

## Multimodality and Digital Subjectivity at the Convergence

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#### Abstract

Multimodality, the idea of communication in multiple modes, can be applied to examine human subjectivity in the digital realm, or what we can call “digital subjectivity.” This article provides a literature review of these two topics to explore the relationship between them. The goal of this review is to understand how multimodality can influence the formation of human subjectivity in the context of digital communication technologies. Specifically, the article aims to answer three questions: 1) How can multimodality play a role in the construction of digital subjectivity in digital environments? 2) What are overlapping areas of concepts and studies on multimodality and digital subjectivity? and 3) What might be gaps of studies found in this literature review? The answers to these questions can fruitfully lead to further research in these areas and other related fields.

**Keywords:** Multimodality, Digital subjectivity, Digital communication

#### บทคัดย่อ

การสื่อสารเชิงพหุวิธี หรือแนวคิดด้านการสื่อสารที่ผสมผสานรูปแบบการสื่อสารหลายรูปแบบ สามารถนำมาประยุกต์ใช้ใน การศึกษาอัตวิสัยของมนุษย์ที่อยู่ในขอบเขตดิจิทัล หรือที่เรารู้จักเรียกว่า “อัตวิสัยดิจิทัล” บทความนี้เป็นการทบทวนวรรณกรรมที่เกี่ยวข้องกับแนวคิดทั้งสองเพื่อศึกษาความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างสองแนวคิดนี้ เป้าหมายของการทบทวนวรรณกรรมคือ เพื่อทำความเข้าใจว่าการสื่อสารเชิงพหุวิธีจะมีอิทธิพลต่อการสร้างอัตวิสัยของมนุษย์ในบริบทของเทคโนโลยีการสื่อสารดิจิทัลได้อย่างไร โดยมุ่งตอบคำถามในสามประเด็น คือ 1) การสื่อสารเชิงพหุวิธีมีบทบาทในการสร้างสร้างอัตวิสัยดิจิทัลในสิ่งแวดล้อมดิจิทัลย่างไร 2) แนวคิดของการสื่อสารเชิงพหุวิธีและอัตวิสัยดิจิทัลรวมถึงงานวิจัยที่เกี่ยวข้องมีจุดร่วมกันอย่างไรบ้าง และ 3) จากการทบทวนวรรณกรรมพบช่องว่างในการวิจัยใดบ้างหรือไม่ คำตอบที่ได้จากคำถามเหล่านี้สามารถนำไปสู่การวิจัยเพิ่มเติมในด้านการสื่อสารเชิงพหุวิธีและอัตวิสัยดิจิทัลและด้านอื่นๆ ที่เกี่ยวข้องต่อไป

**คำสำคัญ:** การสื่อสารเชิงพหุวิธี อัตวิสัยดิจิทัล การสื่อสารดิจิทัล

## Introduction

Multimodality is an interdisciplinary approach stemming from the fields of communication and semiotics. This approach has drawn the attention of contemporary academic scholars in various disciplines with more interest in its application in digital communications and technologies. In the past decades, research studies and practices on multimodality have focused on various issues and employed different perspectives, methodologies, and methods. This trend of research and practices contribute to the development of multimodality scholarship as well as reflecting its interdisciplinary nature.

In the flux of advancing technologies, multimodality, or the idea of multiple modes of communication, can be used to explain the formation of a new kind of subjectivity. This subjectivity, which will be later called in this paper "digital subjectivity," is part of the rhetoric of digital environment. If we know how multimodality is applied in the constitution of digital subjectivity, we might be able to understand the relationship between technologies and the construction of self in this cutting edge era.

This paper focuses on a review of literature related to multimodality and digital subjectivity in order to explore the relationship between these two concepts. The goal of this review is to understand how multimodality can influence the formation of human subjectivity in the context of digital communication technologies. Specifically, the paper aims to answer three questions:

1. How can multimodality play a role in the construction of digital subjectivity in digital environments?
2. What are overlapping areas of concepts and studies on multimodality and digital subjectivity?
3. What might be gaps of studies found in this literature review?

The answers to these questions can contribute to the understanding of the relationship between the concepts of multimodality and digital subjectivity and can lead to further research in these areas and other related fields.

In what follows, the paper is divided into four sections. First, it introduces the concept of multimodality, sketching the background and key concepts. Second, it touches on the concept of digital subjectivity by tracing the definitions of terms and characteristics. Third, the convergence of multimodality and digital subjectivity is presented. Some related ideas and studies, which connect these two concepts together, are also included. Finally, the paper concludes with speculations and implications for further study.

### I. Multimodality

From the review of literature on multimodality, this concept emerged in the late twentieth century from different directions and is still in its ongoing development. Below is a sketch of its background and key ideas based on the direction of social semiotic approach.

#### Background

Multimodality can be simply defined as the use of multiple modes of communication. It is also used to explain "how we combine multiple different ways of communicating in everyday life" (Arola, Sheppard & Ball, 2014: 1). From

this notion, multimodality is based on the understanding of communication and representation more than and beyond language.

As mentioned previously, the concept of multimodality emerged in the late twentieth century. It was originally rooted in the works of Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen in their theorizing of social semiotics. In *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*, they remark that multimodality is conceptualized as a response to the forces of globalization, which drive semiotic boundaries to become fluid (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). Therefore, they propose the concept of multimodality with the belief that communication should not follow the traditional way of thinking, which focuses solely on the use of language. Rather, communication should be conceived as an everyday practice in social semiotic system and is always multimodal (Kress & Ogborn, 1998). In this sense, communication or meaning making is not limited only to the use of language, but it can be conducted in the wider semiotic scope that embraces other modes, for example image, document, and design (ledema, 2003).

From its start, multimodality has been developed over two decades, as a new way to address issues of communication as related to social changes including digital media and technologies (Bezemer, 2012). In this respect, multimodality can be thought of as related to the use of technologies to achieve communication goals.

### Key concepts

Although many scholars view multimodality as a theory, in *Handbook of Multimodal Analysis*, Carey Jewitt (2009), a professor in learning and technology who used to work in Kress's research team, notes that multimodality should be used as a framework of enquiry or a methodological application. Having its root in social semiotics, multimodality links multiple modes or ways of communication to the social systems in order to interpret them as semiotic artifacts in social and cultural boundaries. Based on this idea, multimodality offers concepts, methods, and a framework to deal with visual, aural, embodied, and spatial aspects of interaction and environments, and the relationships between these aspects (Jewitt, 2009; Kress, 2009).

As noted by Jewitt (2009) and Kress (2009), multimodality focuses on three assumptions. First, communication always occurs in multiple modes. Second, semiotic resources are resulted from social construction. Third, communication dwells on people's selection and operation of modes. These assumptions provide multimodality with four key concepts: mode, semiotic resource, modal affordance and inter-semiotic relations (Jewitt, 2009). *Mode* is a material shaped through the daily cultural and social interaction of people. *Semiotic resource* is the connection between representational resources and how people operate them. *Modal affordance* refers to the material and cultural conditions of modes. *Inter-semiotic relationships* is how modes are used in particular contexts. These key concepts of multimodality are also applied when multimodality is used as a method to analyze specific artifacts. This method is called *multimodal analysis*.

What we can take away from the background and key concepts of multimodality is that the communicators or senders seem to play an important role in shaping multimodal communication. In the context of digital technologies, multimodality can be also used to represent these technologies in the forms of different modes of communication designed by communicators.

## II. Digital Subjectivity

To understand the idea of digital subjectivity, it is necessary to know what subjectivity is and its characteristics in postmodernity. This is because this type of subjects can reflect some postmodern conditions driven by the fast-changing world of technology.

### What is subjectivity?

In cultural theory, the term “subjectivity” is defined as another form of “self.” According to Nick Mansfield (2000), “subjectivity” and “self” are interchangeable terms; however, the former indicates social and cultural implications whereas the latter does not. He remarks that “One is always subject to or of something,” so subjectivity is not an isolated abstract entity, but the conception of our individual self as influenced by outside environments (Mansfield, 2000: 3). Jeffrey Nealon and Susan Searls Giroux (2012) seem to agree with Mansfield when they posit that “self” reflects an idea of unique individuality while “subject” reflects the idea of how “self” responds to external social and cultural forces.

In addition to the relation with self, subjectivity is often discussed with the term “identity.” Many scholars (such as Cover, 2016; Hall, 2004; and Kress, 2010) view that these two terms are also used interchangeably. Still, Hall (2004) contends that subjectivity is broader and bound with social and cultural factors while identity, “a flat, one-dimensional concept,” is not (Hall, 2004: 134).

Thus, based on this information, if we want to explore how the external forces like digital technologies can affect the formation of self in the social and cultural milieu, we should take a look at subjectivity in such contexts or phenomena.

### Subjectivity in postmodernity

A postmodernist perspective can be applied in the discussion of the characteristics of subjectivity at present. Philip Smith and Alexander Riley (2001) note that mass media and technologies are among the factors that drive the postmodern conditions to happen. These conditions, as asserted by Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright (2009), are presented in the forms of simulated environments, remix, remake, appropriation, fragmentation and plurality. In *The Condition of Postmodernity*, David Harvey (1990) also makes an observation of the postmodern characteristics that they reflect the assemblage of fragmentation and ephemerality of social and cultural movement.

Therefore, it seems that in postmodernity humans have become subjects of complicated networks of social and cultural dimensions. Humans can also lose power of control over environments and become subjects of power, uncertainty, and fluidity of changing conditions.

### Digital subjectivities

The development of digital communications and technologies can lead to a new kind of subjectivities in the modern era. These subjectivities are called in different names, for example digital subjectivities, cybernetic subjectivities, or cyber-subjectivities.

In the area of critical digital studies, Arthur Kroker and Marilouise Kroker (2013) remark that digital subjectivities emerge from human interactions with digital devices. They also view digital subjectivity as having a characteristic of an individual's multiple, fractured, and plural memory. This characteristic truly reflects the conditions of postmodernity in which fragmentation and fluidity are highlighted.

However, in her work on digital subjectivities and selfies, Katie Warfield (2015) defines digital subjectivities as multilayered and multimodal subjectivities constructed by the influence of technological convergence. This definition emphasizes the plural characteristic of digital subjectivity by integrating the idea of multimodality from a technological perspective. It also illustrates how digital subjectivity and multimodality can be combined in one dimension. Anyway, the relationship between these two concepts will be further examined in the next section.

### **III. Multimodality and Digital Subjectivity: At the Convergence**

To see the relationship between multimodality and digital subjectivity, three areas of scholarship are explored. These areas are multimodal composition, technical communication, and digital literacy. The following descriptions are some notions derived from each area and some examples of works. This will help provide an overall picture of how multimodality and digital subjectivity have been addressed together in research practices as well as identifying the overlapping areas and gaps of studies.

#### **Area 1: Multimodal composition**

The concept of multimodality was introduced to the pedagogical context in the form of multiliteracies approach, which emphasizes five different modes of meaning: visual, linguistic, aural, spatial, and gestural (The New London Group, 1996). Cynthia L. Selfe is the key figure who has promoted this approach in the field of composition studies and has supported the direction of multimodal composition scholarship (Lauer, 2014).

In the context of multimodal composition, students' subjectivities can be affected by many factors, for example teaching strategies, classroom management, and curricula. These subjects are also influenced by the multimodal framework and technologies used in a particular context of communication. In *On Multimodality: New Media in Composition Studies*, Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes (2014) believe that technologies play an important role in students' construction of their subjectivities because "technologies are used to manage and 'enforce' subjectivities in a multitude of ways" (Alexander and Rhodes, 2014: 198). In this light, multimodality seems to be part of the technologies that have impacts on students' cultivation of their digital subjectivities.

#### **Area 2: Technical communication**

Technical communication is an area of scholarship that involves communication in the context of technology. It can be viewed as a subset of the broad field of communication, with one of the characteristics below:

- Communicating about technical or specialized topics, such as computer applications, medical procedures, or environmental regulations.
- Communicating by using technology, such as web pages, help files, or social media sites.

- Providing instructions about how to do something, regardless of how technical the task is or even if technology is used to create or distribute that communication. (Society for Technical Communication, 2018: 1)

In the area of technical communication, multimodality has been used both in the academic and profession contexts. Several works have been found using the concepts of multimodality and rhetoric to investigate identity/subjectivity in digital environments. Nevertheless, works on multimodality and digital subjectivity vary in terms of frameworks, methodologies, and methods. Sometimes, scholars do not indicate that they use the concept of multimodality or digital subjectivity even though these concepts are applied in their studies.

### **Area 3: Digital literacy**

The advancement of digital communication technologies in the past few decades has brought about a shift of interest among communication and literacy scholars to digital literacy. The focus is not only on the role of these technologies in human's social interactions, but also their impact on human's existence and social well-being.

In *Understanding Digital Literacies: A Practical Introduction*, Rodney H. Jones and Christoph A. Hafner (2012) view digital literacy or "digital literacies" as related to social practices, social identities, and social relationships. This new type of literacy includes "the practices of communicating, relating, thinking and 'being' associated with digital media" (Jones & Hafner, 2012: 13).

On this account, digital literacy is defined, conceptualized, and applied in various contexts of study, and the research direction has changed over time to keep pace with evolving technologies. In this direction, multimodality has been of much interest among digital literacy scholars since the turn of the century, and digital subjectivity/identity has been the focal point of many works on multimodality.

### **Examples of works**

Although many scholars in the fields of multimodal composition, technical communication, and digital literacy have paid attention to multimodality and digital subjectivity, research studies in these areas often overlap. The following are some examples of studies published from 2003 to 2019 in these three areas of scholarship.

In his dissertation on "The Rhetorical Process of Digital Subjectivities: Case Studies of International Teaching Assistants Negotiating Identity with Digital Media," Kevin Eric De Pew (2003) proposed that instructors in the fields of composition and digital rhetoric have rhetorical strategies to develop and articulate the rhetorical process for formulating digital subjectivities. He employed a feminist pedagogy and case studies as his framework and method in this study. Even though the concept of multimodality was not explicitly stated, the focus of this work was on multimodal composition.

In "Digital Literac(ies), Digital Discourses, and Communities of Practice: Literacy Practices in Virtual Environments," Douglas Eyman (2007) applied the multimodal approach in designing digital multimodality. He used the MOO (a multi-user virtual environment) in his study of multimodal design in digital literacy to allow students to explore multiple subjectivities.

In "Multimodality and Mobile Culture," Kevin M. Leander and Lalitha Vasudevan (2009) examined three instances of how new technologies influenced multimodal communication and identity formation in mobile culture. Using

a heuristic approach, they focused on the relationship between multimodality and culture, especially problems on identify or identification, in the context of mobile social practices.

Jay Lemke's (2009) "Multimodality, Identity, and Time" is a phenomenological investigation on how the temporal control over media consumption and locus of access affect the experience of these media and opportunities for identification. Lemke applied the phenomenological approach in his multimodal analysis of identity development in the context of multimedia.

Patricia Bou-Franch (2012) worked on the study titled "Multimodal Discourse Strategies of Factuality and Subjectivity in Educational Digital Storytelling." She applied multimodal discourse strategies to investigate discourse strategies of factuality and subjectivity in multimedia historical-cultural digital narratives.

In 2015, Katie Warfield published "Digital Subjectivities and Selfies: The Model, the Self-conscious Thespian and the #realme" based on her study on digital subjectivities and the phenomenon of selfies. This paper reports the results of an online survey of how female experienced various subjectivities in their production of selfies. She drew on several theories and concepts from visual culture, psychoanalysis, feminist critiques, and the concept of dramaturgical self.

In "The Invisible Digital Identity: Assemblages in Digital Networks," Estee N. Beck (2015) investigated the invisible digital identity in the digital environment. This type of identity is derived from users' information captured through their web browsing and surveillance technologies. With tracking technologies, users' invisible identities have become subjects of digital surveillance tactics. In this study, Beck used cultural studies as her methodology and applied many qualitative methods in her data collection and analysis.

In their 2019 publication titled "Issues of Validity, Subjectivity, and Reflexivity in Multimodal Literacy Research and Analysis," David E. Low and Jessica Zacher Pandya reported the results of their analyses of two qualitative literacy studies which they investigated blended or hybrid approach to multimodal analysis. They found from their experiences that the hybrid approach did not allow sufficient reflexivity of the role researcher positionality plays in multimodal analysis.

What could be drawn from the review of literature concerning the relationship between the role of multimodality and digital subjectivity is that multimodality can be used as part of the rhetoric of technologies to influence the cultivation of digital subjectivity. This influence might be in different forms depending on the use of modes, contexts, and environments. How digital technologies have an impact on the construction of digital subjectivity might be another aspect of interest to many scholars to further explore.

### Overlapping areas

Based on the literature review, some overlapping areas of the concepts and studies on multimodality and digital subjectivity can be identified as follows.

- *The role of subject*

Subject is at the center of multimodal communication. Multimodal texts or representations are resulted from choices and practices of users or communicators. The decision an individual makes in designing the frame of communication, for example choosing modes and using them, does not come from the mere self of this individual. Rather, every decision this individual will make comes from the result of the social and cultural embodiment of this

particular person's experience. When multimodality is used in digital contexts, users can become subjects of these environments, which also impact their digital subjectivities.

- *The role of modes*

Modes might also affect the construction of digital subjectivity since they are materially shaped through social and cultural interaction of people. Different modes can result in different meanings of representation. In this respect, Jeff Bezemer (2012) observes that the central area of multimodal research rests on the relationships across and between modes in multimodal texts and interaction.

- *The role of power*

The influence of technologies on the construction of digital subjectivity can imply power relations structured in the system of a particular digital environment. Kress (2010) notes that power-relations play a crucial role in the formation of subjectivity and identity in the context facilitated by digital devices since power can affect the condition of authorship. He points out that "In all domains of communication these rearrangements in power can be conceptualized as a shift from 'vertical' to 'horizontal' structures of power, from hierarchical to...more open, participatory relations, captured in many aspects of contemporary communication" (Kress, 2010: 21). Thus, in the context of communication, power can work in every direction in its flexible structure.

- *The role of rhetoric*

Rhetoric is often used in multimodality and can influence the cultivation of digital subjectivity. Kress (2010) notes that the rhetorical approach is necessary for social-semiotic multimodal theory. Alexander and Rhodes (2014) also contend that investigating "rhetorical dimensions allows us to see how the representation, perhaps even the construction, of subjectivity is changing" (Alexander and Rhodes, 2014: 171). In addition, they remark that turning an attention to an analysis of subjectivities will help us understand more about our developing relationships with technology as well as how we compose and author our lives, individually and collectively.

- *The variety of perspectives, methodologies, methods*

Works on the relationship between multimodality and digital subjectivity also indicate the use of different perspectives, frameworks, methodologies and methods. This variety might reflect the interdisciplinary direction of multimodality, flexible characteristics of digital subjectivity, and changing conditions of digital environments.

### **Gaps of studies**

Based on the literature review, it can be observed that there are still gaps of studies in the scholarship concerning the relationship between multimodality and digital subjectivity. One of the gaps might be the context of studies. Although research in these two areas have been conducted in various contexts, ranging from academic, professional, and everyday life, there are still plenty of contexts and situations that can be further explored, for example the hybrid classrooms, L1/L2 communication landscape, and specific international or intercultural contexts.

When considering from the technological standpoint, digital technology can offer new gaps of studies as well. Since the advancement of digital technology keeps creating new experience for users, new technologies can

be chosen as the new sites of study or artifacts for analysis. For instance, more research is still needed about the new social media websites or applications, online interactive games, simulation software applications, artificial intelligent (AI), and augmented reality.

Another gap of studies might be the frameworks and methods of studies. Although research associated to multimodality and digital subjectivity tend to pursue an interdisciplinary or cross-disciplinary direction, new frameworks and methods can be created and applied to examine the relationship between the influence of technologies and digital subjectivities. It can also be speculated that the development of AI might lead to new ways of thinking and practicing in terms of research frameworks and methods in the future.

#### IV. Conclusion

This review of literature on the relationship between multimodality and digital subjectivity is an attempt to explore the intersection of these concepts. It is found from this literature that multimodality can be viewed as part of the technological context that influences the formation of digital subjectivity.

It can also be speculated that this relationship might be in the form that humans can become subjects of power of digital technologies in digital environments, which are multimodal and multilayered in nature. Concepts on multimodality and digital subjectivity as well as studies in these areas also reflect the overlapping areas in terms of the roles of subject, modes, power, rhetoric, and the variety of perspectives, methodologies and methods.

This literature review also implies the gap of studies related to the relationship between multimodality and digital subjectivity. There are still a lot of contexts and sites of study that we can further explore the cultivation of digital subjectivity in digital environments. New frameworks and methods can also be employed in this research area.

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