

Chapter 32

Social Semiotics for Social Media Visuals: A Framework for Analysis and Interpretation

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ABSTRACT

The social semiotics approach examines the meaning-making process in order to demonstrate how meaning is constructed in social actions and contexts. The rising interest of researchers in social media and its widespread use in society have both highlighted new challenges for data analysis. Social semiotics can provide a deep understanding of the visual grammar of the social media meaning-making process by assuming that this process is considered a social practice. The main objective of this chapter is to guide researchers and enable them to use the social semiotic approach as a research tool for the analysis of visuals in the social media environment. The chapter introduces the key elements, principles, assumptions, and rules of using the social semiotics approach in the analysis, understanding, and interpretations of social media visuals and how to explore the role played by visual elements in the meaning-making process in a social media within a specific social context.

INTRODUCTION

The social semiotics approach examines the meaning-making process in order to demonstrate how meaning is constructed in social actions and contexts (Van Leeuwen, 2009: p. 6). The focus of this chapter is to explain the possibilities of utilizing social semiotics in analyzing and interpreting the meaning-making process through visual elements on social media within a specific social context. The content of the chapter is organized around social semiotics as an approach and research strategy, beginning with an explanation of the meaning of semiotics, sign, and semiotic resources. Some insights are given as

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well on social semiotics principles, assumptions, and basic questions with an emphasis on visual social semiotics and multimodal visual semiotics.

The chapter also discusses aspects and issues related to the social media visuals from the semiotic perspective, showing how social media are considered, semiotically, an environment for communicating multimodal and multilayered content. During the scientific contributions made in the field of social semiotics, some analytical frameworks were developed. This chapter presents these analytical frameworks with an emphasis on the aspects that can be applied to the visual elements of social media. The analytical frameworks addressed in the chapter include the tripartite model that divides meaning generated by visual elements into three categories: representational, interactional, and compositional meaning. Another tripartite division of a sign into icon, index, and symbol is also discussed.

Finally, this chapter sheds light on an important aspect of the analysis of visual elements in social semiotics, which is the analysis of connotation and denotation meanings. Within this point, the model of the Peircean triad is discussed.

Semiotics, Sign, and Semiotic Resources

The end of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth witnessed the birth of two major ideas that characterized the beginning of contemporary semiotics. The semiotic approach was developed through the efforts of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) and the American philosopher and mathematician, Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914) (Abdalla Mikhaeil & Baskerville, 2019, p. 6; Moerdisuroso, 2014, p. 81). The term ‘semiotics’ is derived from an ancient Latin term “semio,” which is absorption of the Greek “semeion,” that refers to a sign. This term is related to an ancient use in medicines; a diagnosis act named the semeiosis process. The term ‘semiotics’ means the signs and the rules, which govern their use that the semiotician should address (Moerdisuroso, 2014, p. 81).

‘Sign’ is the key concept of semiotics. One of the best definitions of semiotics is that of Ferdinand de Saussure, who defined semiotics as the science that studies the life of signs within society; and he called it semiology (Van Leeuwen, 2009, p. 3). Semiotics pays great attention to the context, since the context for meaning according to semiotics is a system consisting of signs (Hatt & Klonk, 2006, p. 200). Pierce suggested an intermediating formulation for the sign; this simply means that the sign mediates between what it represents, its object, and the interpretant, which is the effect the sign makes upon the person interpreting it (Jappy, 2013, p. 4).

From a social semiotics perspective, signs are always newly made in a specific environment and according to the interests of the sign makers. According to this concept of the sign, signs are made by a sign-maker who brings meaning into a kind of apt-conjunction with a form, a selection, or a choice shaped by the sign maker’s interest; interests that are formed, subsequently, by our environment and circumstances (Mirsarraf et al., 2017, p. 3).

According to Saussure, language is a system of signs, and there are not natural signs. This means that signs do not refer to objects or events in the world, but they are conventions. The language is a code with specific rules. The elements of the code are signs. Any sign is composed of a signifier and a signified (Hatt & Klonk, 2006, p. 202).

Traditionally, semiotic resources have been referred to as “signs.” Van Leeuwen (2009) defined the semiotic resource as any product or action that humans can use to communicate, whether it is created or produced physiologically (such as voice apparatus, facial expressions or gestures, etc.) or technologically (such as using pen, ink, or paper, machine, fabrics, or computers, etc.).

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