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Styling the self online: Semiotic technologization in weblog publishing

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(forthcoming in *Social Semiotics*, Special issue on Semiotic Technologies, edited by Theo van Leeuwen, Soren Vigild Poulsen, and Gunhild Kvale)

Abstract

Testing on digital semiotic production the concepts of (self-)styling and technologization of discourse, developed for offline linguistic phenomena, the article investigates the role of digital platforms in shaping the relation between self-expression online, semiotic regulation and the social construction of taste. By focusing on the use of semiotic resources of webdesign for identity expression, the study analyses the semiotic regimes emerging from regulatory practices and webdesign styles on WordPress, and their influence on the changes in the projected identity of a personal blogger. In spite of the participatory character of WordPress, results show the role of the platform in objectifying/technologizing hegemonic semiotic preferences, with consequent normalizing effects in bloggers' self-styling practices. The conclusions relate the findings to broader power dynamics in the social construction of taste and their implications for both online and offline forms of self-expression.

Keywords: WordPress, blogs, technologization, styling, webdesign, self-expression

Introduction

Social media platforms, enabling personal pages/sites creation, content sharing and interaction among users, have made public self-expression through multimodal representation a matter of everyday communication. Website/blog providers, such as WordPress (<https://wordpress.com> and <https://wordpress.org>), make available a wide range of customisable templates for creating

websites/blogs without requiring users' expertise in coding. More recent forms of social media platforms, like Facebook, provide a pre-set semiotic space where users can upload and share content and interact with others multimodally, as well as apps and functionalities that facilitate users' production.

In these environments, we can produce representations, interact with others, and design our online persona through a wide range of modes. Whereas earlier multimodal production was generally confined to professional elites, such as graphic designers or film-makers, these environments (themselves hinging on multimodal platforms designed by IT experts) now enable lay sign-makers to create, share and make public their multimodal productions to an unprecedented extent.

With numerous lay sign-makers accessing a wide range of semiotic resources for representation, there supposedly derives an increased diversity in sign-making practices, not only in terms of contents being communicated but also in manners of communication, i.e., in styles/aesthetics, responding to and shaping different tastes.

However, given that representation is produced through choice, that is, selection from the resources made available by a media platform, and that platforms have affordances (i.e., limitations and possibilities, foregrounded/preferred and backgrounded/dispreferred options for sign-making), questions arise as to the nature/extent of diversity in sign-making practices, and to the technological and social forces that drive sign-makers' preferred selections of resources.

In sum, is diversity in sign-making truly diverse in taste and aesthetics? Or is it rather a matter of variation within a generally unified/unifying hegemonic taste and aesthetics? What is the role of digital platforms in the relation between sign-makers' agency/freedom of self-expression and regulatory practices in the use of semiotic resources?

The article addresses these questions by focusing on webdesign practices of blogs, as

an early form of social media¹. The next section frames the questions theoretically; the following one examines the discourses, regulatory practices and the products' dominant styles of WordPress, the leading platform for weblog publishing; the section after analyses the effects of semiotic regulation in the stylistic changes of a personal blog that used WordPress for its design.

Theoretically, the work integrates concepts from sociology (Bourdieu's 1986 notion of taste), linguistics (Fairclough's 1995 technologization of discourse, Cameron's 2000 styling, and Eckert's 1996 self-styling), and organization studies (Gagliardi's 2006 aesthetics of organisation). While these works have investigated the impact of style/aesthetics and related regulatory practices offline, with linguistic work focusing on language, the study advances the exploration of these phenomena in two directions, i.e., (1) in online practices, and (2) in all semiotic resources used to (self-)style and regulate the expression of identity online.

Analysis of the regulatory practices of WordPress and their influence in the changes of the identity shaping of a personal blog that used WordPress for its design show

- a. An expansion of "professionalism" as a social value, also for personal contexts of self-expression,
- b. A redefinition of professionalism, from quality/expertise in the provision of goods and services, to a matter of style, i.e., a signified associated with formal characteristics of patterned semiotic resources,
- c. The entexting of professionalism and identity in the overall multimodal design of blogs, rather than (solely) in language, and
- d. The constraints in forms of self-expression, technologically-mediated by the

¹ Blogs are considered one of the first examples of social media, as they afford online social networking, see e.g., <https://www.cision.com/us/2009/06/why-are-blogs-considered-social-media/> (retrieved 29 December 2017), and are widely included in scholarly analyses of social media usage, e.g., Aichner and Jacob (2015).

platform and realised as self-regulation in the use of visual resources, with a trend towards homogenization following hegemonic semiotic regimes.

Findings show the role of a semiotic technology, such as the WordPress platform, in mediating between different layers of sign-makers; its mediation conceals the agents behind the technological affordances, naturalizing the power relations (and related conflicting views and positions) that concur to the production of semiotic regimes. This produces an objectification/technologization of the social values associated to patterned uses of semiotic resources (e.g., “professional” is objectively/always desirable; a certain colour palette, layout and font combination is “professional”), generating consent towards hegemonic semiotic regimes and self-regulation in individual expressions of identity.

Theoretical underpinning

Taste, self-expression, styling and technologization offline

Research in semiotics (Eco 2004) and sociology (Bourdieu 1986) has shown that taste and preferences in cultural expressions change through time, communities, and social demographics. Extensive work in sociolinguistics has shown not only that language use varies in analogous way, but also that we are assigned identity features from the ways in which we speak and write. Although not as systematically shown in semiotic research, the same can be assumed for all semiotic resources, e.g., the way we dress, the font type we use in our CVs, or the type of pictures we post on our online dating profiles.

Linguistic research has also shown that corporate/institutional language use is undergoing a process of “technologization” (Fairclough 1995) and “styling” (Cameron 2000); organisations and institutions increasingly regulate the language of their employees to augment “the efficiency of organisational operations, the effectiveness of interaction with clients or ‘publics’, or the successful projection of ‘image’” (Fairclough 1995, 102). By controlling

discursive practices in a diffused way, technologization of discourse produces standardization in language use and generation of consent towards regulation.

Machin and Ledin (2017) use Fairclough's technologization for the resources of space, textures, and materialities of Ikea kitchens, while organisational research has looked at corporate design of spaces, objects and products in shaping the aesthetics of organisations, their image and their relation with customers (Gagliardi 2006); corporate styling can involve also the looks and behaviours of employees, used to reinforce the intended brand image of the corporation (e.g., Mears' "Aesthetic labour").

Eckert (1996) has shown that styling needs not be explicitly enforced by an institution/organisation, but can be self-initiated by members of a community of practice, as a means of identity construction "for the individual as a participant in that community" (1996, 190). Eckert's findings suggest that, while seemingly rising from below, self-styling practices prefigure broader social groupings/regimes (in gender roles, in her study of female preadolescents). In other terms, self-styling is self-expression within the shaping of a community membership identity; yet, mediated through community belonging, it reflects the influence of broader social dynamics.

The shaping of one's identity and the styling of self are semiotically (rather than solely linguistically) realized, and are linked to a more general social construction of taste. This opens questions on the relation between (1) agency/freedom of self-expression, (2) normative/regulatory practices, either self-initiated or policed by others, and (3) the social construction of taste in an individual's shaping of identity.

Expanding the paradigm online: Semiotic regimes, platforms and uses

While the above studies have investigated offline practices, the present work addresses the above issues in digital environments, focusing on weblog publishing practices. The context

presents the following specificities:

1. Presentation of the self is done through disembodied representation, i.e., through images/videos, writing, font, colour, layout; so, aesthetics of space, objects and bodies conflate, and embodied cultural capital is expressed through disembodied resources, including the colour palette, font, writing and layout of the overall design of a personal webpage/blog;
2. In personal websites/blogs (as in social media profile pages) this is done through self-styling practices, rather than regulatory practices and policies from above, with aesthetics of labour becoming a self-regulatory styling practice;
3. Rather than from an employing corporation/institution, external constraints on forms of self-expression come from the semiotic technology, that is, from the platform's affordances;
4. Weblog publishing platforms like WordPress offer open-source templates for webdesign (so-called "themes"), through a model that relies on users' production; WordPress themes are produced by users, who can re-use and re-work them to produce new ones for their websites/blogs and/or for adoption by others;
5. The platform presents itself as a container/mediator of users' productions, with a prevalent "community" discourse; against a promoted and pursued participatory freedom, the platform's designed affordances do in fact regulate the semiotic practices of those producing and using themes, yet in rather complex ways, which have not been investigated yet.

Unlike the use of language, the use of semiotic resources for webdesign has been researched mainly in terms of usability and effectiveness (i.e., with normative purposes) rather than as practices of self-expression. In my previous work (Adami 2015, 2017), I was instead interested in how webdesign resources such as layout, font, image, and writing combine to express and

project identity values of a blog, its author and implied audience. In reviewing the literature, it emerged that only the contents of blog posts and profiles had been subject to such type of (mainly linguistic) investigation (e.g., Huffaker & Calvert, 2005; Kenix, 2009; Kerbel & Bloom, 2005; Siles, 2012), whereas the overall page/blog design was subject to usability and design studies (Bevan 2005; Cyr 2008; Djamasi, Siegel, and Tullis 2010; Faiola 2006; Leavitt and Shneiderman 2006; Zahedi, Van Pelt, and Song 2001), often practice oriented, i.e., aimed to provide indications on best practices to be adopted, disregarding the role of graphic resources in projecting social meanings and identity. More recently, webdesign studies have paid increasing attention to aesthetics values (Douneva, Jaron, and Thielsch 2016; Seckler, Opwis, and Tuch 2015; Silvennoinen and Jokinen 2016; Strebe 2016; Tuch et al. 2012; Reinecke and Gajos 2014), yet always to determine their impact on users' perceived reliability, rather than on the potential of the design of a website/blog to express its owner's identity. Furthermore, up to date, no work has investigated the influence of website/blog publishing platforms on bloggers' practices of self-expression. The present study intends to fill this multifaceted gap and see practices of webdesign in terms of their interrelation between sign-makers' self-expression and normativity/regulation, through the mediation of WordPress as a semiotic technology.

In sum, considering

1. the increased number of sign-makers and semiotic possibilities afforded by digital environments, including the possibilities for users to choose and customise the design of their blog,
2. the increased templatisation of semiotic production made available by platforms for website/blog publishing,
3. an increased styling/technologization of discourse and overall aestheticization of

everyday life (Featherstone 1991) observed offline,

4. broader dynamics that concur to the social construction of taste, including normative indications on webdesign,
5. the two-folded specificity of self-expression online, i.e. (a) the self represented through disembodied resources, and (b) self-styling through choices among themes/templates available on the platform,

The study addresses the following question: In the design of blogs, what is the relation between semiotic regulation entexted in the platform's affordances and sign-makers' self-expression?

To answer it, the next section examines WordPress model of semiotic production and regulation, while the following one analyses its effects on self-expression through changes in the design of a blog.

WordPress: Styling the web by and for the community

WordPress is the most used Content Management System for creating websites (<https://trends.builtwith.com/cms> Retrieved 29 December 2017). It is a web template system for web publishing, i.e., it offers themes and plugins that users can choose and customize to create the look and functionalities of their website.

WordPress offers both free themes and themes that can be purchased, available both on a web platform (Wordpress.com), where users can sign up to create their blog for free, and on downloadable open-source software (Wordpress.org) providing more functionalities for customization of websites/blogs as well as for the creation of new themes. The open-source software project Wordpress.org originated first (in 2003). It is non-profit and owned by the WordPress Foundation (<https://wordpressfoundation.org/>), supported through donations. Wordpress.org is voluntarily-run and free (under a GPL licence) to be downloaded, used and

developed further.²

To investigate WordPress as a semiotic technology, the study proposes a three-partite analytical model, through analysis of

- (1) the discourses on which WordPress hinges and through which it presents itself,
- (2) the practices that regulate sign-makers' productions on WordPress, and
- (3) the products made available on WordPress, in their dominant styles and resulting semiotic regimes for webdesign.

The discourses

Unlike most social media (such as Facebook and Instagram), Wordpress.org is not a corporation. Its voluntary-run and participatory character find a direct reference in the discourses on which it hinges. The present section lists the main discourses resulting from close analysis of how WordPress presents itself through the contents of its website, illustrating them through excerpts from its homepage, the About section and the Get Involved one.³

1. WordPress is for everybody, both for personal and professional/corporate publishing:

The homepage opens with the following tagline:

29% of the web uses WordPress, from hobby blogs to the biggest news sites online.

[<https://wordpress.org>]

² Wordpress.com, originated in 2005, is owned by Automattic (<https://automattic.com/>), founded by one of the first developers of Wordpress.org. Its model and differences with Wordpress.org will not be subject to analysis; the web platform will be considered only for the analysis of theme styles.

³ The scope of the paper does not allow to include the whole dataset of contents examined. These are publicly accessible on <https://wordpress.org>

2. WordPress is made by everybody, both expert and lay people who want to help:

On the “Get involved” section, the header “Make WordPress” introduces the following:

Whether you’re a budding developer, a pixel-perfect designer, or just like helping out, we’re always looking for people to help make WordPress even better.

If you want to get involved in WordPress, this is the place to be.

[<https://make.wordpress.org/>]

3. WordPress is a community:

Besides a section titled “Community” on the homepage, the term is salient also on the About section:

Everything you see here, from the documentation to the code itself, was created **by and for the community**. [<https://wordpress.org/about/> Bold in the original]

In the Etiquette sub-section, the community discourse is frequent and nuanced towards equality and diversity:

In the WordPress open source project, we realize that our biggest asset is the community that we foster. [...]

Contributions to the WordPress open source project are for the benefit of the WordPress community as a whole, not specific businesses or individuals. All actions taken as a contributor should be made with the best interests of the community in mind.

Participation in the WordPress open source project is open to all who wish to join, regardless of ability, skill, financial status, or any other criteria.

The WordPress open source project is a volunteer-run community. Even in cases where contributors are sponsored by companies, that time is donated for the benefit of the entire open source community.

Any member of the community can donate their time and contribute to the project in any form including design, code, documentation, community building, etc. [...]

The WordPress open source community cares about diversity. We strive to maintain a welcoming environment where everyone can feel included.

[<https://wordpress.org/about/etiquette/>]

4. WordPress is free and a site of freedom:

WordPress is an Open Source project, which means there are hundreds of people all over the world working on it. (More than most commercial platforms.) It also means you are free to use it for anything from your recipe site to a Fortune 500 web site without paying anyone a license fee and a number of other important freedoms.

[<https://wordpress.org/about/>]

What You Can Use WordPress For

WordPress started as just a blogging system, but has evolved to be used as full content management system and so much more through the thousands of plugins and widgets and themes, WordPress is limited only by your imagination.

[<https://wordpress.org/about/> Bold in the original; my italics]

In sum, Wordpress.org presents itself as being made for and by everybody, contributing for free within and for an egalitarian diversified community, and free for uses “limited only by your imagination”. Yet the community is not made of peers, as evidenced in the distinction between developers, designers, and lay users, and its participatory character does not prevent practices of regulation of semiotic uses, i.e., technologization. These are realised differently than in the corporate/institutional contexts on which Fairclough developed the notion, as discussed in the

next section.

The practices: Semiotic regulation through a mobile multi-layered model of expert technologists

Given its voluntary-led, community-based and open-source character, WordPress makes public a wealth of documentation on its practices, including guidelines, handbooks and the minutes of its teams' online and offline meetings. The present section focuses on those relevant to the practices regulating the creation, approval and publication of themes (i.e., the products of WordPress, which will be investigated in the following section).

To be included in the Wordpress.org repository, a newly-created theme undergoes a review process, carried out by volunteer members of the Theme Review Team, and detailed in the Theme Handbook (<https://make.wordpress.org/themes/handbook/review/>). Reviews by new volunteer members are supervised by expert reviewers. Although Theme Reviewers are not required to review stylistic/aesthetic features of the design (<https://make.wordpress.org/themes/handbook/get-involved/become-a-reviewer/>), both theme creators and theme reviewers are asked to check a list of requirements and recommended items, listed in the Handbook. A whole section is titled "Design", with a series of recommendations under the headers Typography, Colour and Design Details. Recommendations focus mainly on readability/accessibility (e.g., font size and colour contrast), yet those for Design Details recommend that the theme "has an intended audience" ("General or multipurpose themes are often hard for new users to set up easily. Consider designing niche themes."), that details do not "distract at all from the content", and that "Animation should be used only to call attention to the most important elements on a page, or to show change. Animation should not be used purely for decoration." A linked step-by-step theme test ([https://codex.wordpress.org/Theme Unit Test](https://codex.wordpress.org/Theme_Unit_Test)) lists a long series of features to be checked,

including font, alignment, layout, and colour. The most common form of expression is “[Feature] displays properly/appropriately/correctly” (e.g., “Paragraphs are styled correctly”; “paragraphs align properly”). Hence reviewers are recommended to check themes against principles of semiotic appropriateness and correctness, not specified further.

The list of recommendations is followed by a References sections that links to expert WordPress webdesigners’ presentations published on WordCamp.tv (the video channel of WordPress meetings) and articles on design. Each of the listed references would deserve in-depth analysis, well beyond the limits of a single paper. Suffice it to say that referenced recommendations agree in foregrounding minimalism and simplicity, in their suggested use of a spaced layout, a limited amount of font types and bright colours, and the avoidance of purely decorative effects. Cleanliness and simplicity are also principles stated in the Wordpress.org Philosophy section (<https://wordpress.org/about/philosophy/>).

Fairclough lists the “emergence of expert ‘discourse’ technologists” (1995, 103) as the first characteristics of discourse technologization. These are “specialists in persuasive and manipulative discourse” with “privileged access to scientific information”, so their “interventions into discursive practice [...] carry an aura of ‘truth’”, and “hold accredited roles [...] in institutions, either as direct employees or as expert consultants” (Fairclough 1995, 103).

In the light of the above, Wordpress.org seems to work on a mobile multi-layered structure of expert technologists. These are:

- Those who provide indications and recommendations on design, like those referenced in the Handbook;
- Those who review themes, within a structure of experienced reviewers overseeing new ones;
- Those who create themes, who provide templates (i.e., clustered uses of semiotic resources) to end users who want to create their blog on WordPress.

Within the community-based character of Wordpress.org, the multi-layered structure is mobile. So, in the Handbook, recommendations for reviewers are said to be useful also for designing a theme; in inviting volunteers to join the Theme Review Team, it is said that acting as a theme reviewer is useful for designing good themes. Moreover, technologists who produce recommendations (like those referenced in the Handbook) are themselves creators of themes, which undergo the review process. Against a “freedom” discourse (cf. “WordPress is limited only by your imagination” above), setting trends, (self-)regulating and (self-)policing the use of semiotic resources is an activity everybody should aspire to, and expert members within the WordPress community are the most authoritative sources, not much dissimilarly to communities of practice traditionally considered more conservative in the semiotic regulation of their publishing (like the academic community, with its peer-review process).

The next section examines the themes produced on WordPress, to identify the stylistic trends in the products of these community-based regulatory practices, which, in their turn, set the regulatory practices for end users like bloggers.

The products: Styling the web through WordPress Themes

On Wordpress.com (the web version of WordPress), the Themes section (<https://wordpress.com/themes>) allows searches for themes among 40 different Styles, labelled with adjectives featured in alphabetical order. Table 1 lists the available style descriptors.

Abstract	Elegant	Hand Drawn	Professional
Artistic	Faded	Handcrafted	Retro
Bright	Flamboyant	Humorous	Simple
Clean	Flowery	Industrial	Sophisticated
Colorful	Formal	Light	Tech
Conservative	Funny	Minimal	Textured
Contemporary	Futuristic	Modern	Traditional
Curved	Geometric	Natural	Urban
Dark	Glamorous	Paper Made	Vibrant
Earthy	Grungy	Playful	Whimsical

Table 1. List of searchable styles for Wordpress.com themes/templates (Retrieved 20 December 2017).

Descriptors are not systematic. Whereas some can be paired as opposites (e.g., “Dark” and “Bright”; “Traditional” and “Modern”), others cannot; so there is no “Amateur” for “Professional”, “Complex” for “Simple”, “Informal” for “Formal”, “Concrete” for “Abstract”; “Dirty/Cluttered” for “Clean”, “Heavy” for “Light”, or “Rural” for “Urban”. The absence of opposites is an indication of what is assumed not to be a desirable style; so, we can either want a conservative or futuristic, a traditional or a modern looking website, but we seem not to want an amateur, complex, informal, concrete, dirty, cluttered, heavy or rural looking one; nonetheless, descriptors pointing towards simplicity (“Simple”, “Clean”, “Minimal”) contrast with others like “Flamboyant” and “Whimsical” and, in the absence of “Amateur”, other descriptors point to hand-made values (“Hand Drawn”, “Handcrafted”).

A search for each descriptor shows the number and a preview of the themes categorized under the specific style. The same theme can appear under multiple descriptors (e.g., both as “Modern” and as “Professional”). Table 2 lists the number of themes for each descriptor, providing an indication of the most popular/desirable styles.

Style	No. of Themes
Clean	245
Modern	207
Minimal	188
Simple	166
Elegant	157
Professional	153
Light	151
Contemporary	121
Sophisticated	108
Bright	85
Conservative	58
Formal	55
Artistic	36

Colorful	36
Geometric	36
Traditional	32
Dark	31
Paper Made	28
Handcrafted	23
Vibrant	23
Playful	18
Tech	14
Glamorous	12
Whimsical	12
Retro	10
Earthy	8
Industrial	8
Textured	8
Futuristic	7
Hand Drawn	6
Natural	5
Abstract	4
Flamboyant	4
Urban	4
Flowery	3
Curved	2
Faded	2
Grungy	2
Funny	1
Humorous	1

Table 2. Number of New themes for each style descriptor (Retrieved 20 December 2017).

“New” is the default search setting for themes on wordpress.com.

In line with the recommendations mentioned in the earlier section, the dominant stylistic trends are towards cleanliness, modernity, minimalism, professionalism, simplicity, elegance and lightness, while the least populated ones involve descriptors at the more opposite semantic pole of professionalism and simplicity (such as Hand Drawn, Funny, Humorous, and Flamboyant).

Unlike Wordpress.com, the open-source software Wordpress.org Theme section does not allow for searches among styles. It has three macro-search criteria, i.e., Featured, Popular, and Latest. As software to be downloaded, Wordpress.org is assumed to be used by more expert website creators than Wordpress.com; the search categorisation assumes users to be more

independent in choosing themes in relation to styles. Instead, it attributes higher value to either more recent (Latest) or used themes (Popular), as well as to themes selected authoritatively (i.e., Featured). The afforded criteria of the platform trigger higher value attribution to innovative, mainstream, and authoritative uses of semiotic resources.

The search field on Wordpress.org allows to enter key terms. In the absence of a pre-set list of style descriptors, by running a search for each of the 40 style descriptors found in Wordpress.com, an indicative comparison in preferred styles can be made between Wordpress.com and Wordpress.org. Table 3 shows the resulting numbers when searching for each style descriptor, among the “Latest” themes (as equivalent to the “New” one run for Wordpress.com). Absolute numbers cannot be compared, given that accessible themes on Wordpress.org are ten times more than on Wordpress.com (search results in Table 3 refer to 5,267 “Latest” themes on Wordpress.org against 414 “New” themes on Wordpress.com); yet the relative distribution in each platform can be observed.

Style	WP.org themes	WP.com Themes
Clean	874	245
Simple	596	166
Modern	482	207
Minimal	410	188
Light	328	151
Professional	317	153
Elegant	296	157
Tech	122	14
Dark	59	31
Colorful	32	36
Sophisticated	22	108
Bright	20	85
Contemporary	15	121
Traditional	14	32
Industrial	13	8

Handcrafted	10	23
Vibrant	10	23
Paper Made	7	28
Earthy	6	8
Natural	5	5
Retro	4	10
Urban	3	4
Artistic	2	36
Curved	2	2
Hand Drawn	2	6
Abstract	1	4
Funny	1	1
Futuristic	1	7
Geometric	1	36
Glamorous	1	12
Playful	1	18
Whimsical	1	12
Conservative	0	58
Faded	0	2
Flamboyant	0	4
Flowery	0	3
Formal	0	55
Grungy	0	2
Humorous	0	1
Textured	0	8

Table 3. Number of Theme styles on Wordpress.org (Latest themes) and Wordpress.com (New themes). Retrieved 20 December 2017.

The most populated descriptors are substantially the same on the two platforms, i.e., Clean, Simple, Modern, Minimal, Light, Professional and Elegant, whereas descriptors contrasting with values of simplicity and professionalism (e.g., Playful, Whimsical, Flamboyant, Humorous, Hand Drawn) are again the least frequent or totally absent. When looking at the themes previewed, there is a substantial overlapping of themes appearing in the first result page across the most populated styles; hence a professional aesthetics equals values of cleanliness,

simplicity, modernity, minimalism, lightness and elegance. These seem to be the main stylistic trends emerging from the community creating the themes that are approved to enter the Wordpress.org repository. They align with the main recommendations given by expert technologists discussed above. To observe the regulatory influence of these stylistic trends for end users, the next section focuses on the changes in the design of a personal blog that used WordPress for its design.

A blog case study

Authored by Cassandra, The Diary of a Frugal Family (<https://www.frugalfamily.co.uk>) is “all about my family” (<https://www.frugalfamily.co.uk/about-me-and-my-blog/>), as she writes in the About section, just after a selfie photo showing herself, her husband and her two children. The aims for keeping her blog frame it as personal: “The main reason I write it is because I want to make sure that we don’t forget a single one of the memories that we make as a family”. She reduced her working hours to part time to spend more time with her children, so “we had to drastically change our spending habits and make some life changes to free up the money to allow me to do this”. Hence, she blogs about her saving tips on food preparation and general household, presenting frugality as a joyful lifestyle: “The Diary of a Frugal Family is a complete mish mash of family fun, money saving tips and foodie ideas with lots of cupcakes and smiley faces thrown in too”.

The Diary of a Frugal Family is one of two UK Food Blogs that were subject to analysis of the ESRC/NCRM project “Methodologies for Multimodal and Narrative Analysis of UK Food Blogs” (<http://mode.ioe.ac.uk/2012/09/16/multimodal-analysis-of-food-blogs/>). Within the research team, my investigation focused on the blogs’ aesthetics, that is, on how the co-deployment of resources such as layout, colour, font, image and writing projected specific identities in terms of the blog’s social positioning, its author and addressed audience (Adami

2015, 2017). After the end of the project, I have continued monitoring the two blogs. The Diary of a Frugal Family has changed its overall blog design since then. The analysis compares the blog design of 2013 (the year of the ESRC/NCRM project) and its current one (2017), both produced through WordPress. Changes in the multimodal deployment of the blog design are analysed by following the framework introduced in Adami (2015), to derive the gains and losses (Kress 2005) in identity construction, in terms of meanings that have been backgrounded/deleted and foregrounded/added as a result of the changed semiotic resources of the blog.

Changes in the blog design

Figure 1 shows the homepage of the blog as it appeared in 2013. As analysed in detail in Adami (2015), the combination of modal resources, in the use of a wide colour palette, a dense layout with varied alignment of elements, high variation in font resources, the predominance of drawings over photos, and the modality of the latter recalling amateur and on-the-moment photography, together with the unplanned, personal writing style indexing spontaneity, all communicated “a joyful and chaotic low-budget authenticity” (Adami 2015). The blogger’s relationship of trust with her audience was constructed through the blog’s projected authenticity, i.e., a hand-made family blog for hand-made family food.



Figure 1. The homepage of The Diary of a Frugal Family in 2013 (Retrieved 30th May 2013).

Figure 2 shows the blog homepage in December 2017. The blog design has changed in its overall multimodal deployment. Considering each mode individually, the following changes emerge:

- **Layout** is more spaced, clean, aligned and framed, through grey lines and squares;
- **Font** use is more consistent (one sole font type, with consistent capitalization for labels and headers, and restricted use of colour, limited to grey, black and white), and

minimalist (smaller size and lighter-than-black colour), while the personal character is maintained in the hand-drawn serif font of the logo;

- The **colour** palette is reduced, with predominance of white and grey (cleaner, minimalist and professional) with a hint of pink (recalling female);
- **Image** has turned into professionally-looking photos, with drawing kept only in the logo (recalling authenticity and the old brand identity through the muffins), and with the formerly crayon-drawn social media buttons changed into a more professionally-looking matt effect (with the shape of the muffin used as a branding device, i.e., the logo of the blog).

All in all, while keeping authenticity in the logo, the blog's aesthetics looks more professional, clean and minimalist; it is no longer a low-budget hand-made blog for hand-made family food.

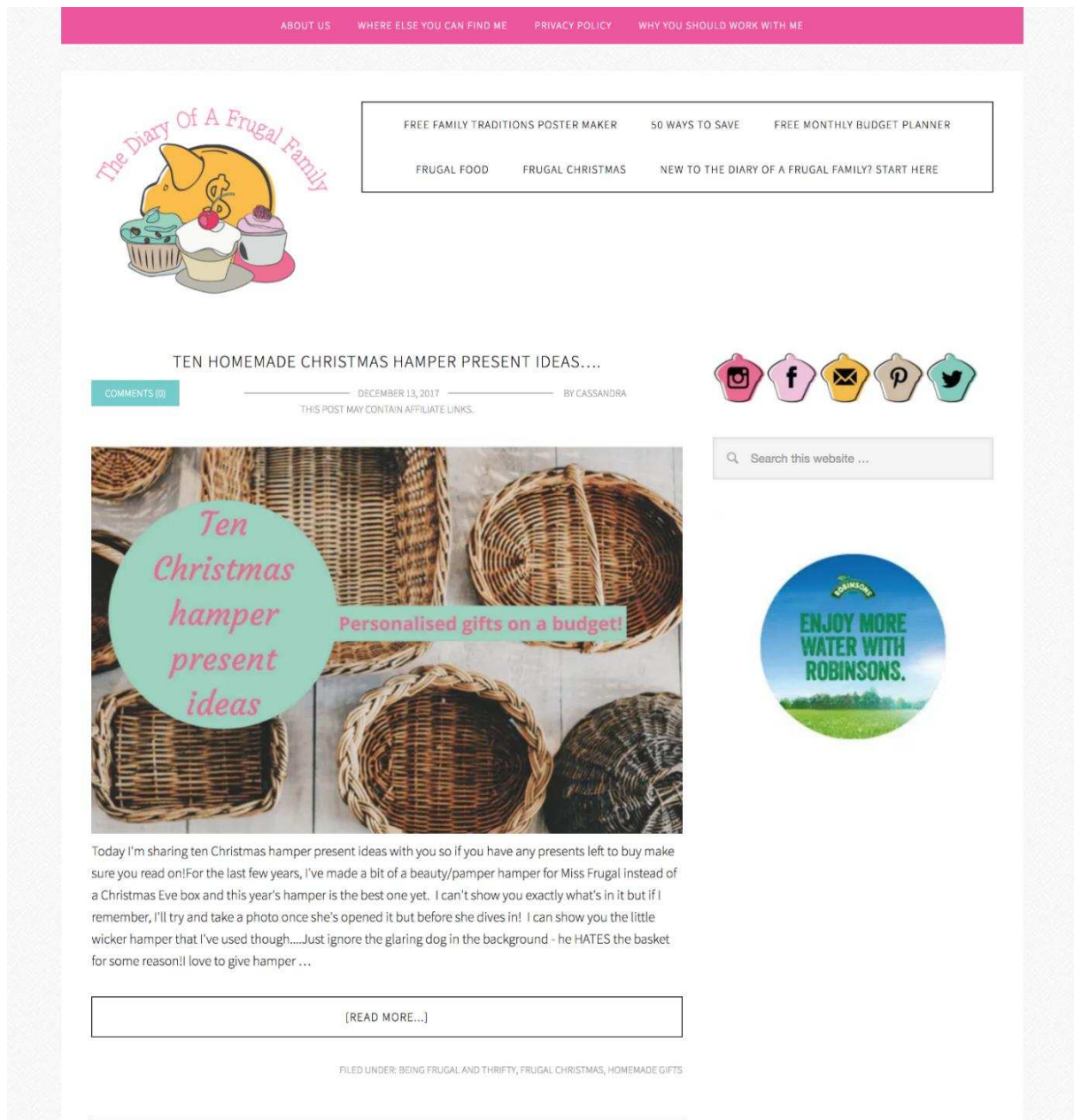


Figure 2. The homepage of The Diary of a Frugal Family blog in 2017 (Retrieved 14th December 2017).

The 2017 blog has new and rephrased sections. Above the masthead, the personal “About me and my blog” of 2013 has changed into a corporate/collective “About Us”. A new section “Where can you find me” (which re-establishes an individual tone from the corporate About Us) lists the blog credits and awards. Two other new sections rely explicitly on business discourse, i.e., “Privacy policy” and “Why you should work with me”; the personal/individual

“me” is framed professionally in the latter. In turn, the 2013 “blogroll” (the list of links to other blogs, which shows affinity within the blogging community) has disappeared from the third column, replaced by a “Search this website” field, marking a shift from openness towards the blogging community to self-referentiality and promotion of one’s own contents, again coherent with business discourse practices. When landing on the homepage, a pop-up window invites users to sign up to the blog’s mailing list. In sum, invitations to follow updates, forms of promotion, and corporate “we” concur to strengthen the business-oriented image of the 2017 version, and combine with a non-cohesive mixing of linguistic resources (i.e., the first singular pronoun) that still portray the personal and individual character of the blog.

Below each post header, the sentence “this post may contain affiliate links” functions as a disclaimer for sponsored contents/links (from companies that remunerate the blogger for featuring/reviewing their products/services). The disclaimer did not appear in the 2013 blog, which had a “Sponsored Post” section above the masthead. While in 2013 only some posts contained sponsored contents, now all posts may do so; hence the whole blogging activity is now potentially a source of income/remuneration.



Do you want to start a money making blog of your own?



Pop over to my meal planning blog for even more recipes and meal planning tips.

Figure 3. shows the bottom section of the 2017 version. The thumbnail on the right links to the blogger's other blog Meal Planning made Easy; the central one credits the blog's high ranking in Tots 100 UK Parent Blogs; the left thumbnail links to a post providing step-by-step advice on how to start a "money-making" blog. This frames Cassandra as a leading blogger in the community, not only as a successful one (both for her blogs' ranking and for her revenue-making blogging activity), but also as someone who can give valuable business-model advice to other bloggers.



Do you want to start a money making blog of your own?



Pop over to my meal planning blog for even more recipes and meal planning tips.

Figure 3. The 2017 bottom section of The Diary of a Frugal Family (retrieved 14th December 2017).

While the multimodal deployment of the overall blog design has changed, the writing style in the posts and the written contents of the profile description have remained the same. The writing reads still spontaneous and unplanned, with informal lexicon and phrasing and non-standard punctuation (as in the use of four dots “....” instead of three “...”, and in the absence of a blank space after punctuating marks, cf. Figure 2), and occasional misspelling indexing spontaneity, with lack of proof-reading. Against the professional-photography modality of the photos featured at the top of each post visible on the homepage, other pictures in posts (which can be seen only by clicking on each blog post) still maintain a non-professional modality, similar to those of the 2013 blog.

In the new blog design, gains in meaning involve the foregrounding of professionalism, self-promotion and role as a blogging leader; losses instead involve the backgrounding of hand-made values and authenticity (with joyful frugality, spontaneity, low-budget and personal

values only in the wording, logo and contents of posts), and a diminished openness to the blogging community. This is the result of choice, but what is the relation between self-expression and regulation as entexted in the themes used? The next section focuses on this.

Styling the self through blog design

The 2013 and the 2017 design of The Diary of a Frugal Family were created by customizing two WordPress themes, credited at the bottom of the blog.

The 2013 blog used Atahualpa version 3.7.11. The theme underwent extensive customization in the 2013 blog, as can be seen comparing the theme preview shown in Figure 4 with the blog homepage in Figure 1 above. Customisation involves all resources, namely,

- the **colour** palette, from a limited grey and white one to a wider and colourful one,
- **font**, from minimal, cohesive and functional variation to a greater and less cohesive one,
- **image**, from a professionally-looking photo in the masthead preview to drawings both in the masthead and as signposts of links,
- **layout**, which keeps only the 3-column vertical orientation of multiple posts, but changes the alignment and framing of the elements (from the theme's all left aligned items and grey lines/squares framing different elements, to the blog's varied alignment and no framing) and density of the page (from a widely-spaced, clean page to a denser one).

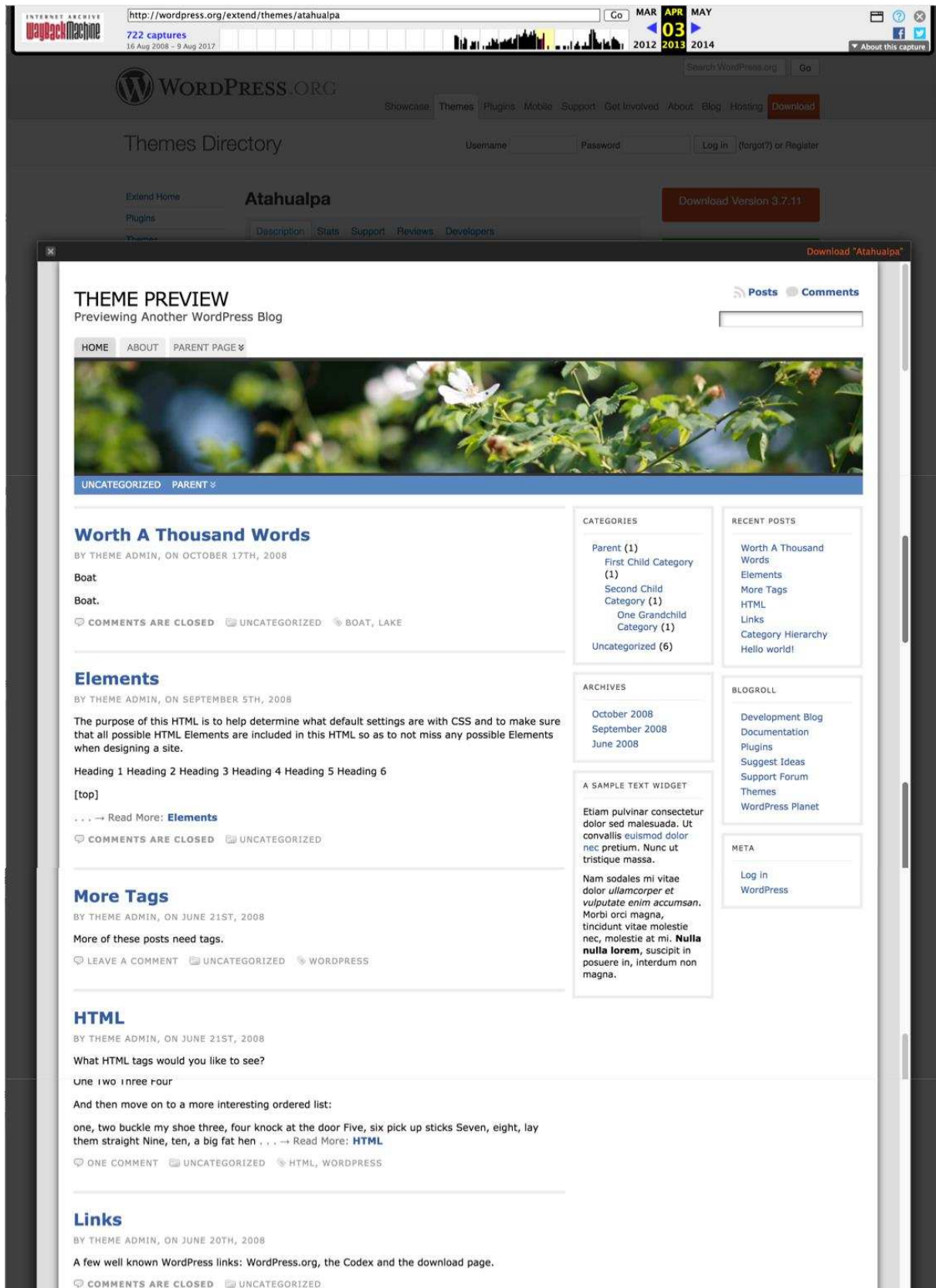


Figure 4. Atahualpa version 3.7.11, theme used for the 2013 blog design (retrieved 20th December 2017 via The WayBack Machine, <https://internetarchive.org>).

These changes in modal resources concurred to shape the overall joyful, chaotic, low-budget hand-made aesthetics of the 2013 design, from a rather clean and professional-looking original theme. The 2013 customization was done in-house by the blogger through a free-to-download WordPress theme.

The change in the blog design in 2017 was instead done using the General Framework theme, always running on WordPress but provided by StudioPress and purchasable for \$59.95 (Figure 5). Customisation (cf. Figure 2) involves the pink top and bottom bands, the image/logo in the masthead, both adding a personal tone, and capitalisation for fonts in headers with the elimination of bold and black, thus counterbalancing the personal/authenticity of pink and logo with a more minimalist use of font.

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Figure 5. General Framework theme used for the 2017 blog design (<https://my.studiopress.com/themes/genesis> retrieved 20th December 2017).

Not only has the blogger decided to spend money for the theme of her new blog design, but she has also asked a webdesigner to customize it, i.e., Stacey Corrin, credited at the bottom of the new blog version (see

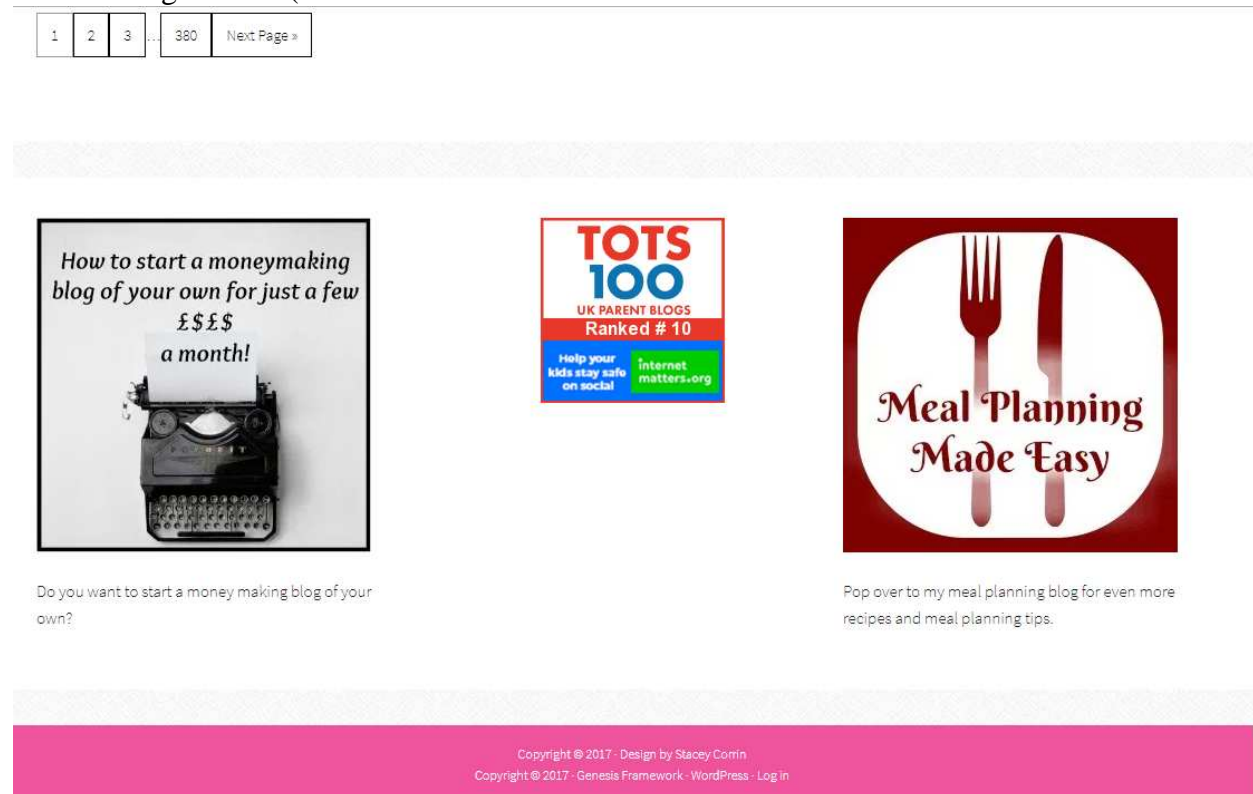


Figure 3 above), which links to the webdesigner’s website. On the homepage (<http://staceycorrin.co.uk/>), the About section presents her and her webdesign mission and aesthetics. Like the blogger, also Stacey Corrin presents herself as a mother with a passion (“geekery” and “technology”). As her mission, she “helps” freelancers and small businesses. Her webdesign aesthetics is “all about clean space, minimalism, and no fuss”. As in the blogger’s projected identity, the personal and professional combine in a specific way, i.e., personal is the relation with business, while professional is the overall resulting aesthetics, following the hegemonic stylistic principles of WordPress themes analysed earlier.

The blogger changed her blog design from a self-customized free WordPress theme, resulting in a handmade aesthetics, to a purchased WordPress theme customized by a webdesigner, resulting in a professional aesthetics. She invested money and consulted an expert technologist; the changes index a transformation in her blogging activity towards professionalism and a business-oriented character. She styled herself, and sought expert help to

do so, through the design of the multimodal deployment of her blog, which now follows the main tenets of hegemonic taste/aesthetic preferences for webdesign. Her 2013 characteristic personal, low-budget, chaotic, joyful and spontaneous authenticity shows now only in the writing and non-featured photos of her posts and profile description.

Through the multimodal orchestration of the blog page, expression of self is styled following the foregrounded regulatory/hegemonic trends of WordPress and its webdesign community of multi-layered expert technologists. The website/blog publishing platform, itself hinging on self-regulatory community-based practices, sets the ground for the favoured/disfavoured possibilities in self-expression through semiotic resources. Following dominant practices/trends, multimodal design from templates becomes a styling device, which, by branding and moulding the self (as professional, clean and minimal), constrains it (in authenticity, spontaneity and personal values, following a taste that deviates from mainstream values of professionalism).

Conclusions

Increasing templatisation of semiotic production democratizes multimodal self-expression online, which was previously accessible only to elite producers; yet, technologization produces standardisation and, by being mediated by a platform, conceals the power dynamics lying behind it.

Like all multimodal digital production, website creation has shifted from an elitist practice to sign-making available to anyone who wishes to express one's identity through the semiotic design of a website/blog. Community-based open-source projects like WordPress intend to democratise webpublishing, by making it accessible to everyone; yet, willingly or not, this generates regulatory practices, which reflect hegemonic preferences in patterned uses of semiotic resource; the semiotic regime regulating preferences reflects the hierarchies in status

among the varied community of those who create resources for weblog publishing and bloggers themselves, in a mobile multi-layered model of expert technologists. Mediated by a platform, the complex universe of agencies governing the semiotic regime determining mainstream trends in webdesign remains concealed; concealed are also the possible conflicts and the minority positions inside the community. The recommended items on design to be checked by Theme Reviewers on Wordpress.org are introduced by the following header:

While we understand not every reviewer is comfortable giving design feedback, we encourage you to look through this list of design recommendations while reviewing themes. [<https://make.wordpress.org/themes/handbook/review/recommended/#design>]

The concessive clause reveals a non-agreement and internal discussion among the WordPress community on the legitimacy of semiotic control and on the role of reviewers (i.e., whether as IT technicians, concerned exclusively with functionality, or as webdesign regulators, who need also to police style). This conflict, which is arguably a vital part of the participatory character of WordPress, remains however behind the curtains of the platform. End users, including both bloggers (like Cassandra of The Diary of the Frugal Family) and webdesigners who use WordPress but are not involved in its community discussions, will draw from the platform afforded themes, i.e., afforded “latest”, “popular” or “featured” preferences in semiotic patterning (which, at present, prioritize values of professionalism, cleanliness and minimalism). The platform foregrounds preferred tastes following “innovative”, “mainstream” and “authoritative” principles, while concealing the (power) dynamics lying behind the semiotic regime.

One may ask, what is wrong with this? After all, end users might actually want to do what is more appropriate, and look professional rather than amateur. WordPress semiotic

regime may be thus empowering lay website/blog authors in being “literate”, in communicating effectively. Yet a gain in supposed literacy equals a loss in semiotic diversity and freedom of self-expression and, ultimately, concurs to reinforce hegemonic power relations in the social construction of taste. In other terms, the issue is the power regime behind (notions of) literacy, in webdesign as in all contexts.

The Diary of a Frugal Family had thousands of followers and was charted among the most successful UK food and parenting blogs already in 2013, when its design looked handmade, chaotic and authentic (possibly “amateurish” against webdesign standards of taste); its webdesign was coherent with the style and contents of its posts. Yet the blogger has decided to change the design to look professional, clean and minimalist; through expert aid, she has spent money and effort to conform it to mainstream taste. She has styled her identity as clean, minimalist and professional; in this, the multimodal deployment of her blog gains in conformity to mainstream taste, while loses in nuances of self-expression, particularly when comparing it with the style of her writing in her posts. Beyond the single case, with personal blogs relying on webpublishing platforms for their design, the naturalised mainstream/hegemonic styles result in self-regulatory practices, a reduced diversity in aesthetics, and, ultimately, a reduced freedom/agency in using all available semiotic resources for self-expression; in banal terms, regardless the purposes for blogging, everybody tends to (want to) look professional, with professional being equalled to certain layout/font/colour/image combinations. In this, the innovative potential of the participatory character of webdesign production in WordPress is disempowered, because the platform-as-a-semiotic-technology conceals difference and foregrounds mainstream uses and taste.

By concealing the agents making (and the conflicts behind) certain decisions that produce semiotic regulation/policing, semiotic technologies objectify and naturalize power dynamics of taste, i.e., the extent of appropriateness of semiotic resources/forms in given

contexts (even more so when semiotic technologies are corporate social media platforms, given that WordPress is voluntarily-led, community-based and open-source). In so doing, they generate consent and a spontaneous will to self-regulation and self-styling. At the same time, corporations and elites appropriate and capitalize on vernacular forms of semiotic expressions, as well as on the products made available for free by participatory projects such as WordPress. As Fairclough points out, corporate technologization has increasingly shifted language use towards “conversationalisation” (1995, 105) and personal/individualized tone, with institutions appropriating typically private forms of language use. While a blogger may feel the need to hire an expert to prevent her blog from looking amateur, corporations increasingly exploit consumer-based promotion (as when sponsoring bloggers), as well as amateur/home-made video aesthetics in their commercials, to achieve authenticity effects and hence augment the trust effect of their promotion, as if coming from peer, lay consumers.

Within an aestheticization of everyday life (Featherstone 1991), form becomes value. Semiotic regimes (i.e., power dynamics governing social values/meanings associated with patterned semiotic resources) hold as valid in all domains of our life, both online and offline. Semiotic regimes reveal social power, in terms of who gains/loses not only from conforming, but also from subverting regulatory practices. The very breaking of conventions can be appropriated and capitalized as value, as when a multibillionaire like Donald Trump exploits the breaking of etiquette (in language use as well as in overall behaviour) as the signifier of being an outsider and anti-establishment. While lay sign-makers, like bloggers, struggle to avoid being “tasteless”, for fear of being excluded, tastelessness is capitalized by certain parts of the elite in that it shocks experts, who become the conservative rulers who prevent change; the formal breaking of conventions/rules is appropriated and capitalized as subversion and hence generates consent irrespectively of who truly benefits from the content lying behind a certain pattern of formal expression.

In sum, the identification of what is gained and what is lost in semiotic regulation and the spread/adoption of hegemonic semiotic uses involves asking who gains and who loses in agency/freedom of expression, and who capitalizes on gains/losses. While linguistic research has long initiated a debate questioning the power dynamics behind notions of literacy and appropriateness, it is time for (social) semiotic research to start questioning the same for the use of all semiotic resources, both online (with webdesign being chiefly investigated with normative aims, for example) as well as offline. Social semiotic multimodal analysis can play a crucial role in understanding the relation between sign-makers' agency and freedom of self-expression, the ideologies lying behind the technologization of semiotic practices, and broader social dynamics of taste.

The dynamics behind notions of appropriateness of semiotic form need to be questioned as the result of (naturalised) power, made even more neutral online through the technology, as well as through discourses of community and freedom, and “from below” creativity, which however do not prevent hegemonic semiotic uses and regulatory practices, with semiotic subversion becoming a capitalized value afforded only by few.

In shaping representational possibilities, semiotic technologies shape taste, trigger the shaping of selves, and shape social hierarchies from their semiotic expressions, i.e., who is (not) literate, who has (not) power, who is (not) expert, and who is (not) allowed subversion. I hope the present work has shown the need to investigate and reveal the power dynamics lying behind the relation between self-expression, regulatory practices and the social construction of taste, for all semiotic resources, both online and offline.

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