FUNCTIONALIZATION AND INFORMALIZATION IN THE DESIGN OF AN ONLINE FASHION SHOP
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Abstract

This paper presents a multimodal analysis of the design of an online fashion shop. Departing from systemic-functional genre theory, it analyses the functionality of the site, bringing out how it designs what sellers do to and for consumers and what the site does and does not enable consumers to do. Drawing on Joos’ analysis of (in)formality in language and Hall’s proxemics, the paper then analyses how the site conceals the power of its functional design by simulating informality and solidarity in a way that ultimately remains one-way and cannot be reciprocated. It finally argues that designs of consumer behaviour similar to that of the analysed site increasingly stand as a model for the digitization of other domains of practice, including education and research, so extending what Fairclough (1993) called the ‘marketization of discourse’ into these other domains.

Keywords

Design, genre, functionalization, informalization, multimodality, online shopping, social practice, critical discourse analysis

1. Introduction

Today many social practices are moving online, in the public as well as in the private sphere. Increasingly we work online, learn online, play online, date online - and shop online. As a result, our towns and cities are changing as offices stand empty, shops close and people meet virtually rather than physically, away from offices, schools, high streets and city centres, with their many opportunities for sociability. This development has been underway for several decades (in the case of shopping since the mid-1990s) but recently it has greatly accelerated as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

There is an unrelenting economic imperative behind the development towards online practices - it increases efficiency and saves cost by creating and controlling consistent, standardized and highly functional ways of doing things, new, technologized forms of bureaucracy that eliminate human judgment and treat people as “objects to be ordered, checked, registered, shifted, and so forth” (Fairclough, 1989: 212) – today we might add ‘objects to be studied in the interest of advertisers and other powerful organizations’. The naked reality of this is concealed by discursive practices that simulate continuing sociability and ‘community’, and compensate for the lack of the ‘human touch’.
In this paper we focus on shopping. Shopping, or, more broadly, the exchange of goods through buying and selling, has long been at the centre of social life. Even supermarket shopping is still an embodied event where we mingle with other people (Rasmussen and Kristiansen, this volume). But in online shopping embodied events and physical spaces become texts – texts which we read and use alone, at home, even if they may relate to social media (e.g. online trendsetters, cf also Andersen and Van Leeuwen, 2017). Such texts not only represent shopping, they also design what we can and cannot do when we shop online, and how we are to relate to sellers who are no longer physically present and often very powerful (think of Amazon), yet needing to legitimate their power by providing services we need and want. Designers, today, no longer only design texts, they also, and at the same time, re-design social practices and the relationships that come with them. Newspaper design, for instance, is, as one designer put it, “as much an exercise in cultural change as an exercise in changing typography and layout” and includes designing “the geography of the newsroom and the sequences of events in a day that turns the news from vague ideas to finished pages” (De Vries, 2008).

Our purpose in this paper, therefore, is to analyse how such texts design the act of shopping and the relationship between buyers and sellers. To do so we will analyse the website of Zalando, an online retail company based in Berlin which offers fashion products in 17 European markets and also acts as a platform for other fashion companies and retailers. Zalando is by far the most popular and highest earning online fashion store in most of these markets, including Denmark, where we conducted this study - it comes in second place in France and Spain (https://www.statista.com). We will use systemic-functional genre analysis to analyse the site’s functional design, the way it designs what customers can (and sometimes must) do, and an analysis of stylistic (in)formality to analyse how it constructs the relationship between buyers and sellers. This analysis is necessarily multimodal, as online shopping sites use language as well as image, layout, typography, colour and (limited) animation.

Our analysis is intended as a critical analysis. Power has been a central theme in critical discourse analysis, and it should be so also in the critical analysis of social practices, whether online or offline. So, before we introduce the analytical framework we will use, in section 3 of the paper, and present our actual analysis, in section 4, we will first discuss the critical issues at stake in more detail.

2. A critical social semiotic approach to online shopping
Two principal strategies for simulating sociability in online shopping are informalization and multimodalization. The move towards informalization has been noted by many commentators (cf Fairclough, 1993). The greater the power gap between the organizations that design and control the practices and their clients, the greater, it seems, must be the effort put toward simulating solidarity and equality, and the larger the clientele, the greater must be the effort put toward creating what Fairclough (1989; 1993) called “synthetic personalization”, a process which, he said (1993: 140), “can be seen as a colonization of the public domain by the practices of the private domain, but also as an appropriation of private domain practices by the public domain”.

This process can be observed, for instance, in the way today’s powerful global tech companies communicate online with their billions of users. On the one hand they command and cajole users in ways that allow no riposte (“Confirm friend”, “Check in”, “Tag friends”) or ask questions that allow only a yes or a no, or at best a limited range of pre-designed answers (as when Facebook enquires about your ‘life events’: “First met”, “New relationship”, “Engagement”, etc, adding only at the very end a category “Create your own”). On the other hand, they do so in everyday casual language (“Congrats! Your Microsoft account is waiting”; “Hmmm. Looks like your stored credentials are out of date”).

Online practices offer efficiencies and economies, not only to the organizations that design them, but also to their users, and it is here that multimodalization plays a key role. Profoundly visual designs combine text, not only with images, but also with layout, colour and typography, so as to realize the advantages offered to users. Online practices offer immediacy and save time and effort. There is no need to commute to the office, to walk to the library, to take the escalator to the 4th floor of the department store etc. Even five clicks can then seem to take too much time. All this is greatly enhanced by the ways in which information is displayed visually, with extensive menus placed in predictable and instantly visible locations. Online practices also offer an abundance of choice – no bookshop can stock as many titles as Amazon, no encyclopedia hold as much information as Google – and these choices are again realized visually, on the catalogue pages of online shopping sites, or on the collages of ‘clickbait’ news items we scroll down on. Finally, online practices offer users a degree of agency, a degree of control over the way they can navigate sites, select from the pre-designed options offered, and order how the goods and services provided will be displayed, for instance according to price or popularity - clothes can be ordered by size, colour, brand or sustainability, for instance, electronic products according to their hardware specifications or functionalities, and groceries by whether they are organic, vegan, and so on.
Multimodalization not only makes online practices convenient, it also makes them pleasurable (Van Leeuwen, 2015). Microsoft’s commands and questions, for instance, are shown against a background of strikingly luminous images of natural wonders and places untouched by technological progress, suggesting continuity with a pre-digital past and compensation for the disembodied nature of online communication through images which have a ‘sensory coding orientation’ (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006), images which “create the illusion of touch, taste and smell” and use colour “as a source of pleasure and affective meaning: vibrant reds, soothing blues, and so on” (ibid: 104. 105). “Like what you see?”, Microsoft asks. To which you can then either answer by either clicking “I like it” or “Not a fan”. In the latter case, another image will be provided. As Adorno said “Something is provided for all, so that none may escape’ (in Horkheimer, 1986: 123).

Like other social practices, and under influence of the same dominant forms of social organization and ideology, practices of buying and selling have undergone significant changes during the past two centuries. From the 19th century on, sellers no longer sold what they themselves produced, whether by bringing products to market or selling from their craft workshops, but began to diversify, and in the process started to fix their prices, create display windows - and engage in advertising. As Dan wrote in 1907 (quoted in Lauwaert, 2009: 26):

> Whereas the shopkeeper of the previous generation was content to rely upon a solidly built reputation as sufficient advertisement, the shopkeeper of today, buffeted by an abnormally developed competition, has to adapt himself to the needs of the times to seek a more pronounced advertisement than a good, honest reputation. He sees in his shop front a happy medium for a properly expressed and unique advertisement.

In the late 19th century department stores had diversified even further, often reinstating credit to increase sales and consumer ‘loyalty’, and directing their advertising specifically to women, so fostering the rise of consumerism. They were not always welcomed. Germany “knew rancorous opponents of the department store, which led to them being restricted in height to minimize ‘unfair’ competition”, while in the USA they were “recognized as a necessary and useful part of contemporary society” (Schönberg, 1908, quoted in Lauwaert, 2009: 27). Yet they offered many opportunities for sociability (cf Ravelli, this volume)

The 1950s saw the introduction of supermarkets in Europe, and also in Australia (the US had pioneered them in the 1930s). They replaced paid labour with unpaid labour, creating efficiencies and cost savings for the seller. Where previously sellers had collected the goods, and weighed, measured and packaged them for their customers, now customers had to collect the goods themselves and take them to a cashier (today even these get replaced by consumer-operated
checkouts). Soon supermarkets grew into global chains, cutting costs by exploiting suppliers in developing countries, and creating food waste and plastic pollution as a result of the pre-packaging of goods. Supermarkets, too, were not uniformly welcomed. (Zijderveld, 1972: 80):

The village woman who is accustomed to shop in a small local grocery store where she is served by a shopkeeper personally and discusses with him the latest gossip is at a loss in metropolitan supermarket where her demands are no longer directed by her needs, but on the contrary dictated by an abundant supply. There is no time for gossip or personal information. She receives, together with her purchase, a small slip of paper with a precise calculation of her expenses. The words ‘Thank you’ are printed on it, more for the sake of public than personal relations. The shopkeeper, the focal point in rural face to face relationships has been replaced by machines and anonymous functionaries.

The move to online shopping takes this development a step further. Shopping becomes even more impersonal, the actual ‘shops’, with their robotized warehouses, even more powerful and remote, and strategies for ‘synthetic personalization’ even more sophisticated.

Change is gradual of course. The old continues to exist alongside the new, though only in specific conditions, for instance in countries where wages are still low and street markets still vibrant, in migrant communities that take the supply of culturally specific goods into their own hands, or in the well-to-do suburbs of rich countries, with their boutique bakeries and small, exclusive fashion shops. And the new had its precursors when the old was still dominant– mail order catalogues have existed since the 1890s. But as the power of multinationals such as Amazon grows further, online shopping will increasingly be the only alternative for the majority. Face to face practices need people, and people are expensive, whether in education, entertainment or retail. They will therefore increasingly be only available to the few who can pay, as concerts and theatrical shows already are.

3. Analysing functionalization and informalization in online shopping

In this discussing the specific design of the Zalando site in section 4, we will ask two questions, one related primarily to the functional design of the site, the other the degree to which, and the way in which, this design is informalized. In this section we introduce the analytical frameworks we use to answer these questions.
Analysing the functional design of online shopping is asking what the sellers do and what the site enables shoppers to do (rather than what they actually do) or prevents them from doing. To do so we use an approach to genre analysis which was developed by Mitchell (1957) and Hasan (1985) and specifically applied to buying and selling interactions. The generic ‘stages’ they distinguished constitute the functional elements of buying and selling, the minimal elements needed, in a given context, for a buying and selling episode to successfully result in a purchase. These stages are all dialogic, consisting minimally of two turns, some initiated by the seller, some by the buyer.

Mitchell analysed how buying and selling proceeds on markets – he recorded market interactions in what today is Libya. He distinguished five functional elements (Mitchell, 1957: 178 ff): salutation (e.g. “Good morning”), enquiry as to the object of sale, initiated by the buyer (“Is this lamb for sale?” – “No, the lamb is included” [i.e. with the sheep]; investigation of the object of sale, typically initiated by the seller (“Look at it and feel it if you like” – “I’m doing so”); bargaining, usually initiated by the buyer (“How much is it?” - “1.60” – “I’ll give you 1.20, my last word”), a stage which is quite protracted in some of Mitchell’s examples, and the conclusion, the actual sale, marked by a handshake (“That makes $1.40. Wish me luck” – “May God make you prosper”)

Hasan (1985: 61 ff) analysed how shopping proceeds in a small shop, a greengrocer. She distinguished eight functional elements, a service initiation, initiated by the seller (“Who’s next?” – “I think I am”), a sales request, initiated by the buyer - several usually occur in a given instance of shopping (“I’ll have ten oranges and a kilo of bananas please”); sales enquiries which result from inspection of the goods and may result in a modicum of negotiation (“These don’t look very ripe” – “Oh, they’re ripe alright. They’re just that colour, a greeny pink”); sale compliances, initiated by the seller, who may accept or reject the buyer’s request (“Yes, anything else?”); the sale (“that will be two dollars sixty-nine please”); the purchase, initiated by the buyer (“I can give you nine cents”); the purchase closure (“There you are, eighty, three dollars and two is five” – “Thank you”) and the finis (“Have a nice day” – “See ya”).

In these accounts, shopping interaction is entirely linguistically realized, though Mitchell recognized that participants may either be “silent in the performance of their tasks or talkative mainly on topics without any apparent connection with what they are doing” (Mitchell, 1957: 169). But many of the functional elements Mitchell and Hasan described can be, and often are, realized non-verbally. In the supermarket the inspection of the goods (Mitchell’s “investigation of the object of sale”, Hasan’s “sales enquiry”) may be visual only, or performed by touching or even smelling. Online the purchase
is realized by clicks and typing in credit card information rather than verbally or by means of a handshake. In short, Hasan’s emphasis on verbal interaction may have caused her to miss non-verbal actions such as weighing and packing the goods.

Finally, not all the functional elements occur in every form of buying and selling. Bargaining does not occur in everyday shopping, although discounts may be given to individual shoppers in some kinds of shop, for example to encourage them to buy an additional item. Nor do all instances of shopping result in a purchase — one can also ‘just look’. And it can be noted that Hasan’s account does not include a ‘greeting’.

For our present purpose we assume that the following functional elements must occur in online shopping, and constitute the basic stages in the process, though of course not necessarily in the form described by Mitchell or Hasan, and not always all present:

1. Orientation (an overview of what the site offers and what sections it consists of)
2. Search (selecting an item or kind of item of interest)
3. Inspection (investigating the item(s) of interest)
4. Selection (choosing one or more items)
5. Checkout (purchasing the item or items)

In section 4 we will look at how these stages are realized in the Zalando site.

Moving now to ‘informalization design’, the trend towards informalization began in the 1920s, both in the private and the public sphere. In the private sphere, the distinction between formal and informal forms of address (e.g. through personal pronouns such as such French tu and vous and German du and Sie) began to erode (Brown and Gilman, 1960). In the public sphere, broadcasting replaced formal speeches with casual, and often dialogic chats and interviews (Cardiff, 1989) and politicians, too, began to address the public in casual ways, as in Roosevelt’s ‘fireside chats’ of the 1930s, or Goebbels’ insistence that radio speakers should “sound like the listener’s best friend” (Leitner, 1980: 75). The impact of television, in the 1960s, accelerated this trend, making close up ‘non-verbal communication’ an important aspect of public communication. Not surprisingly, linguists and social scientists began to pay attention to informalization, and this work, in particular that of Joos (1961) and Hall (1963, 1964), remains, in our view, essential.

Joos (1961: 23) distinguished five styles, or “clocks”, as he called them — the intimate style, used between “intimates”, usually couples, the casual style, used with “friends, acquaintances, insiders”, the consultative style, used to “come to terms with strangers” (ibid: 23), the formal style, used in
formal contexts, for instance in meetings and classrooms, and the *frozen* style, “used for print and declamation”. These styles are characterized by distinct configurations of six parameters: (1) the degree to which background information is shared and therefore does not need to be made explicit; (2) the degree to which ‘public information’ plays a role in the interaction; (3) the degree to which listener participation (“unh unh, that’s right, oh. I see, yes I know” and so on) is continuous; (4) the degree to which communication relies on facial expression, gesture and intonation; (5) the formality or informality of the lexis (e.g. the use of slang) and the ‘completeness’ or incompleteness (e.g. ellipsis, minor clauses) of the grammar; (6) the degree of advance planning. Table 1 shows the role of these parameters in Joos’ five styles:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Intimate style</th>
<th>Casual style</th>
<th>Consultative style</th>
<th>Formal style</th>
<th>Frozen style</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shared background information</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>absent</td>
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<tr>
<td>Use of public information</td>
<td>absent</td>
<td>absent</td>
<td>present</td>
<td>present</td>
<td>present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listener participation</td>
<td>varying</td>
<td>constant</td>
<td>constant</td>
<td>absent</td>
<td>absent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of facial expression &amp; intonation</td>
<td>very high</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>relatively high</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>absent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of casual lexis</td>
<td>very high</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>occasional</td>
<td>absent</td>
<td>absent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of incomplete grammar</td>
<td>very high</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>absent</td>
<td>absent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree of advance planning</td>
<td>absent</td>
<td>absent</td>
<td>absent</td>
<td>present</td>
<td>present</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
More or less simultaneously, Edward Hall (e.g. 1963, 1964, 1966) developed his theory of proxemics, which described how the distance people keep from each other in interaction realizes different kinds of social relation. He distinguished four zones, very similar to Joos' “clocks” – **intimate distance**, **casual-personal distance**, **socio-consultative distance**, and **public distance**. These distances are embodied and multimodal ways of expressing and constituting social relations: the boundaries between them are marked by specific changes in the configuration of six perceptual variables: (1) the degree to which the other person can be touched, ranging from “caressing and holding” to “accidental touching” and “no contact” (Hall called this the “kinesthetic code”); (2) the degree to which the other person’s body odour can be detected (the “olfactory code”); (3) the degree to which we can sense each other’s body heat, ranging from “contact heat”, to “no heat” (the “thermal code”); (4) the “visual code”. determining the amount of the other’s body that can be seen in sharp (30°) vision, ranging from what in film language would be called a Very Close Shot (closer than ‘head and shoulders’) to a Long Shot (in which the full body can be seen); and (5) the “voice loudness code”, which ranges from “very loud” to “silent”. Thus, intimate distance turns into casual-personal distance at the point where body heat can no longer be detected, and where facial features are no longer distorted in the way they are at intimate distance. Casual-personal distance changes into socio-consultative distance at the point where interactants can no longer easily touch each other. Public distance begins at the point where touching is no longer possible, even if both participants fully extend their arms and ends at the point where the voice, even at its loudest, can no longer be heard.

Useful as these parameters still are for the analysis of informalization, there are at least three complications. Firstly, Joos and Hall described these styles as characteristic of enduring, unchanging relations. Halls’ “public distance”, for instance, was the distance “at which people are and are to remain strangers” (Hall, 1966: 125). But informality and formality are also determined by context. If I am part of the audience of a talk presented by an intimate partner, I will keep ‘public’ distance, and were I to ask him or her a question I would do so in formal language, perhaps even jotting my question down on a piece of paper before raising my hand.

Secondly, the configurations of parameters are not fixed, as Joos and Hall suggested. They may be combined in different ways to express complex, hybrid relationships. Casual lexis and incomplete grammar may be planned in advance, even scripted, as they are in the questions and directions on our computer screens. Audiovisual technologies, whether online or otherwise, can only transmit the
visual code and the voice loudness code. Hence the people on our screens can come tantalizingly close and speak to us in an intimate whisper, yet no body heat can be detected, and touching remains impossible. ‘Synthetic personalization’ remains at least partially disembodied, and the relations it creates remain asymmetrical, and hence unequal. Brown and Gilman (1960), in their classic paper on power and solidarity, written at the time when Joos and Hall developed their theories, wrote that “power rests on differences, solidarity on commonalities between participants”. Such differences exist offline as well as online, but online they are the rule. Cheerful greetings like “Hello Theo” and “Welcome to Woolworth” cannot be reciprocated, and questions and commands can only be responded to with a yes or a no, a click or no click, although online buyers may also be able to type in requests.

Thirdly, images can also ‘formalize’ or ‘informalize’ depicted people, and they can do so in several ways. Key parameters distinguished by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2021) are ‘contact’, ‘attitude’ and ‘social distance’. Contact refers to whether people depicted in an image look at the viewer or not. If they do, they appear to address the viewer directly, and this can then be further refined by the way they look at the viewer - whether they smile, implore, or frown censoriously, for instance. If they do not, the depicted people become an object for scrutiny, which makes the viewer a kind of ‘voyeur’ rather than an interactant.

Attitude refers to the angle from which depicted people are seen. The horizontal angle suggests different degrees of involvement – the frontal angle a high degree of involvement, more oblique angles more detached relations. The vertical angle suggests power – it can make the viewer literally and figuratively ‘look down at’ or ‘look up to’ what is depicted. Attitude can also apply to depicted objects and places – with these, too, relations of involvement and detachment, and relations of power, can exist.

Social distance closely relates to Hall’s visual code – the more depicted people, places and things are shown ‘close up’, the more a personal, or even an intimate relation with them is suggested. The more people, places and things are shown in Long Shots, or ‘Very Long Shots’, the more distant and formal our relations with them will appear.

We use the word ‘suggest’ to indicate that these relations are imaginary. We may for instance see a politician from a close distance, casually dressed, smiling at us, and so on – but that does not mean that we have a personal relation with that politician– he or she, to use Hall’s words “is and will remain a stranger”. It only means that the relation has been informalized – and in a ‘one way’ manner that cannot be reciprocated. The power difference remains.
Finally, these parameters combine in many different ways, creating hybrid relations, mixtures of closeness and distance. It is for instance possible for ‘attitude’ to be frontal, hence ‘involved’, but for ‘contact’ to be absent, with a depicted person refusing (or not daring) to acknowledge the closeness by looking at us.

4. Functional design and informalization design in Zalando

In this section we investigate functional design and informalization design in the website of Zalando, departing from the five generic stages discussed in the previous section. This is of necessity rather descriptive, at least initially. While users only need to find the paths that will lead to achieving their aims, analysts of ‘semiotic technologies’ (Poulsen et al, 2018) must find all the paths that can be followed, not only those followed by specific users. They must describe the architecture of the site as a whole before any critical conclusions can be drawn.

Orientation

When first entered, the Zalando website does not greet or welcome customers. Instead they are simultaneously confronted with three functional elements – an introduction, navigation tools and an information request which asks customers to provide information about themselves and their interests and preferences.

The introduction takes the form of an online slide show with each slide showing, on the left, a photo of a glamorous young couple or an array of products and, on the right a text, against a colourful background, an announcement of the advantages Zalando offers its customers and the categories of product on offer – advantages such as “Easy to pay – more choices, less chores”; “100 days free return – so you can take your time to decide”; “Even more than you expect – fashion, sneakers, sport and more” and categories such as “Our Top Brands” and “Our Top Trending Categories”, which are revealed upon scrolling down.

The navigation tools are of two kinds: three conspicuous buttons (“Women”, “Men”, “Kids”, in this order), placed at the bottom of the text boxes we just discussed, and a much less conspicuous horizontal navigation bar at the top of the page, on which consumers can select “women”, “men” and “kids” as well as product categories such as “clothing”, “shoes”, “sports”, “designer brands”. There is also a search bar on which they can type in what they are looking for.

The information request appears soon after the customer has entered the site, in the form of a highly conspicuous black pop up, appearing at the bottom of the page and partially obscuring the
photos and texts of the Introduction, on which white lettering announces that the site “delivers a personalized shopping experience and personalized advertising”, and that to do this “we collect information about users, their behaviour and their devices”, “may link these data across the different devices you use” and “share the information with Facebook and Google” so as to “present you with relevant ads and third party website and apps”. Without replying to the information request, customers cannot enter the shop. They must either click “OK” or “Set Preferences”, which offers a choice in the kind and amount of information they allow Zalando to collect - “essential information”, “marketing” information, “personalisation” information and so on. But one thing cannot be chosen - anonymity. And once you are in, you are in, forever. The second time we googled Zalando, the site led us straight to the product categories we had inspected earlier. The Orientation section was no longer accessible and we were directly led to content regarded to be in our interest on the basis of our previous searches. This recontextualises traditional sales strategies of knowing customers and suggesting products they might like, and although many customers are now aware of these strategies, they have no control over the way they are implemented.

The different elements of the Orientation are informalized to different degrees. The language of the Introduction uses casual lexis (“your line”, “chores”) and minor clauses (“easy to pay”), and simulates shared background information by suggesting that “your lines” will be there, and that Zalando knows what “you expect”. Non-verbal communication is also used - the young couples are shown in casual poses, smiling at the viewer from a frontal, eye level angle, and at either intimate/personal or social distance. But other parameters of Joos’ casual style are absent. ‘Listener participation’ is impossible, suggesting unequal power, and the design of the text is planned in advance, monologic rather than dialogic.

The navigation tools do involve ‘listener participation’. ‘Offers’ are made to which customers can respond by accepting or ignoring them. But customers are restricted to a limited range of pre-selected options and offers, and their responses can only be a “yes” or a “no”, click or don’t click. There are no clauses, hence no signifiers of politeness or impoliteness, or of mood and modality.

The information request features a range of styles – the finer the ‘fine print’, the more ‘frozen’ the style. The “Set Preferences” are still explained in casual language, addressing the reader directly (“We collect information on your journeys”), but digging deeper and checking the ‘Terms and conditions”, the language freezes up and aims at maximum explicitness “The stated prices are final prices (totals) and include any applicable delivery charge and value added tax (VAT) at the applicable statutory rate”. Beneath the informality there is a non-negotiable, formal contract.

Search
Clicking on the “Women” or “Men” buttons, or entering a product category on the search bar, leads customers to the next stage of the “journey”, the Search. But different ways of initiating the search result in different modes of shopping which we will call Display Shopping and Surveying the Range. Display Shopping resembles physical ‘window shopping’ or searching for ideas by looking through a fashion magazine. Surveying the Range resembles actually being in a store and looking at the whole range of scarves, blouses, shoes, or whatever one is looking for. The difference is that in the case of online shopping both can lead more or less directly to the checkout. The gap between thinking about buying something and actually buying it has been significantly diminished, which is one of the ways in which the site tries to imbue a sense of urgency in the user.

Clicking on the large “Women”, “Men” or “Kids” buttons of the Introduction initiates the function of Display Shopping, leading to a layout with, on the left, a text that formulates a fashion theme which combines a particular item or outfit with a particular activity, lifestyle, season, etc, and, on the right, a fashion photo which shows a model or models wearing the items or outfits and, at the same time visualizes the theme. To give an example (which invokes COVID), the text “We will hug again – in soft tactile fabrics” is accompanied by a photo of two young women embracing, dressed in soft clothes. Scrolling down then leads to other fashion themes, e.g. “Let’s reconnect & feel the nature”; “Move your way – for home workouts”; “Winter running kit – For endurance in the cold”. Clicking on “Discover now”, which can be done at the bottom of each of the text boxes, leads to a symmetrical arrangement of four neatly framed images, showing different examples of the relevant, item or outfit, with captions that identify the product (e.g. “big fringe scarf”), the colour, and the price.

Clicking on one of the items in the navigation bar of the Introduction page initiates the function of Surveying the Range, leading to a catalogue containing hundreds of images, displayed in identical fashion and arranged in tight symmetrical rows of four pictures with similar captions, just like the four pictures revealed by clicking “Discover Now’ on a Display Shopping page. The photos either show the product in Full Shot and frontally photographed against a blank background, or a model wearing the product, framed in such a way that the entire item is displayed (which means, for instance, that in the case of shoes only the model’s legs are shown). This decontextualized way of showing the clothes (and the models) contrasts with the ‘Display Shopping’ fashion photos described above, which use facial expression, posture, props and settings to express fashion themes. Catalogue photos are what Kress and Van Leeuwen (2021) call ‘analytical images’, images designed to show the parts of a whole, in as much detail as possible.

Catalogue pages may also include a purely verbal introduction to the relevant product category, usually in the leftmost column, e.g.:
A wardrobe staple for every woman, the right high heels can elongate your leg, create an instant slimming effect and bring a touch of elegance to any outfit (...) A popular footwear option for centuries, classic women’s heels are a must for modern, fashion-conscious women looking to transform their everyday look.

The style of such product introductions is relatively formal, assuming no shared knowledge, and introducing what Joos calls ‘public knowledge’, e.g. a short history of women’s handbags in the handbag catalogue. This contrasts with the more informal style of the fashion themes on the Display Shopping pages, which use the same mix of formal and informal stylistic parameters as the texts in the Introduction text boxes.

‘Listener participation’ is again instrumental – accepting or declining what is on offer, as expressed by a click or the lack thereof. But another kind of response is now added – feedback, in the form of the heart icons. Each item carries a small ‘heart’ icon with which customers can use to express their ‘likes’. Pressing the heart icon has another function as well, because it puts the item on ‘the wish list’, a shortlist of items that might be considered for purchase, either now or at later point. The wish list allows customers to add items to the virtual shopping basket. They can then delete those they decide not to buy before checking out. Meanwhile the site saves the wish, presents it again when the customer logs in next and uses it to add items to the list of products “you might also be interested in”.

In short, Zalando, like other online shops seeks four kinds of responses from customers – personal information, selections, feedback, and of course purchases – and it is these four, and only these, that defines to sellers what it means to be a customer and how customers should behave.

**Inspection**

Selecting an item from a catalogue, or from one of the four pictures “discovered” during Display Shopping, initiates the Inspection stage, leading to what, in an earlier publication, we called the ‘product sheet’ (Höllerer et al, 2019: 144ff). The product can now be inspected in detail. Each product sheet features, in the centre of the layout, a major photograph of the relevant item, and to the left some smaller photos, showing the product from different angles. Moving the cursor over the major photograph allows 360° rotation and zooming in on details such as pockets, special stitching, buttons, the weave of the fabric, etc. – it will also show the model’s face in extremely close detail, almost as if one is inspecting one’s own face close up in a mirror – needless to say, the models’ faces are entirely flawless, even at such close inspection.
To the right of the photo, textual information details shape, measurement, fabric, washing instructions, and so on, in factual and often quite formal language, e.g. “Products with this label are made with at least 50% organic cotton, which is produced without the use of any synthetic pesticides and fertilisers or genetically modified seeds.”

At this stage, the product is no longer appraised or evaluated. But below all this information, the site tries to persuade customers to buy more, through further rows of four similar items or outfits, “Shop the look” displaying the selected product as part of whole outfits, and “You might also like” suggesting other products deemed similar in style and taste or products that customers have previously been interested in.

While customers have control over the visual inspection of the product, they cannot ask questions. Therefore, the site must anticipate the information customers might request and present it in visual or verbal form, for instance in closeups or specs lists. The written verbal information does allow some ‘listener participation’, for instance an opportunity to rate the product with stars and/or write a review. It is also resolutely mono-modal and mono-lingual, which is worth noting, particularly since much of the verbal information would not need to be verbalized in physical shops, where size could be determined by trying the product on, quality by touching it, and so on. Visual inspection, too, only goes so far - while appropriately lit close up images can reveal textural information (density, smoothness or roughness, etc), they can never convey weight or warmth, for instance.

Checkout

A highly conspicuous “ADD TO BAG” button on the Inspection page adds the item to the shopping bag. A much smaller and quite inconspicuous icon in the top navigation bar actually leads to the shopping bag – yet another way in which Zalando tries to keep customers shopping for as long as possible. But when this icon is clicked, the actual purchase process will begin. It consists of several stages – bag inspection, login, address, confirmation and payment, displayed on a timeline at the top of the page. Once the customers have entered their personal information and credit card information it will be much easier to check out the next time they make an online purchase.

As the contents of the bag have been checked, one last attempt is made to make customers buy more – below the summary of the item (price, size, colour, etc), there is again a series of four images (“You might also like – Inspired by your pick”). This can be compared with attempts to sell additional items in physical stores – if you have just bought a shirt, would you perhaps also like to buy a tie? Declining such an offer can feel awkward and impolite. Choosing not to press a thumbnail image of
another product does not. Online offers of this kind may also be more tempting because of the software’s data about customers’ shopping habits and preferences.

The purchase itself is conditional on extensive registration. Email address, address, “your interests” (“women”, “men”, “no preference”), and permission to send information (all pre-worded: “Yes, I wish to receive occasional emails about special offers, new products and exclusive promotions”) must all be provided. Only once this has been done does the customer receive a welcome – either a ‘Welcome back, Theodoor’ or an instant email, even before the purchase has been made: “Welcome, Theodoor. Your account has been created. Here’s a sneak peek of what you can expect from us.”

The online store shows in various ways that it knows the customer – the welcoming greeting, the use of the customer’s name, the automated filling in of previously saved credit card information and shipping address and the store’s knowledge of customers’ personal preferences. However, the inferences made by the algorithms are not about the customers themselves, but rather about their behaviour and they only work if that behaviour is the behaviour of typical customers, as defined by the seller – customers buying for themselves. When customers buy for someone else, or search the site for purposes other than shopping (for instance, in our case, research purposes), the system will not learn anything about them besides a login name and inconsistent cues from their searches.

Conclusion

On the surface, online shopping resembles traditional forms of shopping. Customers still ‘ask for’ items they are interested in, inspect the goods, and may ultimately purchase them. Sellers still push their wares, by praising them as suitable ‘for you’, offering deals and discounts, and enticing customers to return. All of these strategies are documented in the accounts of traditional forms of shopping, such as those by Mitchell and Hasan, and can be recognized in the design of shopping sites such as that of Zalando.

Yet online shopping is no longer a social ritual in which buyers as well as sellers take pleasure in their interactive skills, sensing an underlying solidarity even if both are out for their own advantage, and ending the interaction, literally or figuratively, with a handshake. Instead the seller is absent, disembodied, harvesting information about the customers and using it in ways that remain invisible to customers. Freed from having to behave politely, the customer can now only enjoy the solitary pleasures of efficient technical control of the system, without distractions, without the need physical or social efforts, in short, there is an element of ‘gamification’, but with a single player. Nor is there a
need for trained salespeople with social skills and knowledge of the products they sell, as everything can be programmed into the software.

This makes *design* of central concern in analysing online shopping. Designers, today, recontextualize shopping, and in doing so, they design the behaviour of consumers, the actions which consumers can and cannot perform. They do so with the resources of language, image, graphic design and (limited) animation. For this reason, it is important to analyse online shopping sites semiotically, as *texts*, and to do so in a way that brings out how these texts represent shopping as well as how they enable it, and how they construct their relation with the consumer.

The design of shopping sites like Zalando conceals its power behind a surface of informality and solidarity. But it is a surface only, a hybrid between formal and informal design features. Yes, it uses casual lexis and incomplete grammar, but only limited ‘listener participation. Yes, it uses visual closeness, but without the sensory dimensions that accompany it in face to face interaction, the potential to touch, for instance. Yes, it uses ‘shared background information’, but it is only one-way – while buyers disclose their interests, knowingly or unwittingly, sellers do not. And finally, all this is designed, ‘planned in advance’, which, in Joos’ framework, is a feature of formal interaction. There are trends to allow users to ‘co-design’, for instance in gaming (cf e.g. Lauwaert, 2009, on Lego) but on sites such as Zalando there is little evidence of this, although users can post images of themselves in fashionable outfits.

These kinds of designs of consumer behaviour are increasingly used, not only on shopping sites, but also, for instance, in online educational and research resources. In Mathletics, a resource for learning mathematics with 4 million students across the world (Van Leeuwen and Iversen, 2017), a ‘concept search’ is conducted much in the same way as the search for a particular item of clothing on the Zalando, and the ‘definition pages’ to which these searches lead, have, on the bottom of the page, ‘sales’ recommendations such as “If you are interested in absolute values you might also be interested in closed curves”. In ResearchGate (Djonov and Van Leeuwen, 2018), an academic social network that boast 15 million members, academic practices such as literature searches are based on the user’s previous searches, just as in Zalando, and formal peer review is replaced by informal comments and popularity scores. Everything is based on the model of the consumer who provides information, searches for and selects products, always on the basis of saved records of their interests and preferences, and gives feedback, always on the basis of ‘likes’, of emotion rather than argument, and always in an informal, convivial style. Such a consumer may seem to have agency, even power, but it is always as a consumer, and always within an environment of constraints and affordances that has been designed by institutions with an infinitely greater power.
This model is precisely the kind of model to which Fairclough drew attention in his classic paper on critical discourse and the marketization of public discourse (Fairclough, 1993). Shopping sites, and the way they construct and enact consumer culture can therefore, in our view, provide important clues for understanding “the general reconstruction of social life on a market basis”, the “appropriation of private domain practices by the public domain” with its “manipulation of interpersonal meaning for strategic, instrumental effect”, and its “technologization of discourse” (Fairclough, 1993: 140, 141). It is for this reason that critical attention to the digitization of social practices and to the digital resources used in social practices is, today, a crucial task for critical discourse analysis.

References


