour, and writing are shaped by the technological platform *Pinterest*, and how the take-up of these by Pinterest users is socially shaped in relation to materializing gendered styles.

2.2 Provenance

Semiotic resources have meaning potentials that derive from their previous uses in a given society. When a semiotic resource is used in representation, a sign is newly made. Every time it is used, it undergoes (a certain degree of) transformation. Two principles drive transformation, i.e. provenance and experiential meaning potential. Provenance, closely related to Barthes' (1977) notions of "myth" and "connotation", defines "where signs come from".

> The idea here is that we constantly 'import' signs from other contexts (another era, social group, culture) into the context in which we are now making a new sign, in order to signify ideas and values which are associated with that other context by those who import the sign (Kress/van Leeuwen 2001, 10–11).

Experiential meaning potential is instead akin to Lakoff/Johnson's (1980) view of metaphor and it condenses

> the idea that signifiers have a meaning potential deriving from what it is we do when we produce them, and from our ability to turn action into knowledge, to extend our practical experience metaphorically, and to grasp similar extensions made by others. (Kress/van Leeuwen 2001, 10–11).

In *Pinterest*, as discussed in section 3.2, the provenance of images connected with the practice of re-pinning images from within the social platform, are key in understanding the users' production and maintenance of a coherent 'feminine' style.

2.3 Modal Affordance

The term *affordances* is contested and continuously debated. It has particular emphasis and currency in social semiotic approaches to multimodality (cf. Jewitt, 2013). Modal affordance is used to refer to what it is possible to express and represent easily with a mode. Affordance is a concept connected to both the material and the cultural, and social historical use of a mode. In other words, the affordance of a mode is shaped by what it offers materially, how it has been repeatedly used to mean, in part by its provenance, and the social conventions that inform its use in context. Kress (2013, 61) suggests that, each mode, as it is realized in a particular social context, possesses a specific 'logic' which points to key features of modes, such as the way some modes are inevitably temporally instantiated, and which in turn provide different communicational and representational potentials. The logic of sequence in time is inevitable in speech: one sound is uttered after another, one word after another, one syntactic and textual element after another. This sequence becomes an affordance or meaning potential: it produces the possibilities for putting things first or last, or somewhere else in a sequence. The mode of speech, and differently so writing, are therefore strongly governed by the logics of time. In contrast, (still) images are more strongly governed by the logic of space and simultaneity. As a result of these different material and cultural affordances, some things can be signified more easily in an image, others in speech. Put boldly – modes have specific affordances. Like all governing principles they do not hold in all contexts and are realized through the complex interaction of the social as material and vice versa. That said, in multimodal texts, each mode can be understood as carrying a particular weight or type of 'functional load' and this provides one rationale for the analysis of each modal resource and their intertwined uses in the interpretation of the meaning of a multimodal text. The analysis of the

materialisation of style in *Pinterest* shows, for example, the different affordances and functions of image and writing on the platform.

2.4 The Motivated Sign and the Sign-Maker's Interest

While the affordance of modes, as outlined above, is key to Social Semiotics, so is the agency of the sign maker. A social semiotic account of meaning theorises that: "Signs are made – not used – by a sign-maker who brings meaning into an apt conjunction with a form, a selection/choice shaped by the sign-maker's interest" (Kress 2010, 62).

Meaning is understood as motivated (Kress 1993) rather than an arbitrary association between a form (*signifier*) and a meaning *(signified)*. As the illustrative example of *Pinterest* discussed in section 3, makes clear, how a person materialises their style is shaped by their modal choices and design, but these choices are strongly constrained by the modes available to them and the potential to manipulate these in *Pinterest*, and shaped by the social conventions surrounding the use of images etc. in Pinterest.

In *Before Writing* (1997) Kress offers a detailed account of the materiality and processes of young children's engagement with texts, how they interpret, transform and redesign the semiotic resources and signs available to them – which has been described as 'chains of semiosis' (Newfield 2014, 103). From this perspective, signs are analyzed as material residues of a sign maker's interests. 'Interest' is seen as a situated momentary condensation of all the social experiences which have shaped the individual's 'subjectivity', prompted by a social environment, materialized and realized by means of socially made resources – of which modes are a significant element. Thus it places emphasis on the communal social contexts and resources of meaning making within which the individual's meaning making is suffused. For example, the homepages made by *Pinterest* users, discussed in section 3, are understood as complex multimodal signs from which we interpret the sign makers' gendered style.

Viewing signs as motivated and constantly being re-made draws attention to the interests and intentions that motivate a person's situated choice of one semiotic resource over another (Kress 1993). This 'interest' connects a person's choice of one resource over another with the social context of sign production – returning to the importance of meaning as choice within social semiotic theories of communication.

A social semiotic perspective enables the analysis of texts and semiotic artifacts to identify the social values and positioning of the sign-maker at the moment of the making of the sign.

2.5 Design

The relationships across and between modes in multimodal texts and interaction are a central area of interest for Social Semiotics. From this perspective the meaning of

any message is distributed across different modes and not necessarily evenly. The different aspects of meaning are carried in different ways by each of the modes and any one mode is carrying a part of the message only: each mode is therefore partial in relation to the whole of the meaning and speech and writing are no exception. Social semiotic research attends to the interplay between modes to look at the specific work of each mode and how each mode interacts with and contributes to the others in the multimodal text or interaction.

Signs, modes, and meaning making are treated as relatively fluid, dynamic and open systems intimately connected to the social context of use. From this perspective analytical interest in the modal system, its resources and principles, is strongly located in, and regulated through, the social and cultural. In the example of *Pinterest* and style, it is significant to note the extent to which the design work is embedded in and fixed by the structure of the platform, and therefore the restriction on the users.

The next section demonstrates the application of a social semiotic approach to multimodal analysis. More specifically, it shows how the five concepts outlined above can be used to explore the multimodal construction of gender realised via *Pinterest* texts.

3 Applying a Social Semiotic Multimodal Approach: Style on *Pinterest*

The focus, scope and analytical procedures of Social Semiotics vary according to the purpose of the analysis and the texts, in order to avoid the imposition of a static formalistic order. Analysis revolves around the key concepts outlined in the previous section. A social semiotic multimodal analysis can, however, be loosely described as a process of description and investigation across three inter-connected levels: the level of modes and semiotic resources, and their provenance and meaning potential; the level of design, that is, inter-modal relations; and the level of the sign-maker and context. These levels are often treated as analytically discreet, and forming a sequenced approach: from mode, to design, to context. In this section we illustrate the application of a social semiotic multimodal approach to examine how the multimodal construction of gender is achieved in the social media platform *Pinterest*, work conducted by Berit Henriksen within the larger project MODE (*Multimodal methods for researching digital environments, Mode.ioe.ac.uk*).
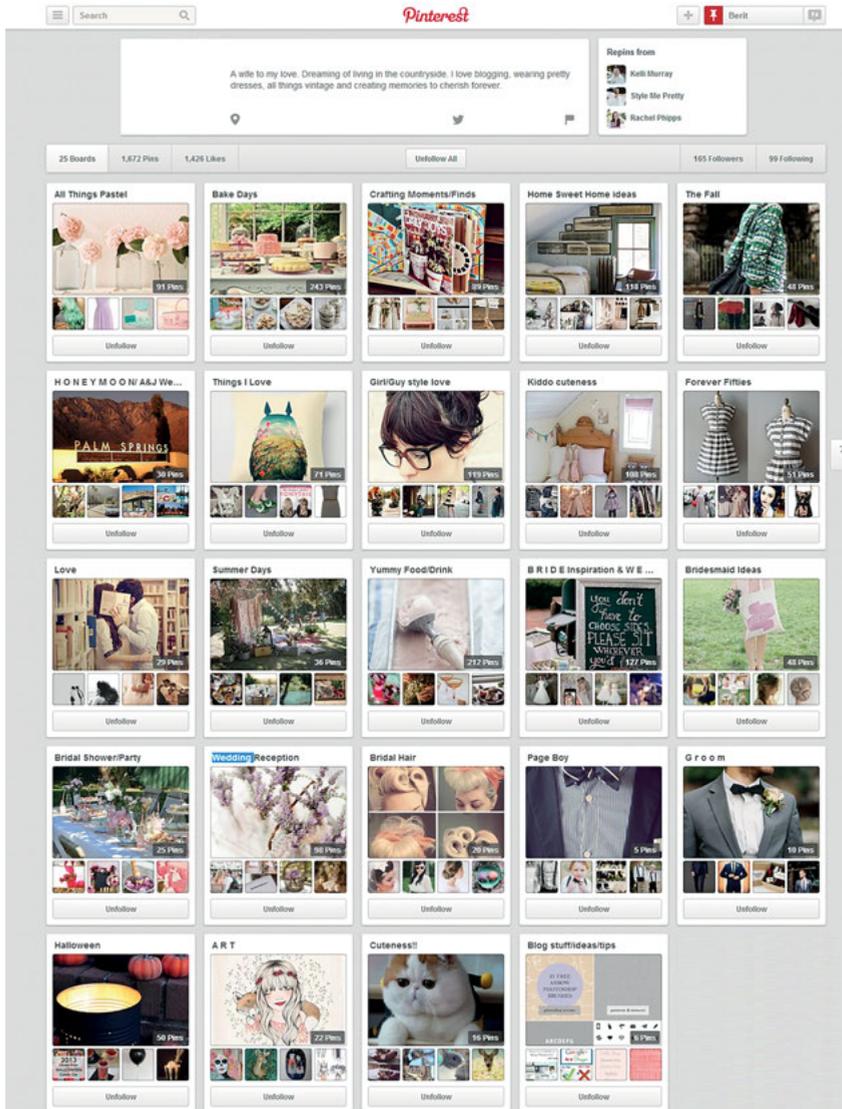
3.1 Pinterest

Social media are web- and mobile applications that enable, and are dependent on, user participation (Kaplan/Haenlein 2010; Mandiberg, 2012). *Pinterest* in particular, is a social media platform that enables users to curate and share visual content and hyperlinks through a process of selecting and organizing still and moving images. When 'pinning' images to virtual pin-boards, the purpose is to share the image as well as the hyperlink that the image represents. For example, a user shares an image of a birthday cake, where the image also function as a link to the cake recipe on a blog. The image collections can be browsed, 'liked', followed and commented on by other Pinterest users, as they interact with one another through their exchange and pinning of images.

A common starting point for social semiotic multimodality is to compare the features of several texts, usually a small sample of texts, in order to examine a specific research question or idea. In this chapter, we focus on an aspect of people's identity work in social media sites – multimodal style practices. *Style* is understood as "the effect of a series of choices made in the design of a message" (Kress 2010, 28). More specifically, we ask how gendered style is materialised by *Pinterest* users' semiotic choices of multimodal resources and the constraints placed on these by the design of the social media platform. How femininity is constructed in *Pinterest* is of interest to debates on the extent to which and means by which social media platforms and users' practices create or constrain 'new' spaces for identity work and/or reinforce social conventions. By providing a detailed understanding of user practices and the design constraints of platforms, and the social norms that they are embedded in, a social semiotic multimodal analysis can contribute to this debate.

This example analyzes the homepages of two typical *Pinterest* users, and is drawn from a larger study that examines how people's social media practices express identity, informed by a multimodal analysis of style, in *Pinterest* and *Twitter*. The sampling of texts within social semiotic multimodal approaches is a key issue, and one that is often a point of critique (discussed in section 4). To investigate how communicative style is materialised on *Pinterest*, user homepages with their boards and pins, were selected as the key space where style choices could be observed. Following a review of *Pinterest* user pages and user data, two typical users' homepages, here labelled User 1 and User 2, were selected for microanalysis. Both present their online identities as matching the gender and age demographic of typical *Pinterest* users, that is female, mid-twenties (although clearly a person may adopt an online identity that differs from their offline one). They also 'pin' on *Pinterest* regularly, related to popular *Pinterest* themes, such as fashion, food and interior design. *Pinterest* user pages are highly coherent, and style is relatively convergent across the users, perhaps unsurprisingly as the site is a highly constrained environment, as will be discussed. However, the two homepages focused on in this chapter do exhibit some differences in relation to the type of images presented, and how these are selected and organised

(See Figure 1). Home page data was archived on one day (August 2013) using screen grab software.
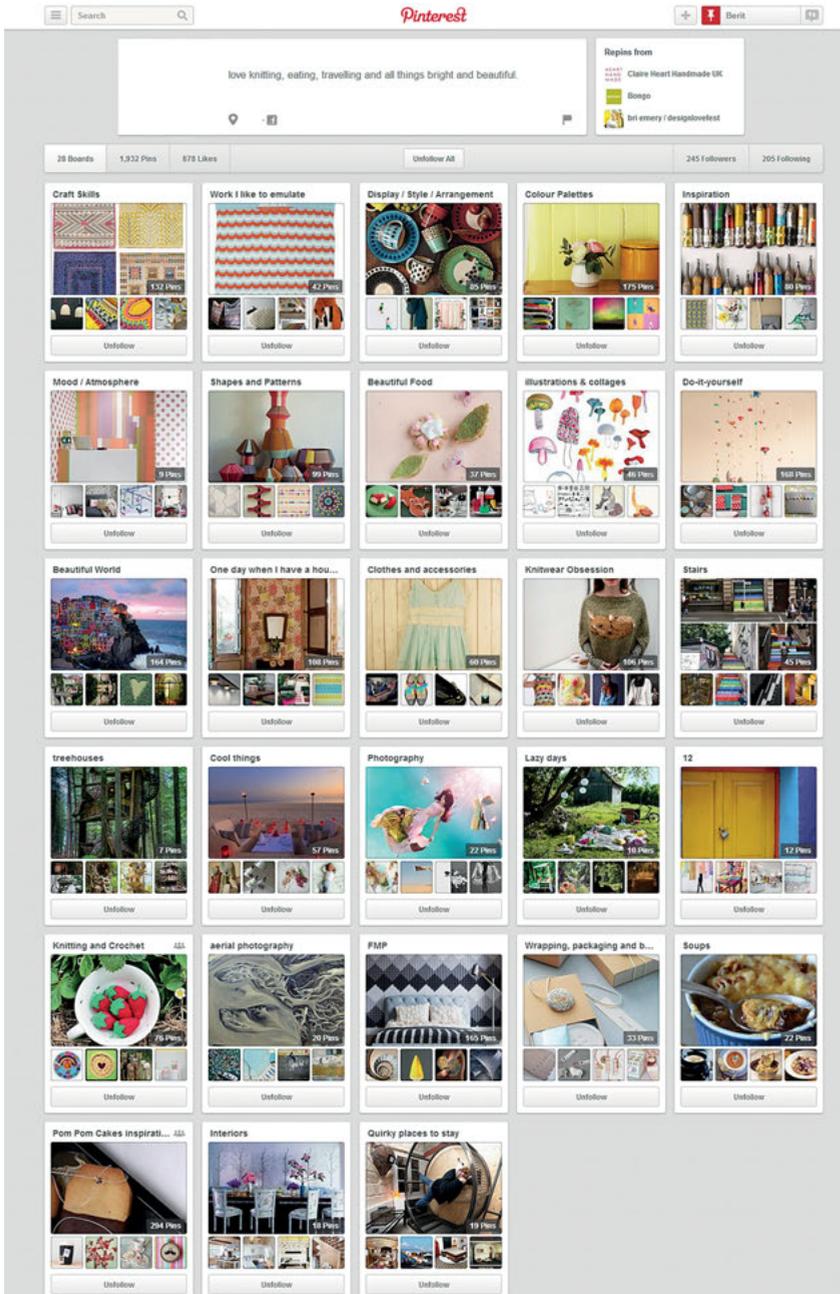
Fig. 1: Image of home pages of *Pinterest* user 1 and user 2

The first stage of a social semiotic multimodal analysis is usually to examine the use of modes in the texts being analyzed. In this illustrative example we focus on the modes of image, colour and writing as these are key modes within *Pinterest*. To ask how a gendered style is materialised through the users' semiotic choices, we examine the semiotic resources of each mode that are used in the homepages in some detail. We discuss the conventions in their use, their provenance, experiential meaning and the modal affordances and logics that have been drawn on. Social Semiotics is concerned with mapping the semiotic affordances, that is the constraints and potentials, of these modes as they are realised in specific contexts, in this case *Pinterest* for a specific social purpose: the realization of gender.

The second stage is usually concerned with attention to questions concerning the modal organization or multimodal design of texts, modal dominance or emphasis within texts, and layout. The relationships between the modes within a text are usually examined in detail, and working with ideas of the multimodal ensemble and arrangement, the issue of the text coherence is explored, as well as the reading entry points, and reading pathways.

The third stage of a multimodal analysis of texts is informed by the concept of the motivated sign and sign makers' interest, often through detailed comparison across texts, and contextualization of these in the social moment. Social semiotic approaches to multimodality, across these three analytical levels or stages, often employ sociological imagination as a research tool, sometimes in the form of commutation, a method from structural linguistics, which involves disrupting the order of elements in a unit to uncover its 'invisible' order, a tool which has been extended to a range of modes. Kress (2010, 90), for example, explores the consequences of three alternative layouts of a textbook double spread. Using this method, Kress shows the effect of changes in layout on the narrative and coherence of a text, and the relationship between image and writing. Such comparisons help to make visible the range of possibilities for a text, and in doing so highlight the sign maker's selection and choices of modes, semiotic resources, materials etc. These choices, in turn provide an insight on the sign maker, opening up the sign makers' interests to the analytical gaze. Recognizing the agency of the sign maker is central to Social Semiotics, notably in relation to the concept of the motivated sign that is used to assert that a person chooses one signifier over another as the 'carrier' of a signified. In this approach, sets of such choices are then elevated to 'design principles' that the sign maker applies, and this supports the researcher in forming a hypothesis about the meaning of the sign, and gaining insight into the sign maker's interests.

3.2 Image Trajectories and the Provenance

Pinterest describes itself as a social media platform promoted as "a tool for collecting and organising things you love" (https://uk.pinterest.com/). The user's homepage is

a dynamic hyperlinked text, with linked layers that viewers can move across. The still image, mainly photographs with occasional prints and drawings included, is the main mode appropriated by *Pinterest* users in selecting content. Although *Pinterest* also makes it possible to pin videos onto the boards, there are very few instances of this, perhaps linked to the practices associated with offline pinboards and the fore-grounding of the visual display element of *Pinterest*. In collecting digital images, there are three types of processes through which an image ends up on a *Pinterest* pin-board; 1) Repin – images found by browsing other *Pinterest* profiles; 2) Add pin – images found by browsing websites; 3) Upload a pin – upload an image from own computer. Users add pins and repins, but very few upload and pin their own images, indeed, uploading a pin appears to have become non-normative within *Pinterest*. This points to the importance of the origin of an image within *Pinterest*, as well as suggesting that the practice of re-purposing others images is more highly valued than image creation within *Pinterest*. These two points further suggest that a user's image repertoire, as well as their connection to others' boards via re-pinning and adding pins are the most significant practices.

Moving through the layers of the text, it is possible to explore the provenance of an image and its trajectory from its original site of display to the *Pinterest* user's homepage. Tracing the trajectory of an image pinned on a user's board reveals the websites that users browse to select and collect images, their *favourite/returned to* sites, as well as the images the user *did not* select, and shows the pinned image in its original context. All of this helps to understand the communicative styles the user might have built on in their text making, providing contextual information useful for investigating style choices, as the network of sites that they are engaged with can be seen as a kind of 'style repertoire'. Analysis of image trajectories, show that User 2 and User 1 select images from sites with similar themes to their *Pinterest* homepages. The themes shaping their selections also relate to common *Pinterest* themes: weddings, home decor, fashion, food and arts and crafts. This level of commonality suggests a high level of digital and social constraint.

A user's pinning style, the extent to which a user pins or repins, shapes the variety of their image sources. Primarily repinning would lead to images collected from a wider network, as it brings together images originally pinned by a range of users with different interests, whereas primarily adding pins would lead to a narrower range of image sources, as images are pinned from sites visited by one user. This shapes the provenance of the images on the user's homepage in distinct ways. The two users analyzed in this example differ in their pinning style: User 2 primarily adds pins directly from websites while User 1 primarily repins from *Pinterest*. In both cases, the pin origins from other social media sites (*Tumblr*, *Flickr*, *Instagram*, and *Wordpress* blogs) and a limited range of websites, primarily commercial web shops. It could be argued that a user, such as User 2, who consistently chooses to pin from outside of the platform, finds the content on *Pinterest* lacking or limited in some way, or that they wish to ensure that they are original in their pins or to expand the realm of the

visual discourse. However, *Pinterest* users' focus on the mobilisation, circulation, and re-appropriation of content as opposed to the creation of content is key to maintaining the coherence of *Pinterest* and an uncontested construction of femininity. That is, the images that circulate are from a restricted pool, drawing on restricted gendered images from the Internet or *Pinterest*.

3.3 Image Content

The images on Pinterest suggest that users' choice of images are shaped by the function of offline pin boards. Pin boards are spaces for ideas, inspiration and notes. Images on Pinterest, drawing on Kress/van Leeuwen's (1996) classification of images, are primarily conceptual images, rather than narrative ones. That is, they depict situations primarily focused on an object or setting. People are present in fewer of the images, and are often hidden, cropped, or not a salient part of the image. In the instances where a person is depicted, the eyes are rarely visible, and never directed towards the camera. The majority of the images represent static 'frozen' moments, moments that do not appear to have a timeline outside of the photographic frame. In the microanalysis of the two selected homepages, most of the images are a naturalistic representation of an object, a place/ space, or shapes and textures. User 1 selected images of clothing and home décor with weddings as a key theme. User 2 favoured food, home décor and architecture with textiles and materials as a key theme. Most of the images are taken from an eye-level, frontal angle, using a variety of shots (*close, medium* and *long*). Objects are often the salient element of the images, as they are closely framed. But both users have also chosen many images without a central salient element and with no strong framing. People are not a primary focus of *Pintrest* images: people are portrayed in less than half of the images on User 1's profile, and less than a quarter of User 2's. When people are portrayed, both users favour images of adult females walking and posing. With few people and few visual narratives or vectors, the images have limited interactive features.

User 2 has chosen more images of private indoor spaces, while User 1 has chosen more images of public outdoor spaces. The inclusion of place/space contextualises the action, person or object depicted in the image but as half of the images are decontextualized, the focus is on the object, removing surrounding information such as geographical location and social context, as illustrated by Figure 2.

Fig. 2: Typical images from User 1 and User 2 illustrate the decontextualized character of images use in *Pinterest*

The interest of the *Pinterest* users is obviously key to their collection of images, and as such we can read something of their style and interests from their pinned images, for example, the many wedding inspired images that occur on User 1's page or User 2's interest in textured aspects. However, the images on *Pinterest* tend to cohere to conservative ideas of femininity and the content combined with the fixed layout of the platform creates a highly coherent ensemble. A wide frame and low salience is used in many of the images on *Pinterest*: this opens an image up to a wider range of uses on the site – enhancing its potential to be repinned. The images while clear in terms of content, tend compositionally to be balanced, almost bland, often with no specific salience or value placed on elements designed to draw a viewer's attention. This leaves the content of the image more open to the viewer to interpret. In part this de-contextualisation relates to the social environment and the function of *Pinterest* as a platform – and the already mentioned circulation of images within the site. If a user wants their pins and pin boards to be accessed and shared among other users, it is important that other users can find something that they are interested in in that image. In addition to being interested in the object depicted, the removal of specific salient element makes it possible for more users to find what is salient to them. For example, an image of a hallway pinned by User 2 was, according to her caption, of interest to her because of the wallpaper depicted in it. There are other elements in the image that may be of interest to other *Pinterest* users, e.g. the table or mirror. This may also relate to the provenance of many of the images – from webshop sites, and image banks, where an appeal to a global audience results in the visual removal of context (Machin 2004, 320).

Colour appears to be a significant resource within *Pinterest*. Indeed the colour of an image, rather than its content, appears to be a key criterion for selecting and pinning an image. The micro-analysis of the two users' homepages shows that both

have selected images that match a colour palette traditionally associated with femininity in the west – rose and pinks. Within this colour range User 1 has selected pastels and low saturated colours as her colour scheme – a delicate and gentle scheme. User 2 has similar hues but with higher saturation and more contrasting colours, a colour scheme that, while feminine, is also associated with energy, adventure and fun. Both limited colour palettes also reflect interior design trends that are currently in vogue – the subdued colour palette and colour patterns associated with Scandinavian home décor, and the bright and saturated hues frequenting popular British interior blogs.

In summary, *Pinterest* users construct conventional gendered styles through their selection of image content and colour-palettes. The themes represented on *Pinterest* are highly gendered, focused around home-making, fashion, and marriage. The restricted origins, the provenance of these images serves to maintain a conventional gendered style. This is compounded by the focus on re-pinning and adding pins from other social media and commercial sites, rather than creating and uploading user images within *Pinterest*.

3.4 Writing

Writing and typography are constrained yet significant modes for users of *Pinterest*. Through the classification of the image pin boards on the homepage and presentation of personal interest in the profile box, writing is a modal resource for users in realising style. The spaces within the homepage where it is possible to write (rather than post an image) are limited. A profile text cannot be longer than 160 characters and the image header cannot be longer that 100 characters. It is not possible to change the font or text size of the writing on *Pinterest* although users make use of typographic features such as capitalisation, altering the space between words, and using symbols. Nevertheless, writing is given prominence in the overall composition of the page through its top placement; the image header is placed centrally above the image, and the profile text is placed centrally at the top of the page. As such, writing on different levels functions as header for the selected images.

Writing on *Pinterest* is distinctly written, and as such users build on written traditions in their text making. This differs from language found on other social media sites, which make use of spoken-like features, materialised as unconventional spelling, abbreviations and emoticons. We see that the grammatical style of the image headers and profile text reflects writing found in other genres where space is limited. For example, a header in *Pinterest* needs to semantically incorporate a wide variety of topics and themes to reflect all images included in a pin board, but it is not required to be a complete grammatical sentence. In this way, *Pinterest* headers echo the simple and/or incomplete sentence structure associated with product labels, newspaper headlines, banner slogans and so on. Writing is an established social practice, and people's experience of writing in other domains enters social media sites, and

shapes their writing in environments such as *Pinterest*, and in turn their style choices in writing. Studies in computer-mediated communication have found that men and women differ in their use of emoticons, exclamation points, and the use of xo ('a kiss and a hug') to sign off online messages (Herring/Stoerger 2014, 576). As users build on their experiences of writing in more neutral and less interactive spaces, these features are not reflected in the *Pinterest* data. Gender conventions do, however, shape the writing on *Pinterest*. For example, the absence of the spoken form can be interpreted as a quiet refusal of the invitation to interact. In the context of *Pinterest* this use of writing may be chosen to enhance the qualities of a 'repinn-able' image. In the context of social media it may reflect a gendered response to the values of inviting interaction.

The content and style of writing are shaped by the technological platform's constraints and affordances outlined above, as well as the social conventions, the norms and rules that social media (and communication more generally) are embedded within. Analysis of the types of words on the two users' homepages suggests that writing, while constrained by the platform, is used as a resource to articulate style, in differentiated ways, within a constrained notion of femininity. For example, nouns (and noun phrases) are the predominant word class making up the image headers. This is not surprising as nouns are useful for labelling. As we saw in the images, the concrete nouns used by both users commonly refer to objects, such as *stairs, knitwear, treehouse* and *art*. Again, these objects can be grouped together under themes such as home décor and architecture. Additionally, the nouns of the image headers also refer to abstract concepts such as *inspiration, mood/atmosphere, moments* and *ideas*. Semantically, User 2 has used nouns that reflect opinions and activities while User 1 has used nouns referring to states and themes (e.g. wedding, home and love). While examples of other word classes are much more limited, we find the use of adjective modifiers such as *yummy, pretty* and *beautiful*, and action verbs such as *dreaming, cherishing, knitting* and *eating*. These words all have feminine connotations, repeating (a form of multimodal emphasis) the themes of the images.

In the profile text, the two users have chosen a writing style where personal pronouns are rarely used. This can be seen as a displacement of the self, which is in part a conventional feminine discourse, a passive refusal of agency. This is the written equivalent of the women depicted with heads cropped from the image. Again, this leaves the connotation of the images open for the ease of re-appropriation and re-pinning. Microanalysis of the two *Pinterest* users' writing shows that users make choices from the semiotic resources of writing available to them in this social and technologically constrained environment. They choose what to write, whether to follow or disregard grammatical rules (e.g. not including pronouns in the profile boxes, making sentences without grammatical subjects), make use of unconventional typography, and so on. There is semantic coherence between the content of the image, the image header, and the profile box, as users present their interests in the context of *Pinterest*, rather than presenting themselves.

In summary, *Pinterest* users construct conventional gendered styles through their selection of words and word structures. The grammatical style of writing is constrained by the available space and the users therefore can disregard written standards and rather focus on semantic content. The themes reflected in writing coincide with the themes of the images and colours, strengthening the notion of *Pinterest* as a coherent/constrained whole.

3.5 Looking Across Modes: Design

It is significant, within a social semiotic multimodal analysis to note what modes are not present, and this is significant as layout is key in the design of modal relations. Layout (e.g. of the homepage) is fixed by the *Pinterest* platform design, and as such many semiotic resources of modes are not fully available to the users: images cannot be re-sized, they are grouped in standardized forms, typographic font is fixed, the length of writing is fixed, colour can not be manipulated (unlike many other social media platforms, filters are not available) and so on. These design decisions (by *Pinterest*) suggest that a strong degree of multimodal coherence or 'sameness' across *Pinterest* users is wanted. People who participate in *Pinterest* accept this high level of constraint. This combined with the thematic coherence across user homepages, and the extent of re-pinning of images within *Pinterest* discussed earlier in this chapter suggests that *Pinterest* users may share a desire for coherence. *Pinterest* is a primarily visual social media platform. *Pinterest* is unequivocally image led, unlike other social media (e.g. blogs or *Facebook*) that may be video, image or writing led. Here, images are re-pinned and the words are left behind, as a consequence writing has a necessarily loose, singular function, an ephemeral classificatory relationship to the image. Colour has a key role in this constrained environment in achieving coherence. All modes appear to be operating in harmony – aligned to a calm mission of unity and coherence. This is markedly different from the complexity of many other social media multimodal texts, in which it is common for different, often opposing, discourses to be realized via different modes, realizing a multimodal layering of meaning, tensions and ambiguities. It could be argued that this, over-arching coherence is a key contribution to the construction of femininity: the singular idea of woman – undifferentiated.

3.6 Style and Gender

The above microanalysis has established the style features in use, exploring how the affordances and limitations of the platform, the social environment and the users' own interests shape the semiotic style choices made by the users. *Pinterest* users' choices of semiotic resources is a key concern of a social semiotic approach, as it

connects choice with meaning; the users' selections of signifieds and signifiers is understood as motivated, and thus the analysis pursues all aspects of their signs as having semiotic potential. This entails using the structure of the text, in the context of the affordances of the *Pinterest* platform, to locate the text in the wider canvas of representation and communication. The assumption underpinning this analytical approach is that such online texts (homepage, profile page, twitter feed, etc.) can be treated as residual traces of people's interaction, as the materialisation of the actions and interests of users. Based on the components and style features of the text, we can therefore make claims about the style practices and interests of *Pinterest* users. The high degree to which *Pinterest* users' style is gendered, and the extent to which this strongly convergent and coherent style is shaped by the normative practices and the design of the platform is pertinent, especially when considered against the backdrop of debates on how social media platforms support people to produce and distribute their own content, as well as to consume a wide range of content made by others.

4 The Potentials and Limitations of a Social Semiotic Approach

A social semiotic multimodal approach, as demonstrated in the previous section has many potentials, but a critical assessment of this approach also shows deficits and limitations. In this section we critically assess this approach and reflect on what social semiotics can and cannot do analytically.

Social semiotic multimodal analysis is a powerful tool with which to understand the social function and complexity of a wide range of texts. It provides conceptual tools that focus on the inter-connectedness between the people's agency, the technologies in use, and the social context of meaning making. This enables a holistic and highly situated analysis of communicative and representational texts. Understanding texts as a material trace of its maker's social action, as well as itself being a complex sign acting in and on the world, combined with social semiotic concepts that focus on the sign maker, their interests, choices and multimodal design, this approach enables the connection between text and sign-maker to be theorized. With this approach it is possible to examine how different actors take up modes within specific environments and point out the consequences of this for communication, learning, and identity – as discussed in the example in this chapter. In this way, a social semiotic approach to multimodal communication is sensitive to the exploration of power relations and how these are materially instantiated. In addition to providing analytical insights into how people produce and use texts, as well as platforms such as *Pinterest* to make them, a social semiotic approach to multimodality can contribute to both critiquing, designing and speculating on future resources and their uses.

Like all research approaches, however, a social semiotic approach has limitations. Like many other labour-intensive microanalytical approaches, this approach focuses its analytical gaze on a small collection of texts. This clearly raises issues of selection, sampling, consistency and generalization, and this is a limitation of this approach, and an area of critique. The focus on the sign maker, especially when working with texts alone, raises a number of issues including how intentionality can be evaluated and assigned, and the 'right' of interpretation. This approach is inevitably risky – in that everything hinges on how convincing the reader finds the analytical abstraction from the concrete text to the social. This work has, perhaps unsurprisingly, been criticised by some for focusing on semiotic texts rather than practices, for making 'unsubstantiated' readings of particular texts, the creation of binary oppositions, and for too strong an abstract theoretical commitment (Prior 2005). We suggest that while from some perspectives these criticisms clearly have validity, they may rather miss the point of a social semiotic approach. These analyses are seeking a theoretical grasp of the principles that inform contemporary communication and to theorize this changing landscape, often putting forward ideas to be further developed through larger studies and different approaches. Another aspect of this limitation is, however, the extent to which social semiotics is a descriptive framework and the extent of its analytical reach to discuss the social. We would argue that on its own, social semiotics does not offer all that is needed for the sociological interpretation of texts. In the analysis presented in this chapter we have had to turn to ideas of gender construction to understand the social implications of the representations being described. In short, while Social Semiotics is powerful in bringing out hidden meanings, the analytical reach beyond the text is limited, and other social theories are often required to bridge the micro-analysis with the macro-concerns of the social. In this chapter we have shown how this approach can address macro-issues, in this case the construction of gender, via a micro-analysis, and shown how this everyday identity work is materially achieved. These limitations of focus can be, at least in part, overcome by combining a social semiotic multimodal approach with other methods (e.g. focus groups, content analysis) that give traction on larger scales of data.

5 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined a social semiotic approach to multimodality, introduced five key concepts, and discussed the principles and processes of analysis. It has illustrated the application of a social semiotic multimodal approach to the social media platform *Pinterest* to explore users' multimodal design of the semiotic resources of image, colour, and writing on their homepages to construct style, with a focus on their construction of gendered style. Two questions raised by this analysis for future research are how the texts users make in *Pinterest* interact with or compare to the

texts they make in other social media sites, and secondly, the extent to which the feminine style of *Pinterest* extends to male users of the site. The theoretical focus of Social Semiotics on macro-level social structures via analysis of micro-textual instantiations has enabled us to engage in the 'excavation' of meaning via reconstructing social practices through detailed analysis of the homepages. Through this intense engagement with texts the general principles of what these signify in relation to gender and style has been explored. This has shown how this approach can be used to examine how practices are shaped through the interaction of social norms and the designed affordances of *Pinterest*. The affordance of image, colour, writing and especially so layout has been shown to be highly constrained, both by the technological design of the *Pinterest* platform, by the practices it supports, and by the social norms that have become established among its users.

Overall, the analysis suggests a high level of coherence in the users' choice and use of multimodal content and composition. The analysis shows that the practices of *Pinterest* circulate a relatively narrow range of commercial content, rather than the images of its users. This served to foreground the provenance of the images users selected and to draw attention to their searching routines and repertoires. This questions the focus on social media as sites for image creation and production, suggesting that *Pinterest* is primarily a site of image consumption, albeit through the work of re-appropriation and categorization of images. These necessarily open images also raise questions about the presumed individual and expressive character of social media. Further, the analysis suggests that offline social norms of gendered roles and femininity have a strong role in the construction of style in *Pinterest*: questioning claims made for the 'new' practices and inclusivity of social media.

This analysis contributes to discussions of how style and gender is constructed in *Pinterest* and the extent to which and means by which social media platforms and users' practices create or constrain 'new' spaces for identity work and/or reinforce social conventions.

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