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The digital mind: semiotic explorations in digital culture

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The dissertation, titled "The Digital Mind: semiotic explorations in digital culture", is published as a **monograph** in English by *Springer Nature* and consists of an introduction, three parts, 13 chapters, a conclusion and references. The volume of the study is 375 standard pages (674 861 characters). References cited: 329 titles.

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SCOPE AND RESEARCH MODEL OF THE DISSERTATION

This is the first monograph in the world entirely dedicated to digital semiotics. It brings together the author's research since 2011. As detailed in the *Introduction*, most of the content was published in one form or another prior to the book's publication. In most cases, the publications are articles indexed in the world's two leading databases for scientific literature, *Scopus* and *Web of Science*. As the first attempt to set a theoretical framework in such an innovative field of semiotics, the monograph brings together research on quite diverse manifestations of digital culture, hence its subject matter is *heterogeneous*, and *various classical models* from the semiotic tradition are combined as a research method. The work is also *interdisciplinary*, insofar as it addresses concepts from similar social and humanities disciplines, with the most significant and original contributions in this regard being related to the modelling of the money sign, scarcity, consumption and other central concepts in economics.

Despite this diversity, the work reflects the *unified structure* of the author's research program, conducted over the course of the last 10 years. In addition to scholarly publications, this program was realized with the founding in 2017 of the thematic scholarly journal of the Center for Semiotics *Digital Age in Semiotics and Communication*, whose sixth issue is in preparation. The Centre for Semiotics also organises an annual international scientific event, which since 2016 has brought together international experts on topics surrounding the digitisation of society

and culture. Since 2015, the author has presented about 15 plenary papers at the most prestigious international semiotic forums on the topics of digital semiotics. He teaches courses on the same topic at the NBU and has successfully joined as an expert on the digitalization of education in the Research Work Package 2 of the International Alliance of Reformist Universities (ERUA), where the NBU participated with great success.

Specifically, the *model of scholarly work* in The Digital Mind is that of some of the most significant contributions of contemporary semiotic theory, where authors such as Umberto Eco, Juri Lotman, Algirdas Greimas, Roland Barthes, and others bring together in one edition research published over a long period of time, unified by a common theoretical framework. Usually this theoretical framework is the most contributory part and comes after the specific studies, as their *synthesis and result*. This feature is important to note as the more standard case is to postulate a theoretical model and then prove it with specific analyses and field research.

SUBJECT AND STRUCTURE OF THE DISSERTATION

There are *three main theoretical strands* in The Digital Mind... that unify all the chapters and ensure the monographic nature of the dissertation. The assumption is that these themes are the most semiotically relevant to the initial approach to modelling digital culture. These are:

- 1) The commercialisation of culture as a result of new digital technologies
- 2) A critique of textualism as an approach to modeling digital culture
- 3) Transformations of Identity and Publicity in the Age of Social Media

The commercialization of culture (or, in Rifkin's words, the absorption of the cultural sphere by the commercial sphere) has been an old and very popular topic of critical thought since the first decades of the twentieth century, but after the semiotic analyses made in most of the chapters of the dissertation, the hypothesis is formed that in the digital age this process for the first time penetrates the DNA of culture, its generative mechanism, and thus opens its sociodetermining function to an indefinite future.

In most chapters of the work, there is an explicit or implicit *critique of textualism* in terms of the fact that the very basis of the approach (whether it is its rigorous methodological form of generative semiotics or its euphoric poststructuralist phase) is the fixation of discourse in a durable and unchanging form. This, according to one of the main hypotheses of the work, is hardly compatible with the interactive nature of digital culture, even though most contributions to digital semiotics currently come from this direction.

All these metamorphoses of cultural content also lead to inevitable repercussions on the *identity of contemporary people*, on the way they make sense of themselves and others, communicate, express themselves, consume and exchange recognition through the giant platforms of social media. According to many authors, digital sociality is creating a new type of

person, a new social bonds and a new hybrid self. An entire section of the work is devoted to this topic, but it is also present in many of the other chapters, given that the author applies an original model of identity created in his habilitation thesis on pre-digital socioculture (2004), but further developed and updated for the new situation.

Thematically the work is divided into three parts. *Part 1* is devoted to the general theoretical framework, which comes as a synthesis and summary of the research conducted throughout the decade 2010-2020. It is composed of two chapters, the first modeling the commercial core of the digital semiosphere, and the second a critique of textualism in relation to interactivity. *Part 2* brings together all the research that provides a semiotic perspective on the main mechanism by which the cultural sphere is absorbed by the commercial sphere: the *experience economy*. Such themes include the new semiotic status of copyright after the heyday of online experience and content sharing, the changing language of cinema after the rise of digital special effects, the transformation of football into a highly mediated paid-for experience, the entirely new formats with which love and sex are commercialized in the Internet age, and the common platform for the global circulation of economic value - digital currency. *Part 3* brings together research oriented towards the formation and manifestations of new 'digital' identities. Such a case study is the exploitation by the new digital populism of the symbols of national identity, the Google effect as a prosthesis of thinking and memory in new generations, the new emotional grammar of emojis and similar means of expression in social media, leading to the impossibility of a serious and thorough public debate on any topic, the serious challenge to education built on the textualist notion of knowledge and the new "hypertextual" generations and how identity is constructed with the new consumer rituals in social media.

AIM, OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

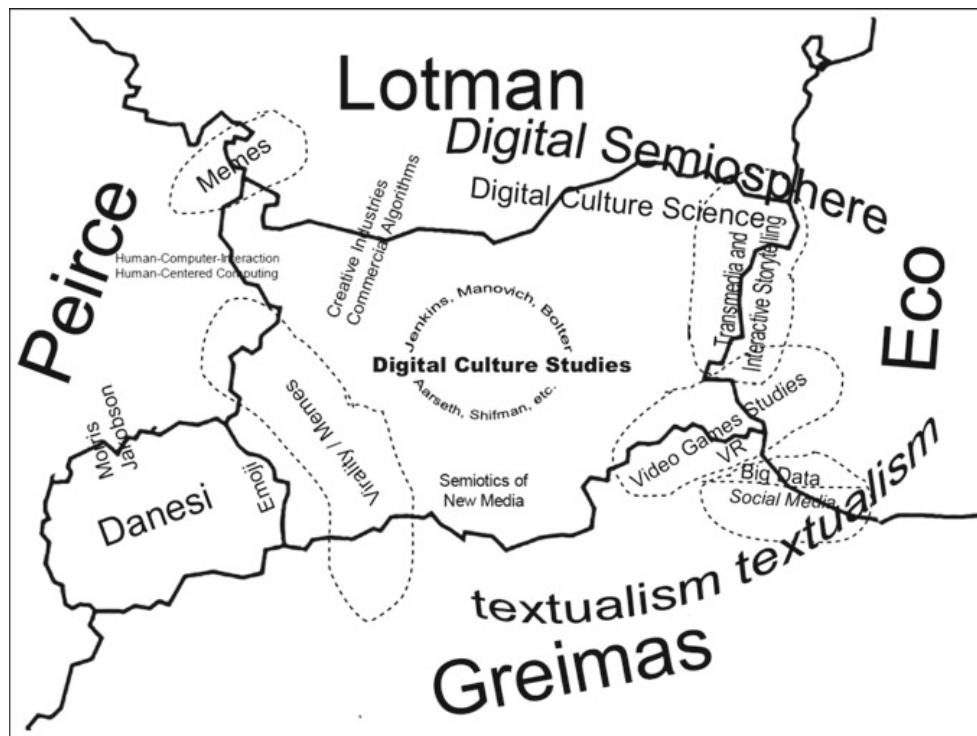
The aim of this work is to systematize the author's research of the last 10 years and to derive from them new theoretical models adapted to the semiotic features of digital culture. The work is entirely marked by the fact that such an attempt was not made until its publication and, accordingly, the models and hypotheses derived are open and dialogical. It also aims at covering the most relevant topics on which there have been the most semiotic contributions so far, on which the critique and the new proposals are based. The main tasks facing the author were best formulated by the anonymous reviewers of the *Springer* publishing house, and they were entirely in the direction of revising the individual chapters so as to give the work a more monolithic character for publication as a monograph. This task took over a year to complete, the chapters were modified and 75 internal references were added.

The most complex issue concerns the methodology of this research, but also the methodology

of semiotics as a scientific discipline in general. There is no generally accepted methodology adopted by the entire semiotics community. Individual schools develop their own methodology, and it is often the internal controversies surrounding this methodology that are the real driving force for the development of the discipline. Greimas' generative semiotics, for example, boasts the most well-developed methodology (an emanation of structuralism), exercised quite rigorously by the researchers belonging to it. But this school is also perhaps the most criticized. As a critique of structuralism emerged the interpretive semiotics of Umberto Eco, which in time developed its own methodology, though not as articulated as the generative one. Eco's interpretive method is based entirely on working with secondary sources - texts and other manifestations of culture fixed in permanent form, and especially a large base of scientific literature. The author of this dissertation was formed entirely in Eco's school and hence the basic methodological edifice of the study comes from there. It analyses texts and manifestations of digital culture in equal measure, together with the development of semiotic theory based on work with a large base of scholarly literature. The method is deductive and therefore subject to logical scrutiny, while proving assertions with reference to documented facts and statistics from reliable sources. As indicated in Chapter 1, apart from Eco and specifically in terms of reference to statistical facts from the new economy, a model for insightful analysis and reasoned hypotheses is Jeremy Rifkin, most notably from *The Age of Access* (2000), which along with several works by Eco is the most cited source in this study.

BRIEF PRESENTATION OF THE DISSERTATION

The dissertation's *introduction* is among the contributions that synthesise the research work conducted over the last 10 years and aims to outline the context in which it fits. It presents a systematic and analytical picture of the current state of digital semiotics and outlines some ideas for the future development of the discipline. The first part attempts to map existing semiotic contributions, divided by different theoretical schools and covering publications in the main languages of the semiotic community (Fig. 1). The second part is devoted to some critical remarks on the main semiotic paradigms applied to digital culture. The main criticism is that most of the existing contributions do not question the classical semiotic models, but rather adapt the new cultural reality to them. There is also a strong division between schools and scholars who ignore each other's publications.



PART 1. Theoretical framework

Chapter 1. The digital semiosphere

This chapter is also a synthesis of the research work carried out over the last 10 years and provides a comprehensive semiotic formulation of the first of the three theoretical strands that unify the contributions in this dissertation, namely 1) *The Commercialization of Culture*. The chapter examines digital culture using the tools of cultural semiotics, in particular the semiosphere model. Web 2.0 platforms are taken as the main cultural device of our time and as the most typical way in which the Internet shapes digital culture. Currently, the majority of the world's population is immersed in digital culture. The first part of the chapter discusses the striking similarities between Web 2.0 platforms and Lotman's Semiosphere. In doing so, the equivalences between the elements of the classical semiotic model and these platforms (or platfospheres, as they are called) will be defined. The second part explores the fundamental difference between the centre of the semiosphere (as conceived by Lotman) and the computer code and commercial algorithms at the centre of the platforms responsible for their cultural functioning. A parallel is then drawn between the cultural reality of the past, in which intellectual elites and academics were the driving force of culture, and the contemporary proactive (or even aggressive) core of semiospheres, in which obscure and patent-protected algorithms shape a cultural reality motivated exclusively by commercial success. The chapter concludes with an analysis of three platfospheres and opens a theoretical perspective to the monograph's third

main theoretical strand, 3) *Identity*.

Chapter 2. The Fall of Textualism and the Rise of Interactivity

This chapter synthesizes all the contributions of the second main theoretical line, 2) *A Critique of Textualism*. It examines the key notion of interactivity as the basis for another paradigmatic shift in sign research that aims to keep pace with the digital transformation of culture. The main point is to emphasize that the textual approach, methodologically the most developed form of semiotics, is not efficient when it comes to the analysis of cultural content available in interactive form. To better illustrate this point, I outline a new prospective approach to video game analysis in which the limitations of textualism are more pronounced, compared to applications to less formalized interactive cultural phenomena. The aim of the example is to show that a new semiotic approach is possible, in which a consistent part of the methodological advances of textualism can be reconfigured to support the theoretical foundation of a semiotics of interactivity.

Chapter 3 Copyright in the Digital Experience Economy

This study is one of the most contributory to the development of a theoretical line of 2) *A Critique of Textualism*. It analyses the link between the idea of copyright and the birth of the printed text. The semiotic core of the issue lies in the fact that the standard notion of copyright is linked to the textualist notion of fixing any form of creative expression. Such textual fixation is made possible by culturally codified systems of discursive production. At the same time, new media and a range of technologies enable the recording and dissemination of more immediate and uncoded forms of sensorimotor experience and collective interaction. Thus, the boundaries of what might traditionally be considered 'intellectual property' are slightly blurred and explain the 'turn to experience' in copyright protection. In light of these considerations, I will examine the current definition of copyright, particularly the concept of a work of authorship and fixation in material form. Furthermore, I will argue that new forms of media and entertainment content call into question the very philosophy of the law insofar as some copyrighted fragments of works, through the form of memes, become the new alphabet of self-expression and make it impossible to control their use.

Chapter 4 Semiotics of Experience and Digital Special FX

This is the research that inaugurated the Digital Culture research programme. It traces the transformations of the language of cinema in the wake of extreme *commercialisation* following the advent of digital special effects (*theoretical line 1*). First, it examines a trend in screen design - their dematerialisation and their unusually widespread proliferation across all sizes, with important semiotic implications. The research in the first part is mostly concerned with the drivers

of this process, which come from the market and the emergence of the so-called "experience economy". The findings of the first part suggest that the evolution of the screen is likely to allow digital media to enable the transmission of the whole sensory-motor picture and thus facilitate the communication of the overall experience. To illustrate this reflection, which is unusual for semiotic research, I will use some examples from science fiction films such as *Total Recall* (1990), *Strange Days* (1995), *Open Your Eyes* (1997), *The Matrix* (1999), *Vanilla Sky* (2001), *Minority Report* (2002), *Avatar* (2009), *Surrogates* (2009), *Blade Runner 2049* (2017) and *Inception* (2010). Semiotics at the contemporary stage of development is efficient when it comes to communication realized through "lazy texts", i.e. texts as lazy machines (Eco) that require communicative strategies to simulate the effect of reality and an active interpreter with a system of expectations formed by textual competence. However, when communication begins to be dominated by transfers of 'pieces' of experienced or imagined reality with a strong sensory motor impact, then the mechanisms of signification and interpretation change, as do the paradigms that have placed signification and interpretation at the heart of semiotic inquiry (Theoretical Line 2) *A Critique of Textualism*). The chapter's conclusions anticipate the need for semiotic scholarship to be more open to other disciplines, fieldwork, and laboratories, from the great school of anthropology (Moss, Levi-Strauss), ethnography, and qualitative studies to cognitive science laboratories and recent advances in digital user experience research.

Chapter 5. The Market for the Football Experience in the Digital Economy

This study develops theoretical line 1) *The commercialization of culture*, tracing the semiotic implications of the commercialization of one of the most popular forms of entertainment, football. The chapter traces the evolution of the most popular game since 1990, with the author focusing on the comparison with the situation before that year and highlighting the main elements of its transformation into an example from the vanguard of the experience economy. This chapter is less semiotic than the others. The theoretical considerations are based on market data, statistics and previous research. Although these have been explored by many, the original focus here is on the impact of digital technologies and the phenomenological explanation of the football experience. One of the most important contributions of this paper is the division of general football euphoria into two complementary types: the euphoria of identity and the sensorimotor euphoria of embodied experience. The former is mainly concerned with the opposition of communities and local "heroes". The second kind of euphoria stems from the exaltation of football technique and tactics inherent in a more mature and mediatized phase of the game's development, in which the premises for the contemporary commodification of sport (or hypercommodification, to use Giuliani's term) are rooted. A large part of this chapter is devoted to a detailed analysis of the way in which digital communication technologies and the organisation of football have changed in various ways since the 1990s, leading to the creation of

player brands, the transformation of the game into a corporate race, and the commodification of the experience into multimillion-dollar businesses.

Chapter 6: Cultural Transformations of Love and Sex in the Digital Age

The same theoretical line 1) about the *Commercialization of Culture* is developed in this short study-an overview of the history of love and sex since the advent of the Internet. The aim here is to present a semiotic view of the significant cultural changes in the way sexuality is experienced in the age of the global information web. The main focus is on how new communication technologies and the mechanisms of Web 2.0 have changed intimate relationships, how they have commercialized sex in its basic functions, how the digitalization of prostitution has changed its commercial structure, etc., all in favor of transforming this key aspect of our lives in accordance with the experience economy. More specifically, cyber-dating and hookup culture, erotica and pornography websites, video games, webcams, hidden cameras and online voyeurism, sex worker platforms, websites and forums, digitally designed sex, and the dark side of the web: cyberbullying, online paedophilia, revenge porn, etc., are explored.

Chapter 7: Semiotics of Transaction in Digital Age

In this study, the author delves into the premises that make 1) the *commercialization of culture* so mainstream and easy to achieve, in this case focusing on the main semiotic mediator of economic value - the money sign. For this, transaction semiotics is presented as a new approach oriented towards the semiotic mechanisms of transactions of economic value. After analyzing the nature of the main semiotic mechanism of transactions of value (the monetary sign), it is found that its basis is the confidence in the future of the economic system of exchange and the *scarcity of* its availability as a condition of its value and meaning. These characteristics lead us to seek theoretical support in the existential analytics of temporality developed by Heidegger, where a homology is found between economic scarcity and the thesis of the primordial temporal finitude of human existence, which is the scarcity of human being-time. In this way, two levels of semiotic analysis of transactions are distinguished, a deep/authentic level of primordial value formation and a surface level of the commercial practices of market exchange. From this point of view, the new digital economy seems to converge the two levels, making available time for each person a basic economic resource.

Chapter 8 Semiotic overview on legal tender and digital money

This rather recent study provides a new and complete model of the money sign in favour of a comprehensive understanding of the digital economy as started in Chapter 7. The first part summarizes the most important results of the previous semiotic study of the money sign. In order to understand the essential characteristic of digital money, it is necessary to make a

threefold decomposition of the main types of money sign, namely: commodity money; representative money and fiat money. This approach is then used to situate the most important contributions of other authors in the field of semiotics and related disciplines. The second part develops a semiotic approach to the concept of legal tender, where the latter is viewed as a semiotic mechanism that provides specific conditions for the formation of the value of money. It combines the historical overview with an emphasis on important theoretical considerations concerning the application of pure legal tender. The last part is devoted to a proposal for a semiotic model (see, Fig. 8.4) of the sign of fiat money. This model was developed and applied as a reflection on some critical indications of the global financial crisis of 2008-2009, using the expression "the semiotization of money" to describe it. The model is based on one of the most pervasive definitions of money, which views it as an "trust inscribed", which opens the analysis to the mechanism of cybercurrency valorisation.

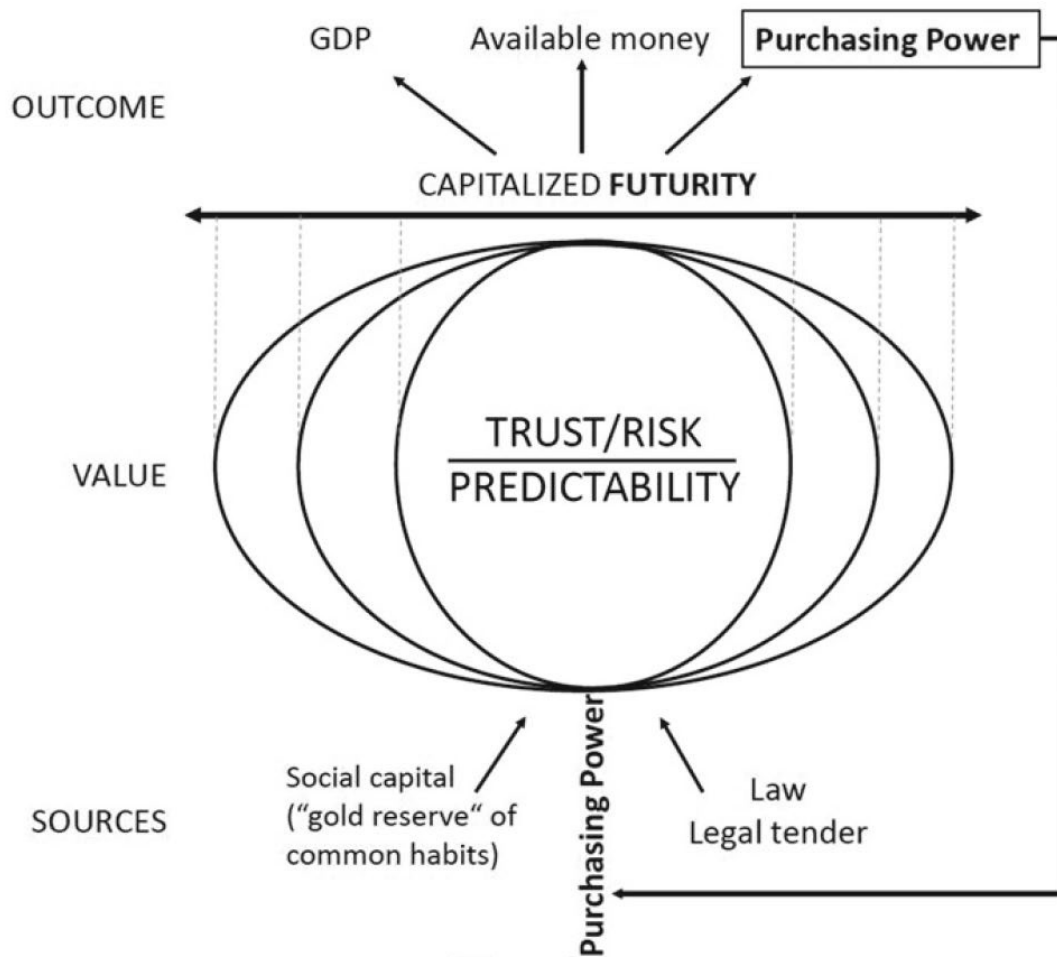


Fig. 8.4 Semiotic model of fiat money

Chapter 9. Identity in Digital Age: From Nationalisms to the Post-truth Uses of Collective Symbols

This chapter contributes most to the theoretical framework of line 3) *Individual and collective identities*. It first examines the history and role of the Bulgarian flag in the formation of Bulgarian national identity, starting from the second half of the 1990s. A semiotic model of identity is then developed (Fig. 9.1.), which places a major emphasis on its constructed nature and its communicative flexibility in carrying out our social interactions. The basic division of the communicative resources of the self sees the opposition of individual characteristics to collective ones. What follows is an interpretation of identity value flows in digital social communication modelled as an 'ego economy', where receiving and producing recognition from and for others is seen as the 'currency of the ego'. With this model, the particular efficacy of national symbols is demonstrated, to which is added the efficacy of the 'nationalist libido'. Thus, what follows is a section in which the use of national flags, colours, symbols and narratives in new media sets the stage for a new digital populism (Populism 2.0), masterfully exploited by extreme politicians with important political outcomes and troubling future prospects.

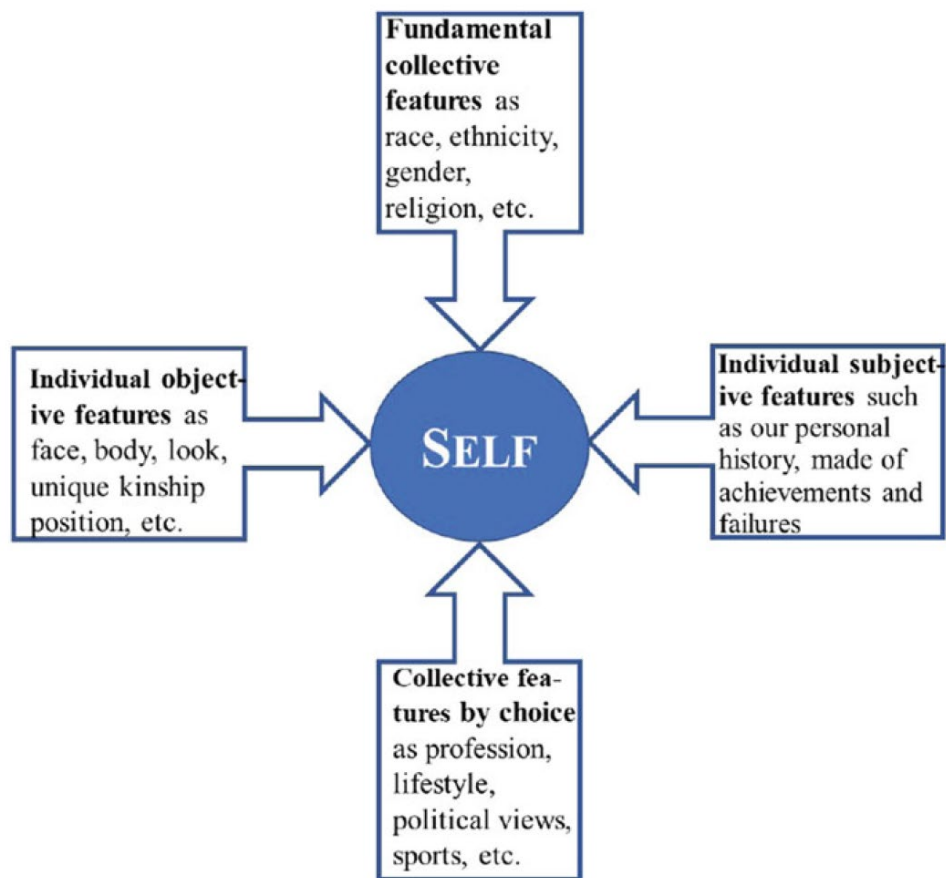


Fig. 9.1 Model of identity

Chapter 10. The Internet, the Encyclopaedic Competence and the *Google* Effect

This chapter explores another aspect of *digital identity* (theoretical strand 3) related to the problems that new digital technologies are causing in the field of education. The basis of the study is Umberto Eco's encyclopaedic model of culture. Even before I turned my interest to education in the digital age, I was struck by Eco's idea of the encyclopaedia, conceived in the early 1970s: an idea that quite accurately predicts the structure of information on the Internet. The main hypothesis here concerns the formation of portions of encyclopaedic competence, where the advent of the Internet has clearly caused profound changes, as evidenced by students' approach to learning. I use another perspective on the same phenomenon, stemming from critical sociology, regarding changes in the identity structure of generations born in the Internet era. The third perspective comes from a brief study of the development of search engines and the reasons why *Google*'s algorithm now dominates this key element of the Internet, the global encyclopedia. The conclusions of this chapter are that the Internet and access to its content through the outsourced 'minds' of search engines are among the main factors in the emergence of a new type of identity for the 'digitally born', representing a *culture of navigation*.

Chapter 11. A Semiotic Exploration in the Web 2.0 Emoti(c)onal Discursivity in Public Debates

In this study, the specific case study surrounding the debate on the adoption or rejection of the *Istanbul Convention* (IC) in 2018 became the occasion for theoretical modelling of important aspects of digital identity (theoretical line 3). The debate was dominated by a populist position that rejected the document. From this debate, the word 'gender', literally transcribed in Cyrillic and without a literal translation into English, became not only a neologism with acutely offensive connotations for the LGBT+ community, but also a commonly accepted 'universal' insult. I demonstrate that the very reason for the rejection of IC is semiotic at its core. I share some reflections on the digital 'undomestication' of the mind as a reverse cultural process to what is considered the domestication of the mind through writing (Fig. 11.2; Goody 1977). Although cyberbullies act alone in front of their computers, their behavior is determined by factors of crowd (or more precisely, e-crowd) psychology, which explains well many of the primordial interventions in the debate. Such a framework also fits well with the logic of the so-called post-truth situation. The last part of the chapter applies some well-established semiotic tools to enumerate the main communication codes of memes and other visual cyber 'attacks' on the falsely attributed ideology of IC.

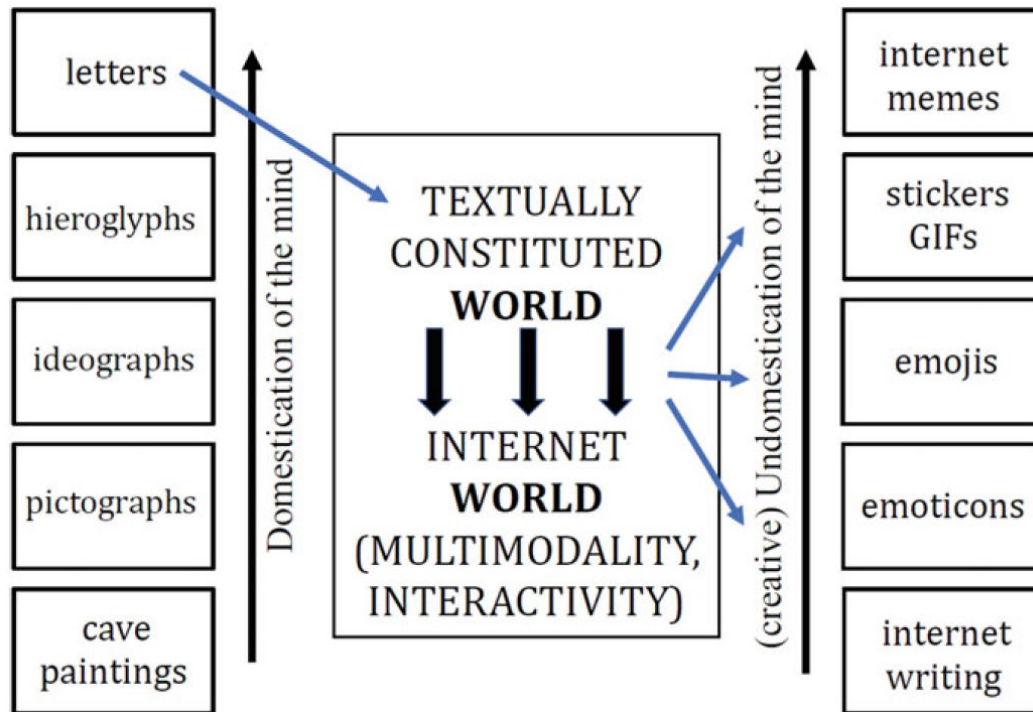


Fig. 11.2. Mirror model of the domestication/dehumanization of the mind

Chapter 12. From Textualism to Hypertextualism

This study combines a theoretical line 2) *Critique of Textualism* with a line 3) *Digital Identity*. The genesis of textualism as a relation to the World and its problematic validity under the conditions of interactive digital culture is explored. In particular, the relationship between methodological textualism and eroticism is examined and how this relationship develops in digital culture, in the age of hypertextualism. The point of departure is Roland Barthes' work on the notion of text, and especially his book *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973), where we find ample evidence that the French semiologist's attitude towards text is fetishistic with overtly erotic references. Such an attitude is quite representative of the whole era of structuralism and poststructuralism. The age of hypertext (and of the Internet in general) is changing the culture of text into new forms of intertextual exchange, where sensual pleasure itself becomes the object of communicative exchange. The eroticisms of hypertext are more explicit than those of text and take myriad forms that are difficult to fit into a general pattern. The final section considers the implications of hypertextual reality for educational institutions and their role in digital society (Fig. 12.1 for a comic interpretation of the thesis).

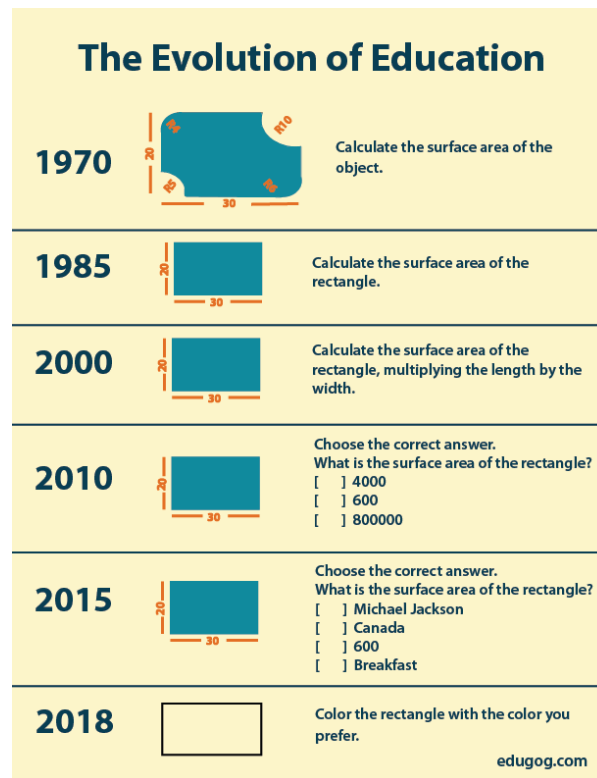


Fig. 12.1. Evolution of education (edugog.com)

Chapter 13. Identity and consumer rituals in *Facebook*

The final study in the dissertation analyses a new form of identity construction in social media (theoretical line 3), coming from consumer culture research and based on continuity with pre- digital practices. It specifically elaborates the new forms of consumer rituals that have emerged since the emergence of the world's largest social media. As a point of departure and theoretical model, I use the classification of consumer rituals as "tools for the transfer of meaning" as described in Grant McCracken's famous book *Culture and Consumption* (1988). His classification includes four types of rituals for the transfer of meaning from goods to consumer identity, namely rituals of possession, exchange, grooming and divestment. If we consider the expression of consumer behaviour on *Facebook*, we can first of all note that the whole consumption process has entered a new phase, almost entirely virtual, i.e. with very little connection to the material, tangible phase of the consumption process. The whole platform encourages its consumers to apply their creativity in completely new forms, with which they transfer the meaning of their favourite goods, services, brands and lifestyles to their identity/profile. I offer a list of the different options *Facebook* offers for consumer rituals, ranked by their semiotic impact in the process of conveying meaning. Such options are name, profile picture, status, family connections, timeline, albums, etc.

Conclusions

The COVID-19 global pandemic unfolded over the past three years and dramatically coincided with the story of this book. It may not be the deadliest pandemic in human history, but it is certainly the one with the greatest socio-cultural and socio-economic impact. No such catastrophe has been written, photographed, broadcast and published about as much as this one. We are talking about billions of man-hours devoted exclusively to this topic. This phenomenon is due to digital means of communication and especially social media. The aforementioned impact of the pandemic is largely due to the colossal semiotic production that accompanies it, or, in other words, to precisely those consequences of digital culture that are the subject of this book.

The phrase "the new normal" has become a standing joke about the extraordinary changes in all walks of life that we have been forced to unwittingly accept in order to adapt to this situation. The "new normal" is a joke today because in fact it has not yet settled in. It is still under construction, but the expression has served to mark the advent of stability after previous major world crises. The pandemic caused the paradox of the new normal everywhere. The digital transformation has made societies more dynamic than ever, but this dynamic had a market, political and social logic. The mega-black swan of the pandemic shook the whole system to its foundations and all logics of continuity with the past were broken. Millions of works in the humanities and social sciences like the present one remained in a state of weightlessness, awaiting the unpredictable stabilization phases of the new normal.

Let's take *money*, one of the most important topics in this work. Governments have allocated trillions to keep businesses breathing in this period of forced production and consumer stagnation. This is a completely new situation in the relationship between the purchasing power of money and the participants in the social contract - the law, the government and society. Surely the "new normal" of money will be enriched by this experience. The usefulness of semiotic models of the money sign here is not so much to predict exactly what it will look like in the future, but rather to enable the unprejudiced readers to be able to unravel the new sociocultural reality for themselves.

The same can be said for the *cinema* of digital special effects and sensory-motor experiences - another important topic here. Before the pandemic, this transformation was in full swing, but afterwards cinemas were closed and blockbuster premieres were on hold. While mega-productions such as 007's *No Time to Die* (2021) waited for the backlash from the anti-COVID measures in cinemas to achieve their projected return on investment, the new individually targeted VOD formats achieved unprecedented success. This is due to the delivery of high quality product to the homes of people in forced isolation. However, the new narrative formats of *Netflix* and similar platforms differ from those of mainstream cinema and will certainly play a much more important role in the new normal compared to the pre-pandemic situation. Again, I hope that the semiotic models of transformation proposed here will be useful to those who will have to unravel

the mechanisms of the new unpredictable cinematic reality for themselves.

Football is also moving towards its new normal. The pandemic has struck this bastion of pop culture at its core - the living presence of people in stadiums. My analysis of how digital media is enlarging and commodifying the football experience and delivering it in different formats to the global market coincided with what has been happening over the last three years. While viewers hadn't returned to the stands, the profit structure and overall management of the business was quite different to the pre-pandemic formats.

Can we talk about a new normal of *identity for the* internet-born and pre-internet generations? Although identity is one of the most touched upon concepts in this book, I would hardly presume to define its referent. However, the debate about how the social isolation of the pandemic has changed our psyche, ego and sense of self is the most widely developed debate and is part of the public domain. It has opened up a limitless speculative spiral in which we find it increasingly difficult to navigate. Rebellions against social exclusion are organised by people who see its imposition as an infringement on their freedom. Conspiracy theorists have experienced a new renaissance, anti-vaxxers from all countries have united in a virtual coalition that has led to a point in countries like Bulgaria where only 11% of medical workers and teachers consider it necessary to vaccinate against COVID-19. It is my hope that the semiotic model of identity, and the overall concept of commercial ego turnover as a driver of social media, will help the unbiased reader answer the question of why this intense thirst for self-expression and significance of online individuals has completely displaced scientific and empirical reasoning on a topic so important to the survival of humanity.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE DISSERTATION

All contributions are presented in global rather than national terms.

1) This is the first monograph entirely devoted to the semiotics of digital culture, and quantitatively it is currently the most common area explored by semiotic publications

2) The work proposes a new theoretical framework for the study of digital culture, based on Lotman's semiosphere model, suitable for the analysis of cultural innovations following technological innovations, as well as digital culture after the rise of social media (Web 2.0), for which the concept of "Platphosphere" is introduced

3) The work is interdisciplinary, and besides the usual semiotics-related studies of new media, cultural studies, anthropology, sociology, there are also strong economic concepts such as money sign, scarcity, consumption, crypto currencies, purchasing power, fiat money, gold standard, credit, etc.

4) The work offers completely original visualized models of a) typology of the monetary sign, b) economic value through the purchasing power of the monetary sign, c) a developed model of identity; d) the evolution and devolution of the sign according to its historical uses.

5) The work offers a comprehensive panorama of all contributions to the field of digital semiotics (visualized on a map), including all major traditions. No such attempt has been made before.

6) The work offers a completely new semiotic treatment of the notion of interactivity, through a substantial critique of textualism

7) The work applies in an original way the semiotic approach to modeling the value of bitcoin, the new meaning of the term "gender" in the Bulgarian language, the football experience as a mediatized product, etc.

PUBLICATIONS BASED ON THE DISSERTATION

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