

Beyond Content: Social Media Interfaces as "Texts" in Critical Media Literacy

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Abstract: The interface of a social networking service (SNS) plays a crucial role in shaping how users engage with and experience the platform (Suchman, 2007; Verbeek, 2015), influencing their interactions, self-expression, and social connections. However, young users may not always recognize interface elements—such as layout, colors, menus, buttons, infinite scrolling, autoplay, and notifications— and their potential influence on attention and engagement (Anderson and Wood, 2021). While media education initiatives frequently deconstruct media "texts" with young people, they largely focus on content-related issues such as misinformation, neglecting the impacts of interface design on perceptions and experiences. This study advocates for an expanded media literacy approach that considers interfaces as "texts" to be critically analyzed. Rooted in critical media literacy (Kellner and Share, 2005), this project aims to document adolescents' representations and experiences of social media interfaces and identify educational strategies promoting critical competences. Conducted in French-speaking Belgium, it adopts a design-based research method (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012) to create and evaluate an offline pedagogical activity. Initial focus groups with 35 adolescents aged 13–18 provided insights that shaped the activity's design, shedding light on young users' awareness of interface components, their potential role and effects, and their attitudes towards these design features. The prototype of the activity was tested in four schools. It combines semiotic approaches (Jewitt and Henriksen, 2016; Souchier, Candel and Gomez-Mejia, 2019) with experiential learning (Kolb, 2015), creating a game-based simulation where learners engage in speculative design (Willis and Anderson, 2013). This approach encourages students to analyze and (de)construct social media interfaces, reflecting on their production and reception contexts. Ultimately, this research calls for an expanded approach to media education that includes interface awareness as a key component of Digital Literacy.

Keywords: Interface, Media Literacy, Social Media, Design-Based Research, Critical Thinking, Adolescents

1. Introduction

Digital interfaces are ubiquitous: we see and use them every day. This omnipresence has made digital interfaces feel so "natural" that they often become "invisible", as noted by Souchier et al. (2019). In other words, we rarely reflect on their presence or their effects. We feel that we are in direct contact with our friends, with content, with the world, without reflecting on the mediating role of the interface. This experience is especially true for young people regarding social network service (SNS) interfaces, as they use these platforms extensively (Allen et al., 2014; Tiidenberg et al., 2017; Hamilton, Nesi and Choukas-Bradley, 2020).

Many media education initiatives already focus on social media. However, these efforts primarily address user interactions and content, whether textual or (audio)visual. Common topics include the influence of social media on representations related to issues such as climate change, disinformation, cyberbullying, hate speech, and political discourse. These approaches prioritize the "text" that mediates interactions between users, often overlooking an examination of the platforms themselves. Jeong, Oh, and Kim (2022) reported this content-focused tendency in digital media education, arguing for a broader perspective that considers platforms "*as media in their own right in the sense that they mediate information, knowledge and data*" (p. 166). They advocate for critically exploring the symbols that make up these platforms, encouraging an education that encourages children to "*unfamiliarise the familiar 'texts'*" (p. 167) of their media experiences.

This project aligns with this shift in perspective, proposing to view the interface with a mediating role deserving of critical educational attention. Instead of focusing on content that mediates between users, it examines interfaces as "texts" mediating between designers and users. As Jeong, Oh, and Kim (2022) observe, media literacy research rarely addresses interfaces. When it does, the focus is typically on technical skills, with critical literacy limited to content or security issues. This project seeks to fill this gap by asking: *How can we help adolescents develop critical skills regarding the interfaces of social networks?*

2. Theoretical Framework: Semiotics as a Tool for Developing Critical Media Literacy About SNS Interfaces

This project is grounded in critical media literacy (CML), as it aspires to foster reflective and critical thinking about media, particularly SNS interfaces. CML (Kellner and Share, 2007; Wright, Sandlin and Burdick, 2023) is an educational movement focused on critical thinking skills regarding media content, form, and media production's broader social and political implications. It is "*a transformative pedagogy with a theoretical base and practical teaching methodology to empower students to examine their world and challenge the dominant myths that seem "normal" or "natural"*" (Funk et al., 2016, p. 320). CML promotes analyzing dominant ideologies, interrogating power structures, and exploring the influence of media ownership and distribution on messages and audiences. Rooted in social justice, it seeks to empower learners to use media responsibly and ethically for a more just and equitable society.

Semiotics are a valuable tool for CML, examining how signs and symbols convey meaning. Grounded in the foundational work of authors like Saussure, Barthes, Peirce or Austin, semiotics has long contributed to media education by equipping students to "read" media texts (De Smedt and Fastrez, 2022). Through semiotic analysis, students learn that media texts— e.g., newspapers, films, television programs, advertisements, or digital content—are not neutral but composed of semiotic resources imbued with specific meanings shaped by creators' intentions and sociocultural contexts. Treating SNS interfaces as media texts, this project explores semiotics as both a theoretical and methodological foundation to analyze and educate critically about them. Two semiotic approaches were identified to develop a critical *technosemiotic* approach to counteract the invisibility of SNS interfaces. Together, these approaches provide a comprehensive framework to question the design and use of these artefacts, drawing attention to their often-overlooked material and symbolic components and their mediating role.

2.1 Multimodal Analysis

The concept of multimodality, grounded in social semiotics (Lebrun, Lacelle and Boutin, 2012; Kress, 2014; Jewitt and Henriksen, 2016), refers to the use of culturally shared semiotic resources that produce various effects, enabling people to (re)construct meaning. Multimodal analysis examines how various modes— images, text, sound, and gestures— combine to create meaning.

As Eikenes and Morrison (2010) argue, interfaces are not flat layers but mediating cultural artefacts that dynamically combine semiotic resources. We suggest applying multimodal analysis to SNS interfaces to counter their naturalization by demonstrating that they incorporate a complex set of semiotic modes that actively shape meaning and user experience. By identifying and deconstructing semiotic resources, multimodal analysis can reveal how SNS interfaces comprise elements (e.g., words, menus, icons, buttons, layout, colors, and typography) that help users interact with the system and make sense of the available information. It can also shed light on auditory (e.g., notification sounds) and haptic elements (e.g., clicks, swipe, scroll), showing how they can influence attention and interactions.

Additionally, multimodal analysis highlights power and agency dynamics within interfaces by examining the affordances of modes—what they materially offer, how they are repeatedly used, and the social conventions shaping their use and meaning (Jewitt and Henriksen, 2016). Studies like Djonov and Van Leeuwen's (2018) on ResearchGate and Jewitt and Henriksen's (2016) on Pinterest illustrate how applying multimodal analysis to SNS interfaces reveals how affordances guide interactions, promoting certain interactions while constraining others (Mangen and van der Weel, 2016).

2.2 "Screen-Writing" and the Concept of Architext

Introduced in 1996 by Emmanuel Souchier, "screen-writing" refers to the reading and writing processes in digital environments. The contributions to screen-writing (e.g., Souchier, 1996; Jeanneret, 2007; Souchier, Candel and Gomez-Mejia, 2019) are rooted in a *technosemiotic* perspective, which links text interpretation to their production and reception contexts, shaped by material, technical, historical, social, and cultural conditions (Souchier et al, 2019).

Central to this literature is *architexts* (Souchier et al, 2019)—digital textual structures that organize and regulate other texts and communication processes closely linked to interfaces. Like multimodal analysis, screen-writing theory views interfaces as sites of power and agency, shaping user behavior by structuring text display and communication conditions. Authors argue that while interfaces may seem neutral, they are deliberate

constructions by designers. 'Small recurring forms' (e.g., menus, headings, lists, search bars), which guide users through digital spaces, are examined, highlighting how their familiarity and recursiveness contribute to the invisibility of interfaces. Screen-writing theory also explores interfaces' sociocultural and ideological dimensions, focusing on the conventions shaping their design and reception. More specifically, it critically reflects on the economic imperatives embedded in SNS design and its demand for user productivity, highlighted in discussions of semiocapitalism (Berardi, 2009). It also considers how digital writing-reading activities engage the senses and body.

Beyond its theoretical contributions, the literature on screen-writing provides practical tools, such as analytical grids and case studies, for deconstructing digital texts (Souchier et al., 2019). Saemmer, Tréhondart and Coquelin (2022) drew on this framework to develop media literacy workshops. These workshops invited participants to question their interpretative process of media texts, including the interface of media websites. This project is among the few media education activities we found to focus on deconstructing interfaces and examining their reception.

2.3 Definition of Critical Competences

By integrating the contributions of multimodal analysis and screen-writing within a competence-based approach (Fastrez, 2010; Lebrun, Lacelle and Boutin, 2012) of (critical) media literacy, we identified four competence areas for developing a critical education about SNS interfaces. The first is interface design, which refers to competences required to identify and evaluate (e.g., aesthetically, ethically, etc.) the techno-semiotic components of SNS interfaces. The second area concerns the socio-economic context in which SNS interfaces are produced. Related competences imply the ability to question this context (e.g., producers' identity, intentions, etc.). The third area concerns the reception contexts of SNS interfaces. Related competences concern the ability to reflect on reception conditions (e.g., users' identity, needs, difficulties, practices, etc.) and the potential effects on users. Finally, the fourth area pertains to personal practices regarding SNS interfaces, the ability to interrogate them and their correspondence to one's needs. By integrating these four areas, we identified five key critical competences regarding the understanding and use of SNS interfaces. They can be formulated as follows: (1) considering SNS interfaces as multimodal techno-semiotic system that conveys information/messages, (2) conceiving the role of the production context on the techno-semiotic choices of the SNS interface, (3) reflecting on the potential reception effects of the techno-semiotic choices of SNS interfaces at the individual and (4) collective levels, and (5) adopting a user behavior (as reader and producer) of the interface that considers these reflections/evaluations.

3. Method

This research adopts a design-based research (DBR) approach to address the question: "*How can we help young people (14-18 y/o) develop critical skills regarding social network interfaces?*" DBR is an iterative methodological approach for designing, evaluating and refining educational interventions like pedagogical tools, programs, and activities (Anderson and Shattuck, 2012; McKenney and Reeves, 2013). DBR enables us to develop and test educational activities that apply semiotic (de)construction of SNS interfaces to assess whether it can help enhance teenagers' critical competences. It is a collaborative approach where researchers and practitioners (e.g., teachers or educators) collaborate to co-create the intervention. In this study, we work with *Action Médias Jeunes*, a media education association active in French-speaking Belgium.

We conducted seven focus groups to inform the initial activity design phase and to document adolescents' representations and use of SNS interfaces. Participants drew an existing SNS interface, which served as the basis for group discussions. These sessions took place at a school in French-speaking Belgium and involved 35 adolescents aged 13 to 18. We analyzed session results using thematic analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1994) on NVivo. These discussions provided valuable insights into young people's practices, questions, challenges, and interests, grounding the educational activity in their lived experiences. The following sections summarize key findings from these focus group discussions and outline how they informed the design of our educational intervention.

4. Findings

4.1 Participants' Representations of SNS Interfaces

Participants demonstrated a high level of interest in the topic of SNS, likely due to their frequent use and the "fun" aspect of discussing these platforms. This engagement indicates that SNS is a relatable topic for young people and a suitable focus for exploring interfaces' roles and effects on the public.

The drawing exercise revealed participants' knowledge of key SNS interface components. The level of detail varied between individuals, though common trends emerged. First, common layout design was often drawn correctly, including menus, buttons, research bar, etc. Results show a solid, if basic, familiarity with the standard layout of SNS interfaces. Common interface elements related to content were also consistently depicted, such as username display, location tag, timestamps, and possible reactions. Second, students prioritized images over text. Posts were often depicted visually, while text was minimal or represented in simple, abstract forms like waves. Third, we observed a limited but specific use of color. Although colors were available, they were used sparingly, suggesting that color is perhaps not perceived as an important factor in SNS interfaces. A notable exception was the "like" feature, often highlighted in red, indicating its high visibility and memorability. Finally, metrics such as follower counts, likes, and *snapstreaks* were frequently included in drawings, reflecting an importance, whether conscious or not, accorded to the quantitative elements that shape engagement and user status on these platforms.

While participants were enthusiastic about discussing SNS and had mostly no trouble drawing their interface from memory, the term "interface" itself was unfamiliar or confusing for some and required further explanation. In addition, participants often strayed from the topic of interface design during the discussions. When questioned about the positive or negative aspects of SNS and their potential effects and affordances, they often shifted the discussion to the platform's content, interactions, or users. This resulted in difficulties steering discussions towards the design elements of SNS and their relevant roles and effects, but it also highlights the interest of the educational project.

4.2 Traces of Competences in Interface Analysis

Focus group participants received questions about the affordances of SNS interfaces (e.g., Do you feel the platform encourages or discourages specific actions?) and potential effects (e.g., What effects might these design elements have on you or others?). In response, some students were aware of how specific design features can extend the time spent on SNS. For instance, one student noted, *"It beeps, so you check it out"*, referring to notifications that draw users back to the app. Another observed, *"Short videos make you continue to the next one"*, illustrating an understanding of how content formatting can encourage prolonged usage. Some students recognized how specific design elements encourage repeated platform use and content sharing. For instance, one participant noted, *"I tell myself, oh I must make my snapstreaks"*, explaining how gamification features can create a sense of obligation or motivation, drawing users back to the platform to maintain their "score". Some students also acknowledged how the display of the number of followers can have effects on engagement dynamics. One participant mentioned, *"When I was younger, I think it was a bit of a race between friends, who had the most followers."* Some students also recognized the potential influence of likes and engagement metrics on users' well-being and emotions. A student noted, *"Some people can think, 'Wow, that person did this and got so many likes, while I barely got any"*, highlighting how the display of engagement metrics on SNS interfaces can affect self-perception and contribute to feelings of insecurity. In addition, some participants reflected on the social implications of SNS interfaces. Talking about likes, one student shared: *"It's more about strengthening friendships,"* suggesting that engagement metrics can act as a form of social affirmation that reinforces connections. Conversely, they can also negatively influence these relationships, as one participant admitted: *"If my friends don't like my post, either they haven't seen it, or I'm taking it a bit personally."* Finally, some students identified privacy risks tied to the immediacy of social sharing: One student highlighted, *"It can go fast, you take a photo and don't pay attention to what's behind it, and that's it, it can be dangerous."* This comment suggests an awareness of how spontaneous content sharing, like on BeReal, may lead to unintended exposure and image right issues.

However, these examples represent traces of critical reflection on the effects of SNS interfaces, demonstrated only by some participants. Overall, the discussions revealed varying levels of awareness and critical thinking on the topic: While some participants could identify such potential effects spontaneously or in response to specific follow-up questions, others gave these implications less consideration. These differences and the potential

debates they could spark emphasize the importance of a pedagogical approach that exposes students to diverse perspectives on SNS interfaces, encouraging them to reflect on aspects they may not have previously considered.

We observed that time management and security were among the most frequently identified potential effects of SNS interfaces, reflecting that these are commonly discussed topics at school or home and/or are more clearly perceived. On the other hand, discussions about emotional, relational, and societal impacts were less prominent or tended to remain at a superficial level. These topics also emerged less spontaneously, surfacing when raised by the interviewer. This gap indicates a valuable opportunity for media educators to encourage deeper reflection on these dimensions, which may not naturally emerge in peer discussions. In addition, older participants tended to express a shift in perspective, particularly concerning social validation metrics like followers and likes. As adolescents age, their values, needs and/or practices may evolve, highlighting the interest in focusing on different aspects of the SNS interface during a pedagogical activity depending on the participants' age, questions, interests and challenges.

4.3 Personal Practices

Discussions revealed varying levels of awareness and intentionality among students regarding personalization settings like location sharing and profile privacy. For example, one student had selectively enabled location-sharing on Snapchat according to her needs, stating: *"I only activated it for my mother"*. Another admitted uncertainty, saying: *"I don't know if it's activated for everyone or not"*. Some students had deliberately set their profiles to public or private to align with their preferences, while others lacked clarity about their settings or related reasoning. These differences highlight the need for educational activities that help young people explore personalization options, understand default settings, and tailor their SNS experiences to their needs. The discussions also emphasized the value of peer learning as students were exposed to new perspectives and shared practical advice, potentially inspiring or enabling them to make more deliberate choices for greater control, safety, or personal preference.

Regarding screen time, participants also had mixed reflections. While most acknowledged spending significant time on social media (often one to several hours per day), their feelings about this usage varied. Some felt dissatisfied, seeing the time spent as *"too much"* or *"wasted"*. At the same time, they experience difficulties in cutting back. One student shared, *"I'm trying to reduce that more and more, and getting under an hour is my goal, but it's a bit hard"*. Others viewed their social media time with less concern. One student said, *"If I really wanted to stop, I'd know how to do it, but I don't necessarily mind spending a bit of time on it."* Another remarked, *"It's not like I'm addicted"*. These attitude differences suggest a need for educational approaches that address screen time awareness and self-regulation strategies through interface personalization, especially for students who feel a sense of dissatisfaction but struggle to make changes.

4.4 Design and Tests of the Educational Activity

These insights from focus groups, combined with the theoretical framework and the expertise of collaborative media educators, helped us develop a pedagogical approach to foster the identified critical competences regarding SNS interfaces. Experiential learning (Kolb, 2015) plays a central role in this approach. Students are encouraged to *"learn by doing"* as they engage in the creation of interfaces. By placing students in a creator's role, this approach aims to make participants reflect on the intentional design choices behind SNS interfaces. This approach aligns with CML's emphasis on production: Students will create alternative media to analyze and challenge mainstream design elements critically. This approach also connects with critical and speculative design principles, encouraging participants to use design to stimulate meaningful reflection and spark debate rather than to produce functional objects (Willis and Anderson, 2013; Wuyckens, 2024). The pedagogical approach is socio-constructivist (Amineh and Asl, 2015) via peer-to-peer interaction.

The developed educational activity based on this pedagogical approach is structured as follows: First, the educator initiates a general discussion about SNS, exploring which platforms students use, how they engage with them, and what purposes they serve. Students then divide into groups and assume the role of SNS designers. They start by analyzing existing SNS interfaces to identify strengths, weaknesses, and design features they like or dislike by using screenshots, their knowledge of platforms, etc. In a subsequent production/creation phase, they design their own SNS platform. Each group must adhere to a specific economic model: data monetization, public funding, crowdfunding, or subscription-based payment. Considering the model's implications, students work to create a prototype of their SNS, making key decisions about the platform's name, target audience, type of content, algorithm, notifications, etc. They must also draw the news feed interface and

user profile page. Each group presents their imagined SNS and its interfaces, explaining any rationale behind their design choices and how the economic model may have influenced their decisions. Finally, the educator guides a collective discussion about (1) game/design experience and user experience of SNS interfaces, (2) attention economy and data collection, (3) potential individual and (4) social/societal effects of SNS interfaces.

This activity was tested in four schools, and preliminary results highlight successes and areas for improvement. First, engagement and motivation were high in most groups. Students were enthusiastic about the activity and enjoyed the creative exercise of designing alternative interfaces. However, specific individual interests and personalities may have affected engagement levels in certain groups.

Secondly, the activity successfully sparked discussions, with some groups reflecting on how design elements can, for example, influence emotions or security. In some cases, this led to a shift in perspective, as students moved from a strictly positive view of SNS interfaces to a more nuanced critique of the choices embedded in SNS design. However, discussions varied in depth: some groups focused predominantly on aesthetics. Sometimes, one or two students also tend to lead or dominate overall group engagement, sparking fewer debates and limiting collaborative learning.

A recurring issue was keeping students focused on the interface rather than the content shared. The activity may require more structured facilitation to help students focus critically on the interface. Finding a balance between allowing students to learn through hands-on experience or learning from each other and providing structured guidance from educators is crucial to enhancing the activity's effectiveness.

Lastly, time constraints limited the depth of exploration in some sessions. Although extending the activity duration could allow for a richer critical analysis, teachers have limited time to dedicate to the topic, underscoring the need for efficient activity design.

4.5 Educational Implications

The findings underscore the potential of semiotics-based educational activities in fostering critical media literacy regarding SNS interfaces and interfaces in general. The activity's design—rooted in experiential learning and socio-constructivist principles—demonstrated notable success in engaging students and motivating them to reflect on SNS interfaces. By focusing on the design elements of SNS interfaces rather than content alone, students begin to recognize how design choices can influence users' attention, behaviors, emotions, and relationships. The educational activity developed for this purpose sparked engagement and critical reflection among students. It provided a platform for them to collaboratively imagine alternative interfaces, empowering them to question existing models. This reflective engagement marks a promising step in equipping students with skills to consciously and critically navigate social media environments, potentially raising their interest and ability to regulate their personal use.

However, the activity also revealed areas for refinement. One recurring challenge includes helping students focus on the interface rather than the content. An improvement might offer a more structured facilitation approach, particularly for groups struggling to develop critical debates independently. Providing educators with structured discussion guidelines could help students sustain a critical focus on interface design elements. These findings point to valuable directions for refining the educational approach. Iterative refinements will also include the development of an assessment tool to evaluate to what extent the activity enhances the identified critical competencies.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study explores the potential of integrating semiotics into media literacy education to empower young users in navigating SNS interfaces. The findings suggest that a structured yet flexible pedagogical approach, blending experiential learning with peer-to-peer discussions, can foster critical thinking. However, the study also highlights challenges, such as the difficulty students face distinguishing between content and design and the need for scaffolding from educators to maintain this focus. Addressing these challenges through iterative refinement will further strengthen the activity's impact.

Ultimately, this approach offers a promising avenue for equipping young people with the tools to question and consciously interact with the SNS interfaces in their daily lives. In an era where digital environments increasingly shape perceptions, emotions, behavior and social dynamics, fostering this critical awareness is essential for promoting healthy, intentional media practices. As social networks and their interfaces evolve, ongoing

adaptation of media literacy education will be crucial, positioning adolescents as informed, empowered participants in the digital age.

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