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Social taste and meaning at glance: A multimodal framework of aesthetics in webtexts

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Abstract

This working paper presents a social semiotic framework for the analysis of aesthetics in digital texts. It observes modal configurations in layout, font, colour, writing, visuals and interactivity to derive a webtext's aesthetic meaning potential, which could hardly be accounted for in traditional analysis of writing alone. A multi-stage process of descriptor assignment associates subjective and social evaluations to objectively observable descriptors attributed first analytically to each modal feature, and then considered in combination. Intended to work for all webtexts, the framework is applied to the analysis of two food blogs and provides a fine-grained analysis of a text's social positioning and orientation towards its author and audience.

List of images:

Fig. 1 The screenshot of the homepage of The Diary of a Frugal Family (retrieved 27th May 2013).

Fig. 2 The screenshot of the homepage of Thinly Spread (retrieved 27th May 2013).

List of abbreviations:

FF = The Diary of a Frugal Family

TS = Thinly Spread

1. Introduction

What is there in a text that has us say, at a first glance, 'this is kitsch' or 'this is radical chic' or 'this is for kids'? What do these labels reveal about the text? Even more, what do they reveal about us, when we use them? The present chapter tries to answer these questions, by sketching a social semiotic framework for the multimodal analysis of aesthetics in digital texts. It has been designed

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for the analysis of the aesthetics in blogs, but it has the potential to be applied to all kinds of webpages.

As a relatively 'old' type of webtext, the blog format has been the subject of considerable academic investigation; yet most empirical studies have often focused on solely analysing the texts' written (and, at times, visual) content. While quantitative approaches (e.g., De Zúñiga, Puig-I-Abril, & Rojas, 2009; Herring et al., 2005; Kelly, 2010; Reese, Rutigliano, Hyun, & Jeong, 2007) provide a description of blogs in terms of numbers and frequency of posting, comments, internal/external links, more qualitative studies (e.g., Huffaker & Calvert, 2005; Kenix, 2009; Kerbel & Bloom, 2005; Siles, 2012) use content analysis when considering the blogs' posted images, along with linguistic methodologies for the blogs' written contents. The latter involve mainly discourse analysis for posts and profile descriptions, and conversation analysis for comments. Whether using quantitative or qualitative methodologies, whether analysing texts (as the above cited works) or surveying bloggers and readers (e.g., Cenite, Detenber, Koh, Lim, & Soon, 2009; Herring, Scheidt, Bonus, & Wright, 2004; Stavrositu & Sundar, 2012; Viégas, 2007) – and even when using multimodal approaches (e.g., Abas, 2011; Thibault, 2012), extant studies on blogs focus essentially on their 'content'.

Nevertheless, blogs have meaningful form beyond their posted written and visual content. Blog publishing platforms such as *Wordpress* and *Blogger*, for example, offer a series of templates and customizing features that bloggers can select and combine together to produce their blog. Choice here involves a range of default and customizable modal features, such as colour palette, layout, font type, animation and interactivity display, among others. These formal configurations are immediately visible when accessing a blog and hence are a salient component of a blog's style, thus shaping its aesthetics, before (and framing) its written content. In shaping aesthetics, they position the blog in relation to values existing within society, expressed as taste, thus projecting a series of social features onto the blog's implied author and addressed audience.

With the increased use of multimodal resources in the design of (traditionally considered written) texts, a text's style, aesthetics and social positioning is no longer shaped by writing alone. Hence the development of analytical tools to examine the meaning potential of these formal configurations is central to researching digitally-produced (written) texts.

After providing a social semiotic reading of aesthetics, the chapter will present the framework and will exemplify its application. Being in its early design, the framework needs refining and testing. The chapter intends to offer a resource along with promoting discussion, useful feedback and further work in this direction.

2. A social semiotic perspective on aesthetics

Taste is a social product. Bourdieu's (1979[1986]) milestone work has shown that differences in taste, or aesthetic preferences, are regularly distributed among social classes and among what he called class fractions, or sub-groups of individuals having specific agglomerates of cultural capital, encompassing life-style, class, gender, age, profession and education.

In this sense, Kress' (2010) defines aesthetics as the "politics of style", with style defined as the "politics of choice". In evaluating sets of semiotic choices (or stylistic options) in a text, aesthetics expresses and reveals power relations existing in society, naturalized as 'taste'. An aesthetic label locates a text socially, by condensing a recollection of characteristics which reveal a set of identity features projected by the text onto its implied author and addressed audience. At the same time, by classifying its object, taste classifies its classifier (Bourdieu 1979[1986]); aesthetic evaluations lie in the 'eye of the beholder', so an analysis of a text's aesthetics can reveal the observer's social positioning with reference to a given set of values existing within society.

Bourdieu's (1979[1986]) notion of taste and Kress's (2010) view of meaning and aesthetics enable the (otherwise blurry) concept of aesthetics to be handled as object of analysis. Bourdieu's view of taste as the naturalization of differences in cultural capital shuns any association of the term aesthetics with an idea of intrinsic (or universally shared) 'beauty' in an artefact. Kress' social semiotic take on sign and aesthetics contrasts common approaches to style (for example Lanham 2006) that consider aesthetic evaluations as dealing with 'form', as separated or distinguishable from 'substance'. In a social semiotic perspective, all modes (such as colour, gesture, writing or dress code) have resources to make meaning. Aesthetic evaluation is the (socially-framed) result of a(n individual's) meaning making activity. It too is meaning, made out of the use of a certain resource; it is the meaning we make of a sign when we answer the question 'what is it like?' rather than 'what is it?'. Hence all modal resources have potential to make meaning, including aesthetic meaning. This enables the framework to work with aesthetics as meaning. The aesthetic meaning potential of a resource is given by the values attributed to its use in a given social group. The aesthetics of a text can then be analysed as a part of its overall meaning potential and as expressed by (the social evaluations of the use of) all the modal resources composing the text.

Each of us has a naturalized, internalized aesthetic taxonomy, yet we can hardly describe it analytically. We seem to be able to identify the style of a semiotic artefact at first glance, assigning labels such as 'high-tech' or 'romantic' as easily as we can assign genre labels such as 'documentary' or 'advertisement'. Yet seldom can we explain what it is exactly in a text that makes it 'high-tech' rather than 'romantic'. The social semiotic framework presented in this chapter is

intended as a resource to analyse, explain and socially locate a given aesthetic meaning potential of a digital text, by singling out the role of modal elements in shaping it.

3. The Framework

The aesthetics of a webtext is made apparent through the orchestration of various modal resources to make meaning and produce coherence, and a multimodal social semiotic framework provides an approach for analysing visuals and writing in relation to other modes. This approach is necessary to understand the increasing confluence of represented content with the materialised design of the blog form.

In order to derive the aesthetic meaning potential of each mode and any of its elements, the framework employs a multi-stage qualifying process of descriptor assignment. The multi-stage process is first analytical, focusing on the aesthetic meaning potential of the use of each mode and modal element; then, a final stage of synthesis combines and weights the results deriving from the analysis of each mode and determines the set of aesthetic meaning potentials of the overall multimodal orchestration of a webtext.

3.1. A multi-stage process of descriptor assignment

If aesthetics positions a text with reference to a combination of parameters defining social taste, it can be said that aesthetics qualifies a text with reference to a given set of social standards. Hence by assigning a social evaluation to the use of a given modal configuration, we can analytically derive its aesthetic meaning potential and thus answer the question ‘How is this text? What is it like?’ (rather than ‘What is it? What is it about?’). The aesthetic meaning potential of modes and modal features can be thus described by assigning a descriptor to their configuration in a text. The descriptor needs to qualify the use of a given modal feature in reference to the overall multimodal orchestration; it describes a quality of the text as expressed by the modal feature. In words, this means assigning an adjective to each modal feature as appears in a given text.

As a result of the analysis, a text’s aesthetics is the combination of the qualifiers attributed to each modal feature. The combination needs to be weighted; the same descriptor assigned to more than one modal feature (or multiple descriptors agreeing in meaning) has a greater weight in qualifying the aesthetics of the text. The presence of disagreeing qualifiers should not be disregarded, as they are indicative of conflicting meaning components (counter-)balancing or producing dissonance in the text’s overall aesthetics. So, for example, if both layout and font express the value ‘high-tech’, while only colour expresses the value ‘traditional’, the former qualifier can be said to have a higher impact than the latter. At the same time, ‘traditional’

expressed by colour might serve to ‘tinge’ distinctively or mitigate the higher impact qualifier expressed by layout and font.

We can describe a text’s aesthetic meaning potential through a qualifying process because the ways in which we label reality through adjectives depends on social taste. At the same time, the selection of an adjective is always also the expression of a subjective evaluation. It reveals the meaning-maker’s interest (Kress, 2010) at the moment of engaging with the text; hence a text’s aesthetic value perceived/assigned by a reader/viewer reveals his/her subjectivity as well as his/her social positioning in respect to a given social group’s taste. This makes the assignment of qualifiers a powerful tool in the analysis of web design choices and readers’ perceptions. At the same time, however, a process of qualifier assignment is inevitably subjective, and this holds for the analytical process too. Hence, when the reader/viewer is the multimodal text analyst, the subjective component behind the qualifying process needs to be analytically described, making the analyst’s standpoint as visible as possible.

To do so, the qualifying process needs to undergo multiple stages, each of which must be made explicit in the analysis. At a first stage, descriptors assigned to each modal feature are as objectively ‘measurable’ as possible; then at a second stage these are assigned more evaluative qualifiers, up to a final stage where social judgment is derived from each evaluation.

Each stage assigns a descriptor to the previous one. The process from one stage to another is metaphor, made explicit through analogy. The evaluative meaning of an objectively observable descriptor is derived through “provenance” and “experiential meaning potential” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001:10-11). The former works through association with established social uses of the same modal element; the latter works through association with material experiences of its presence. As an example of descriptor assignment through provenance, ‘pastel’ as an objectively observable descriptor of a given colour nuance can be qualified as ‘infant’, then possibly judged as ‘childish’, through association with the frequent use in objects for babies (see the analysis in the next section). As an example of descriptor assignment through experiential meaning potential, the use of a ‘large’ font size in a text can be associated with ‘accessible’ from our experience of the use of enlarged font sizes to facilitate reading. We might then associate the use of a large font size with social evaluations such as ‘facilitated’, ‘for users who have difficulties of some sort’, and judge them as ‘elementary’.

3.2. A methodological caveat: Subjectivity

The process from more objectively quantifiable descriptors to subjective evaluation and social judgment is certainly problematic, at least in two respects. Firstly, the more towards the figurative

use of the descriptor as ‘social judgment’, the more subject to dispute it may be. The proposed framework is not intended to provide any normative descriptions as to what social judgment should be given to a certain characteristic; rather it is meant to produce insights on the social evaluations that ‘hide’ behind any aesthetic judgment, and thus reveal the social affiliations lying behind a sign-maker’s use of an aesthetic label. We are certainly stepping into a slippery area. Nevertheless, if we want to attempt to analytically describe the socially-shaped grounds of aesthetics, we cannot avoid entering the sensitive area of subjective evaluation, and must accept the fact that any given observable and measurable descriptor might lead to a range of different evaluative descriptors and social judgments. After all, linguistic studies and studies in rhetoric have long developed tools to analyse the style of writing (and speech) and its related social values; now that, thanks to digital technologies for text production, ‘written’ texts are increasingly multimodal, there is an urgent need to start to set the ground for an analysis of the aesthetics of a text as expressed by the use of multimodal resources. As problematic as its application may be, the framework can certainly represent an initial contribution. The set of aesthetic meaning potentials derived might then serve as a basis to assess (and to be checked against) designers’ and readers’ perceptions.

As a second issue, any ‘objectively’ observable descriptor has potential both for positive and negative evaluations. For example, a ‘symmetrical’ layout might be evaluated as positively balanced, hence stable and reliable, or negatively as too squared, precise, predictable and boring. The positive and negative connotations of a given characteristic depend on three intertwined factors. A first factor is the ensemble of descriptors given by the intertwining of the various modal features in the overall multimodal orchestration of the page. This motivates the need for a final stage of synthesis after assigning descriptors to each modal feature, so that consistent, compatible and conflicting trends are weighted and an overall picture is built of the aesthetic meaning potential of the whole webpage. The second factor is given by the type of text, its uses and purposes and its ongoing aesthetic conventions. This points to genre, as the “entexting” of social relations (Kress, 2010) and hence the time- society- culture-situated specificity of any semiotic practice. Aesthetic values change in time and among social groups. For example, ‘how much stability/instability’ is desirable in the multimodal orchestration of a text belonging to a certain genre, and when it is too much, will vary in time and among societies as well as reflecting them (for example in terms of their own level of stability). Finally, a third factor influencing a more or less positive connotation of a given descriptor is given by the meaning-maker’s social positioning and orientation towards the sets of aesthetic values derived from the other two aspects just discussed. Indeed interpretation is a socially-shaped activity, driven by the meaning-maker’s interests, as a consequence of the values deriving from his/her life-world. Hence the type of aesthetic interpretation will always depend on

where the meaning-maker positions him/herself within the dominant politics of style of a given society at a given historical moment. As difficult to analyse and complex as it might be, the third aspect here is crucial, since it enables the framework to derive the social orientations and identity features that the aesthetics of a given page projects onto both its implied author and its addressed audience.

Therefore, as an ultimate stage, qualifiers should enable the analysis to assign the text a set of 'life-world' identity features. These include (1) domain features related to work or leisure, which denote the text as, for example, professional versus amateur, domestic versus commercial, high tech versus traditional, or public versus personal; (2) age/generation features, denoting the text as either authored or directed to children, teenagers, young adults, adults, or more mature generations; (3) class, as problematic as this notion might be; (4) gender and, within this, any element associating the text to femininity/masculinity/transgenderism; (5) level of education; (6) (life)style, such as new age, minimalist or classic; (7) ethnic group; (8) social (sub-)group and interest group, such as fan-communities, or youth-culture specific groups, or else for families/parents versus singles, or for different types of sexual orientation. These labels are not to be intended as mutually exclusive social attributes (or, worse, as an all-encompassing and always valid checklist), but rather as an example of different dimensions of social variation mapping a multi-dimensional continuum where the text can be located.

Rather than lived ones, the identities resulting by the combination of these features are designed identities as projected by the text. They are constructed identities of its 'ideal' author and audience. They may then be 'hyper real' and/or stereotypes, resulting from social (pre)judgments attributed as the result of power relations existing within society. So, 'amateur' as a text's derived aesthetics does not mean that the text was produced non-professionally; instead, it means that it presents itself as non-professionally produced, which might be indeed more apt to meet the rhetor's communicative needs. Videos professionally designed to have an amateur aesthetics are increasingly used for television commercials, for example, following communicative strategies aimed at giving a sense of authenticity. In this case 'amateur' is a designed identity that the professionally produced video projects onto its 'implied' author, thus shaping a relationship with the audience as peers rather than as seller/advertiser towards targeted customer, as would be in the case of a video with a 'professional' aesthetics. Again, the negative/positive connotation of a given aesthetic feature (such as 'amateur' versus 'professional' or as 'childish' versus 'mature', for example) depends on the meaning-maker's 'taste preferences' in relation to the specific genre and his/her interests in the communicative events, along with his/her positioning towards established values (and power roles) within society.

In sum, with no intention (nor possibility) of ascribing the aesthetic features of a text to its ‘real’ author or ‘real’ audience, by deriving social attributes from aesthetic values, we can determine a text’s social positioning and orientation towards its addressed audience. This develops a fine-grained resource for the analysis of a webtext’s interpersonal function (Halliday, 1978; Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996/2006), much of which could easily be lost in the analysis of writing alone.

4. The Framework applied to two food blogs

Aiming to exemplify the framework just described, this section applies it to a comparative analysis of the aesthetics of two UK food blogs’ homepages, namely *The Diary of a Frugal Family* (frugalfamily.co.uk) and *Thinly Spread* (thinlyspread.co.uk).²

Figure 1 presents the screenshot of the homepage of *The Diary of a Frugal Family*, while Figure 2 shows the one of *Thinly Spread*. Each image combines the first two screens, as visible on a 13’ screen, with medium viewing size selected in the browser’s settings. The framework is applied to selected features of the homepages’ layout, colour, font, visuals, writing and interactivity.

² The blogs were selected by NCRM-Node Novella as the dataset of the collaborative project presented in footnote 1.

[Posts](#) [Comments](#)

HOME
MY FAVOURITE POSTS
ABOUT ME AND MY BLOG
FRUGAL CHRISTMAS
SPONSORED POSTS
FREE BUDGET PLANNER

The Diary of a Frugal Family

Surviving the credit crunch... Follow our journey to living a more frugal lifestyle





School Holiday Ideas



Cooking with Kids

all content

- ▼ Posts (124)
- ▼ Free (20)
- Eating veggie for a week....
- Review Round up....
- Learning about Consumerism....
- Eight ways to save money
- 5 things you need to know about commercial property insurance....
- #Cook3Night - Easy Chocolate Pudding Cake....
- Recipe Monday - It's back a while....
- Sometimes it's hard to smile....
- The Ginger Nips 50g....
- What's Forward - Why I love Pinterest....

Eating veggie for a week....

by casso@frugalfamily, on May 27th, 2013



This is a bit of a back to front meal plan because I'm going to tell you what we ate last week instead of what we'll be eating this week....

Seeing as last week was National Vegetarian Week we decided to have a (mostly) veggie week which was great for me because it gave me a bit of an excuse to cook a few different things as I'm a bit stuck in a rut with our meals at the moment. I've got back into the habit of cooking the same old meals which is not only boring but it also makes me feel a bit blough about cooking so I'm more tempted to not stick to the week's plan.

The veggie meals we've had have been great, especially for Miss Frugal who eats very little meat now and for Mr Frugal, who thinks a meal isn't a meal without a bit of meat, I just added some sausages or a chicken breast to his plate here and there to keep him happy 😊

Monday - Lazy chilli and tomato risotto with crusty bread.

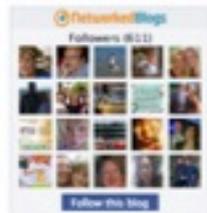
LAZY OVEN BAKED RISOTTO

FOR THE BASE OF THE RISOTTO YOU NEED 250G ARBORIO RICE AND 1.5 PINTS OF CHICKEN STOCK TO A LARGE CASSEROLE DISH.

ADD ANY EXTRA INGREDIENTS YOU WANT AND BAKE AT 200 C UNTIL ALL THE LIQUID HAS BEEN ABSORBED. STIR EVERY 5-10 MINUTES AND ADD MORE LIQUID IF REQUIRED.

FOR THIS TOMATO AND CHILLI VERSION I ADDED 2 CARTONS OF CHOPPED TOMATOES (THE ONES WITH CHILLI IN TOP), 1 CHOPPED GREEN CHILLI, SOME MUSHROOMS CHOPPED, HALF A CHOPPED RED ONION AND A HANDFUL OF BABY PLUM TOMATOES





My Favourite Blogs



FAVOURITE MONEY BLOGS

- A Mum's Humour
- A mother's ramblings
- Adventures of an English Mum
- Baby Baby
- Crystal Egger
- Frugal Family
- Frugal Queen
- He, the Man and the Baby
- Mummys Knees
- Purple Mum
- The Madhouse
- Tyrodot
- Violet Poley
- What's the Hummy

FRUGAL BLOGS

- Baby Budgeting
- Thrifty Mum

PARENTING SITES

- Full Home
- Red Ted Art

Figure 1. The Diary of a Frugal Family.

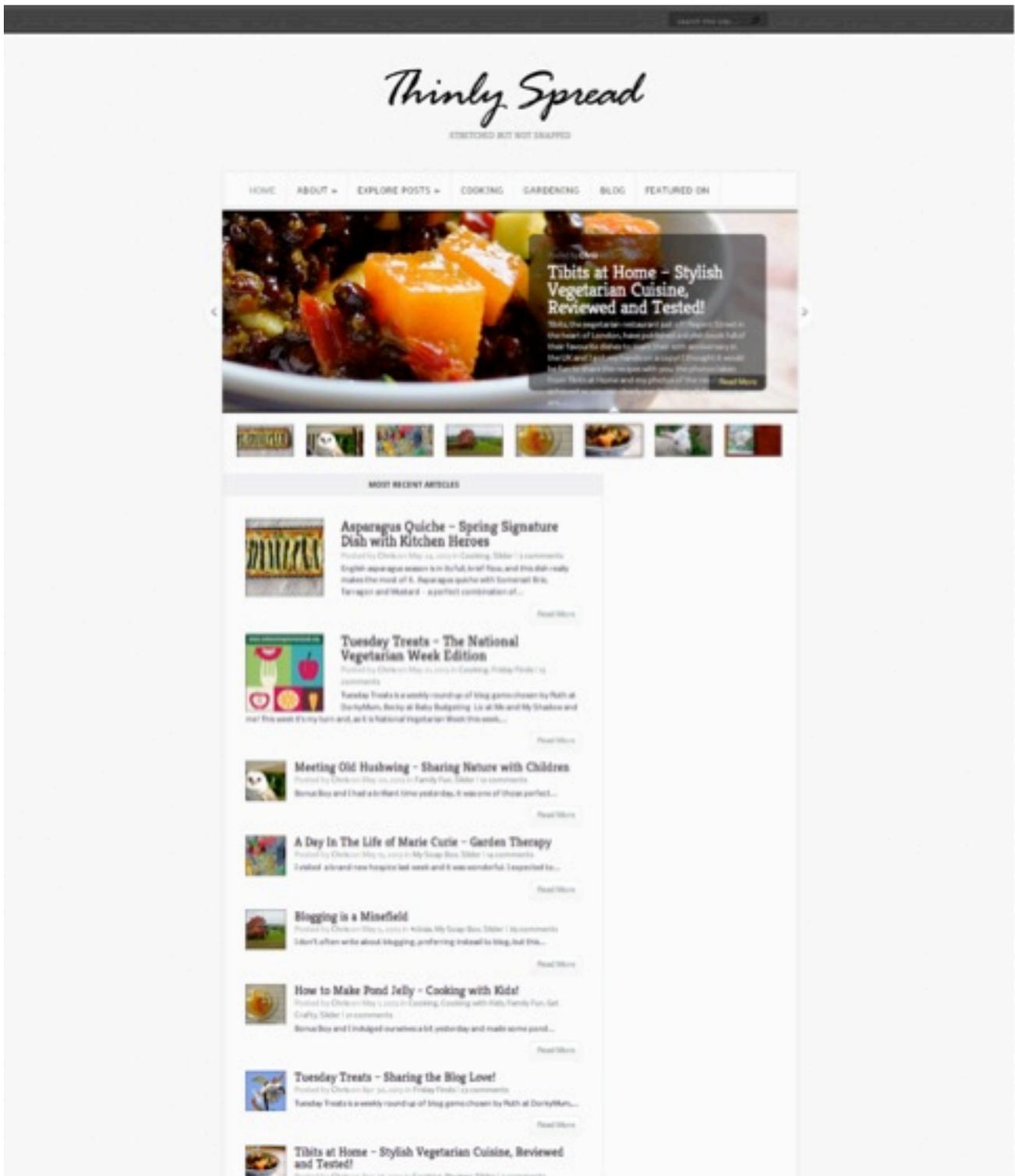


Figure 2. Thinly Spread.

4.1. Layout

The two homepages differ greatly in layout, both in their orientation and framing. As for orientation, after a horizontal headmaster, *The Diary of a Frugal Family* (henceforth FF) has a vertically oriented layout arranged in three columns with a central one devoted to posts, the full text

of which is published one post after the other on a very long page. The orientation of *Thinly Spread* (henceforth TS) is more complex, presenting a horizontal banner below the masthead with images dynamically changing and typed highlights scrolling from right to left. Below the banner, although vertically arranged, a series of posts are indexed as squarely-shaped 'bites' (see Knox's 2009 notion of "newsbites" in online newspapers). All in all, the vertical orientation of FF can be assigned the descriptor 'linear', vis-à-vis a more 'modular' organization of TS.

The two orientations offer different possibilities of choice and hence power to author and audience. They also clearly recall different online genres: more traditional blogs versus more recent online newspaper homepages. To explore the aesthetic meaning potential of the two different orientations, from these observable descriptors ('linear' versus 'modular'), one can use analogy to derive social evaluation. The linear one associates with an older textual arrangement, recalling by analogy the linearity of traditional Western printed texts. The modular one is newer, characterizing more recent types of design both on screens and in printed texts. Therefore, as a second stage in the qualifying process, the layout orientation of FF can be assigned the descriptor 'old', versus 'new' assigned to TS, thus further socially locatable as 'traditional' versus 'modern', for example.

As for framing, both blogs use mainly white to separate elements, but in different ways. FF uses green bands and squares to further frame the page and the masthead, while the white framing has irregular shape, tracing curves and lines following the contours of items. Their alignment varies, so that left-aligned and centre-aligned items alternate in the same column. In contrast, TS uses regular frames (white and grey lines and bands), within which elements are always left-aligned, so that it is immediately clear which elements belong together and which ones differ. In other terms, item categorization through framing is regular in TS, while in FF it is irregular. Besides, elements are widely spaced in TS, while the page in FF is rather dense, overcrowded even, when compared to TS. Hence descriptors assigned to framing are 'irregular' (which might be positively valued as 'varied', communicating a sense of movement) and 'dense' for FF; 'regular' (the fixedness of which might however be mitigated by the dynamic nature of the banner) and 'spaced' for TS.

Looked at together, the layout features denote aesthetic values of old, irregular and dense for FF versus new, regular and spaced for TS. These might then be further ascribed to specific social judgments and life-world identity features. So, for example spaced, modular and regular environments are typical of minimalist styles, often associated with 'upper class' taste. Especially in urban environments, space is a luxury that only few can afford, while filling all available blanks is a sign of economy, thus the density/overcrowding of FF page could denote aesthetics of a different class, and associate the concept of frugality (in the name of the blog) with economizing practices, in saving all space available, for example. As discussed earlier, these associations might be endowed

with negative or positive evaluations in different social groups and by different meaning-makers at different moments in the history of a society and culture. They might contribute to making a text more effective and successful to certain audiences rather than others. Even more interestingly, making these social evaluations explicit, might give insights into the meaning-maker's affiliation with power; so an upper or lower class aesthetics might be either positively or negatively perceived (as in the example of the ambivalent value of the adjective 'posh' or 'sophisticated', for example), depending on the observer's affiliation towards dominant taste (of those who are in a position of power). Even more, (powerful and even conflicting trends in) society might tinge dominant taste differently at certain moments in time, depending on (the need of) more elitist or democratic signs of change, for example.

4.2. Font

Both blogs present variation in font type, colour, size, capitalization and bolding effect. FF uses bolding effects for occasional sub-titling in posts but this is not visible in the screenshot in Fig. 1. In varying these modal elements, FF produces a multiplicity of different combinations. The menu labels above the masthead have small, pink, sans serif, capitalized fonts. The title of the masthead has large, light-blue, serif, non-capitalized fonts; its sub-header has smaller, pink, sans-serif, non-capitalized fonts. The title of blog post is light-blue, sans-serif, larger than the black body text and than the light-blue but serif font of the titles directing to other pages in the left column; these correspond to the title "My Favourite Blogs" in the right column, which however has a larger size, while the title of the link below "My favourite mummy blogs" is smaller, capitalized and sans serif; capitalization and alignment suggests it may have the same rank as "Frugal blogs" and "Parenting sites" further below in the same column, but these differ in colour. In sum, the resources of font are combined together to produce a great extent of variation. This corresponds to a highly varied functional differentiation, which results in a multiplication of functional elements, making categorization less defined or less immediately recognizable. As a result, the use of font features might appear inconsistent and non-cohesive. Thus, the descriptor '(extremely) varied' might be qualified further as 'non-cohesive', 'inconsistent', or 'chaotic'; it could also be interpreted as 'playful' and 'child-like' (further considering the font type used overlaid onto the risotto image).

In TS, the same modal features (serif versus sans-serif font type, colour, size, capitalization and bolding effect) are used jointly to produce a smaller range of functional differentiation. TS uses essentially the same combination of font type+colour+size+bold+caps for all elements that fulfil the same function. Serif fonts are larger, bold with capitalized initials, and always function as post titles (plus the sub-header in the masthead, the only serif in grey and capitalized). Sans-serif fonts are for

all other texts; with full capitalization differentiating menu labels and section titles from body text, and grey differentiating sub-headers. Compared to FF, font colour plays a particularly cohesive role in TS, since the palette involves only the colour black with its lightened nuances of grey and white.

In terms of social evaluations, against a very minimal, function-related use of font differentiation in ongoing professional web-design practices, the use of a wide font variation can be indicative of (and thus become the signifier for) a sign-maker's first stages of familiarization with the affordances of the mode, when practicing a newly learned feature involves exploring its expressive potentials rather than optimizing its functional role. In FF this is further reinforced by the rather large font size of the body text of the post. With the same viewing options set for both blogs, FF body text font size is larger than the one adopted in TS, resembling the enlarged font size of browsers' facilitated viewing options, associated to sight impairments due to ageing processes. Age as generation associates in its turn with digital non-native demographics, thus with a non-insider status in the web-design community. Again, this aesthetic value refers to projected identity features, devoid of any positive/negative connotation (websites for children are often designed with a high range of font differentiation), while a text might be intentionally designed so as not to shape an expert-learner relationship with the audience, but rather as a peer-to-peer one; here, in the context of food blogs, the design choices of the FF blogger conveys an aura of authenticity and unsophistication which might communicate peer-to-peer trustworthiness to its audience.

In turn, the 'expert' and 'professional' evaluations of fonts in TS shape the relation with the audience differently, conveying an aura of professionalism to the blog. This combines however with the highly salient cursive font type of the masthead "Thinly Spread", which simulates 'handwriting'. Through experiential metaphor, it can be assigned the value of 'home-made', 'artisanal', and 'personal', thus mitigating a possible 'coldness' associated with 'professionalism' in the use of fonts.

In sum, like the use of layout resources, also the use of the resources of font in the two blogs points to different aesthetic meaning potentials, shapes different relations with the audience and projects different identity features onto their implied authors, aligning the two blogs with different social groups (and the related tastes).

4.3. Colour

The colour palette of the two homepages is very different. FF uses a rather wide palette including green, blue, pink and brown (in its lighter and darker versions), i.e., separate colours rather than different nuances of the same colour. A wide range of colours can be given a descriptor 'colourful', with an associated evaluation such as 'playful' (reinforcing in this sense the same descriptor of the

font differentiation). This mitigates the blog theme of frugality, shaping it as 'joyful' rather than 'depressing'. FF wide palette can also be given the descriptor 'unrelated' (and hence 'non-cohesive'). The only element shared in the palette is the pastel tone. Pastel can be associated further with 'infant' colours, as is usually found in toys for infants.

In TS instead the palette is tightly tuned, involving one colour (black) varying its lighting, thus ranging from black through grey up to white; this produces a contrast with the few highly saturated colours in the images. Black could be cold, denoting professionalism, and elegance, as in dress code. Black is also frequently used in luxury product advertisements. Note that, if the images were not in full colour, the black and white pallet would tinge the text aesthetics as 'old' (and thus 'traditional'), recalling older technologies of black and white print. Here instead 'one' and 'nuanced' might associate with 'attuned/cohesive' as their evaluative descriptor; 'cold' can associate with 'professionalism' and 'elegant/chick', reinforcing the 'minimalist' value produced by framing and compatible with the 'expert' use of fonts.

Adding up to the use of framing and font, the two blogs' aesthetic meaning potential of colour reinforces their social orientations.

4.4. Visuals

FF has preference for drawings, as for the cupcakes used as signposts and in the masthead, and the thumbnails for social networking sites. Their modality (high in colour, for example; 'brushed' for social networking site icons) communicates 'child-like' as a social evaluation. By looking at the icing on the cupcakes, its colour points to non-natural/organic food; hence again a life-style (and maybe class and education) assignment can be made. Finally when FF uses photographs, they do not present a 'sensory' modality that is typical of professional photos promoting food. The 'misty' effect in the photo of the risotto combines with the 'comic sans' font of the overlaid typing to communicate 'amateur' as a social evaluation, thus expressing 'spontaneity' and 'authenticity' (that is, a 'home-made' picture for a home-made meal and a 'home-made recipe') and a peer relationship with a general public.

TS photographs instead have a sensory modality, with saturated colours and contrasts, synaesthetically stimulating taste through colour; this is typical of food photographs in glossy magazines and food shows, thus associating with 'staged' and 'professional' and reinforcing the aesthetic meaning potential of colour and font discussed earlier, in the sense of a carefully crafted sophisticated simplicity in contrast to FF's joyful and chaotic low-budget authenticity.

4.5. Writing

In FF, the writing style of the post, with the one-plus-triple-dot punctuation in the title and the two-plus-triple-dot one in the first line of the post, suggests informality and immediacy, even if capitalization is standard (thus not denoting any internet-specific usage). In the blog post, sentences are quite long, with a syntax recalling spoken language (normalized for writing though, without any semantic or syntactic plan changes, hesitations or repetitions), again communicating immediacy and ‘speed/haste’ in production, especially the lack of punctuation as in the second sentence:

Seeing as last week was National Vegetarian Week we decided to have a (mostly) veggie week which was great for me because it gave me a bit of an excuse to cook a few different things as I’m a bit stuck in a rut with our meals at the moment.

At a more abstract level, ‘speed/haste’ might be associated to ‘spontaneity’, reinforcing other modal descriptors discussed earlier. ‘Informality’ is found also in vocabulary (e.g. ‘veggie’ in the title; ‘a bit of’; ‘stuck in a rut’; the non-standard onomatopoeic ‘bleugh’), phono-morphology (contractions with auxiliaries) and syntax (the split infinitive ‘to not stick to’) and in the use of the emoticon. Combined with the personal tone, this shapes a closer relationship with the audience, communicating openness and authenticity, and a willingness to share without careful planning.

In TS, the writing style of the post suggests a more formalised and structured design. Sentences are succinct without compromising the use of metaphors and visual language to recount family events or share recipes and extend gardening tips. The writing in TS resonates a contemporary design that features a minimalist approach: writing without overcrowding or overextended embellishments. Further, vocabulary and syntax are standard and generally non-colloquial, although occasionally personal (through first person pronouns) and emotional (the use of exclamation mark). Capitalization is used consistently as in printed texts. Titles have capitalized initials and a two-part structure as in traditional non-fiction works; punctuation reflects standard use too. TS’ posts reflect the style of carefully planned writing, even when hosting personal and informal expressions, as in the final ‘I got my hands on a copy!’ in the following excerpt:

Tibits at Home – Stylish Vegetarian Cuisine, Reviewed and Tested!

Tibits, the vegetarian restaurant just off Regent Street in the heart of London, have published a stylish book full of their favourite dishes to mark their 10th anniversary in the UK and I got my hands on a copy!

Writing style combines with other modal elements to communicate ‘professionalism’. Together with the carefully placed and shot photographs, and the “newsbites” (Knox, 2009) layout, it recalls journalistic style tinged with a personal note (as in professional food reviews). It communicates the appearance of an effortless simplicity of professional writers, which is reflected in her post contents.

4.6. Interactivity

FF displays static and mainly drawing- and word-based interactive signs/sites; their configuration communicates a low interactive aesthetics of the page, much lower compared to TS, which displays a dynamic banner with elements scrolling from right to left (see Adami forthcoming, for dynamicity as a signifier of high perceived interactivity and for a methodology to assign aesthetic and functional values to a webpage interactivity). Low or high interactivity clearly associates with less or more expertise, high-tech and updatedness; reinforcing again the ‘old’ versus ‘new’ of layout orientation, and the other aesthetic meaning potentials of the overall modal configuration.

5. Conclusions

Although both dealing with ‘blogging about food in a moment when resources are scarce’, the two blogs shape the theme differently, and project different social attributes onto their implied author and addressed audience. FF presents itself as playful, for children, chaotic, spontaneous, amateur and authentic; TS instead shapes it as minimalist, professional, carefully balanced and planned. The two might be associated – either positively or negatively, depending on the social affiliation of the reader – with the tastes of different class fragments and lifestyles. FF’s flamboyant authenticity speaks of a low-budget loving family with children; TS’s sophisticated simplicity speaks of someone taking the task of blogging about food professionally.

The analysis of the two blogs points to the shifting function of composition in contemporary communication. Namely, the ways in which meanings are conveyed through the combined use of form and content in the overall design is both personally customised and socially situated. This is to say that what appears on the blog is a combination of technological and social affordances of the digital medium combined with the aesthetic choices of the blogger. The blog platform provides bloggers a range of digitally enabled modal resources to design and shape meanings. *How* the blogger customises the range of blog templates through layout, fonts and colours, among other modes, is a reflection of the social worlds with which the blogger associates. Even the selection of a template is suggestive of a certain politics of choice, or style. For example, TS uses “Elegant Themes Premium Wordpress Themes” that is not a standard, free template, instead it is an option

for purchase. Here, the choice-as-design offers insight into the relationship between the aesthetics of a blog and the social positioning of the blogger ‘to fashion’ the technological affordances offered by blog platforms into a particular text for others to view. Likewise, FF has customised her blog to differentiate from a standard or premium Wordpress template and designed the blog as a ‘book for the children’ and to serve as a personalised keepsake about their familial experiences and childhood memories. Hence, while both blogs can be classified as food blogs, what we have are two food blogs designed for different purposes and the aesthetics of each blog communicates personalisation that is at the same time a public display that integrates select advertisements and blogger affiliations with commercial institutions. This tension and blurring of the personal/private with public/commercial point to possible future developments and applications of the framework.

There is an increasing interest in understanding the blogger’s layout design in relation to the integrated commercialised features. Current and popular blogs are often sponsored by corporations or institutions to market their products. This integration, which was not common in earlier blogs, is reflecting a larger societal shift. There is a sense of ‘performativity’ at play in the blog design and aesthetics when viewed as a multimodal text inclusive of commercialised design. Thus, a future area of this work could develop or adapt methodologies able to attend to aesthetics to include the larger social ideologies apparent in the embedded commercial elements.

Notwithstanding a need for further testing and refinement, and the issues opened by the inescapable subjectivity of its application, the framework has a three-fold potential. In the first place, it can be used to analyse a text’s social orientation, by singling out the meaning potentials of the text’s multimodal orchestration in terms of identity and social positioning that it projects onto the author and the addressed readership. In this sense the framework can be conceived as a methodological tool for a fine-grained analysis of a text’s interpersonal function, in terms of how it shapes social roles and power relations of the participants in the communication event.

Secondly, the framework bears some potential for critical analysis, in that it can reveal viewers/readers’ social constructs, affiliations and values. Given that aesthetic evaluations are pervasive in society, any social label communicated by a text’s multimodal orchestration is in fact perceived as such only if meaning-makers, readers/viewers and ‘users’ of the text align themselves with – or, alternatively, are aware of – the sets of values in force within society. In this sense, the framework can be used to reveal social assumptions, evaluations and judgments that meaning-makers have naturalized. It can produce critical insights when adopted in combination with perception studies.

Finally, the framework has potential for design, in that by providing a resource for the assignment of social values to specific modal configurations, it can be conceived as an empowering

tool, raising sign- and meaning-makers' awareness of the meaning potential of each design feature, enabling them to choose and assess the resources which can best serve their rhetorical purposes in the design of their texts' aesthetics. In this sense it can be used as a complement to design studies.

Studies in socio-linguistics, rhetoric and (critical) discourse analysis have long developed tools for the analysis of the social values embedded in the use of written and spoken language. The analysis of the two food blogs has shown that today's texts use a complex of multimodally-constituted signs to produce a variety of differences in style, aesthetics and social positioning. Differences are often nuanced, complex and multi-faceted, and would hardly be visible if we focused our analysis on writing alone. Still, they have an impact in our everyday meaning-making and sign-making activity, in the way we make meaning of these texts and in the way we approach and evaluate them. Their impact hinges often on naturalized sets of social values, and acts at a deep level precisely because sign-making conventions for modal resources other than writing are largely implicit. A social semiotic multimodal framework can help research in writing studies to make these meanings explicit and to make readers aware of the socially-constructed grounds of their aesthetic evaluations.

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