



**SOUTH-EAST EUROPEAN CENTRE FOR SEMIOTIC STUDIES**

**Department of Economics**

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**THE DIGITAL MIND: SEMIOTIC EXPLORATIONS IN DIGITAL CULTURE**

Author Summary of a dissertation thesis

for the acquisition of the degree Doctor of science. Field of higher education: 3. Social, economic and legal sciences. Professional direction: 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Culture Sciences (Semiotics).

Sofia

2022

The dissertation thesis entitled "The Digital Mind: Semiotic Explorations in Digital Culture" is published in English by Springer Publishing House in 2022 and consists of a three parts, Introduction, 13 chapters, conclusions and Index. The volume of the work is 375 standard pages (674,861 characters). List of references: 369 titles.

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## **The digital mind: semiotic explorations of digital culture**

*Kristian Bankov*

### **Summary of the dissertation work**

#### **Introduction: the semiotics of the digital culture**

**Summary of the introduction:** The main objective of the introduction is to present a systematic and analytical picture of the modern state of digital semiotics and to outline some ideas for the future development of discipline. The first part is an attempt to draw up a map of the existing semiotic contributions, divided into different theoretical schools and covering the publications of the main languages of semiotic community (Fig. 1). The second part is devoted to some critical notes on the main semiotic paradigms applied to digital culture. The main criticism is that most of

the existing contributions do not call into question classical semiotic models, but rather adapt the new cultural reality to them. There is also a strong divide between schools and scholars who ignore each other's audiences.

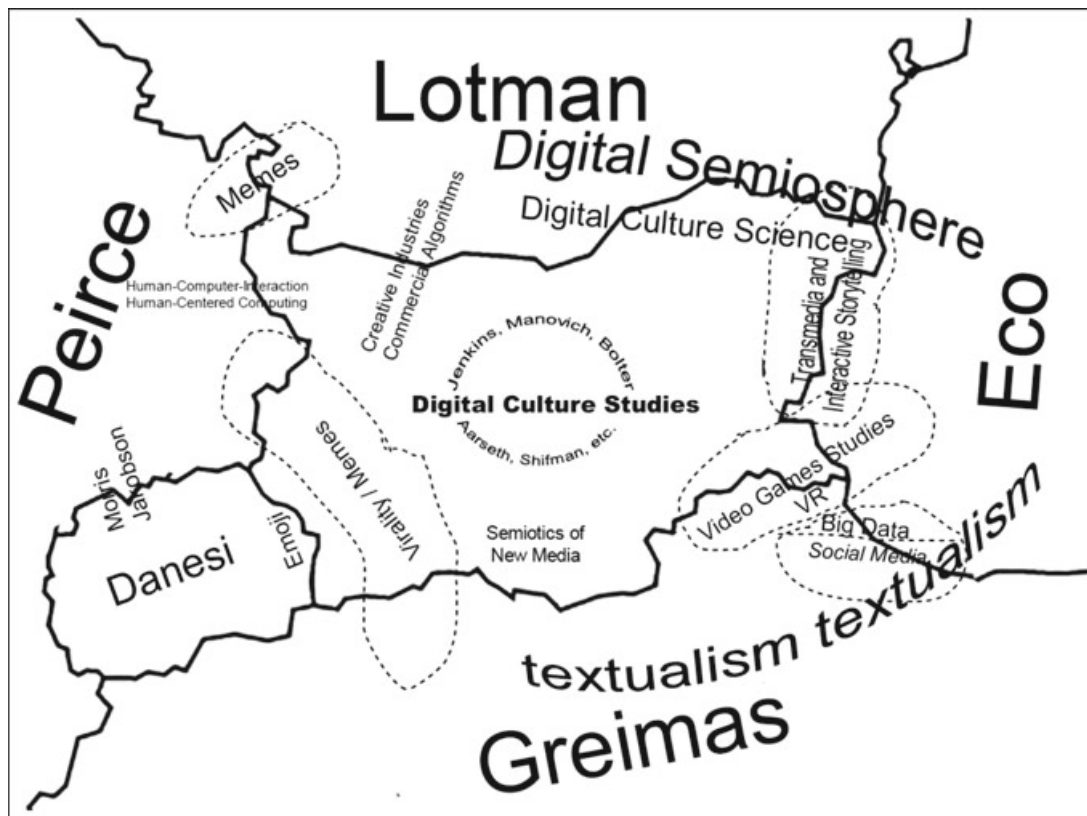


Fig. 1

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**Summary of the chapter:** The purpose of this chapter is to define the general framework of the book, and in particular the model of the semiosphere. Web 2.0 platforms are considered the main cultural operative of our time and the most typical way the Internet shapes digital culture. Currently, the majority of the world's population is sweating in digital culture. The first part of the chapter will look at striking similarities between web 2.0 platforms and the Semiosphere. It's Lotman. This will determine the equivalents between the elements of the classic semiotic pattern and these fabrics me

(or fabric phosphers, as I will call them). The second part will explore the fundamental difference between DNA at the centre of the semiosphere (as conceived by Lotman) and computer code and commercial algorithms at the heart of the platforms responsible for their cultural functioning. Then there will be a parallel between the cultural reality of the past, in which intellectual elites and academia have been the driving force of culture, and the modern proactive (or even aggressive) core of semispheres, in which sec-reticent and patently protected algorithms form a cultural reality motivated exclusively by commercial success. The head will finish with an analysis of three platfosphers.

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**Chapter summary:**

In the second chapter of this part, I intend to consider the key concept of interactivity as the basis for another paradigmatic change in sign science, which to keep up with the digital transformation of culture. The main point is to emphasise that the textual approach, methodologically the most developed form of semiotics, is not effective when it comes to the analysis of cultural content, available in interactive form. To better illustrate this issue, I intend to outline a new approach to video game analysis in which the limitations of textualism are more pronounced than with the annexes to less formalized interactive cultural phenomena. The aim of the example is to show that a new semiotic approach is possible, etc., and that a consistent part of the methodological achievements of textualism can be reconfigured to support the theoretical basis of a semiotics of interactivity.

**Part II Semiotic Explorations in Experience Economy**

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**Chapter summary:**

In this chapter, I will be exploring some of the implications of copyright, following existing research on the way in which new digital technologies provide an effective interactive experience. The semiotic core of the issue lies in the fact that the standard concept of copyright is linked to the textualist notion of *fixation* of any discourse of creative expression.

Such a textual fixation is made possible by culturally codified systems of discursive production. In the meantime, the new media and a range of technologies allow for the registration and dissemination of more genuine and non-codified forms of sensorimotor experience and collective interaction. In this way, the boundaries of what might traditionally be considered “intellectual property” are slightly blurred and explain the “experiential turn” in copyright protection. In the light of these considerations, I will examine the current definition of copyright, especially the concept of authored work and fixation in tangible form. I will further prove that the new forms of media and entertainment content call into question the very philosophy of the law.

<b>4 Semiotics of Experience and Digital Special FX</b> . . . . .	51
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**Chapter summary:**

In this chapter I shall first examine a tendency in screen design—their dematerialization and extraordinary proliferation—with important semiotic implications. The inquiry in the first part is mostly concerned with the driving forces of this process which come from the market and the advent of the so called “experience economy”. The conclusions of the first part suggest that the evolution of the screen will most probably allow digital media to provide for the possibility of transfer of the whole perceptual picture and thus facilitate the communication of the integral experience. In order to illustrate this unusual reflection for semiotic inquiry, I will use some examples from sci-fi movies such as *Total Recall* (1990): Directed by Paul Verhoeven; written by: Philip K. Dick, *Strange Days* (1995): Directed by Kathryn Bigelow; written by: James Cameron, *Open Your Eyes* (1997): Directed by Alejandro Amenábar; written by Alejandro Amenábar and Mateo Gil, *Matrix* (1999) by Wachowski brother and sister, *Vanilla Sky* (2001): Directed by Cameron Crowe; written by: Alejandro Amenábar, *Minority Report* (2002) Directed by Steven Spielberg; written by Philip K. Dick, Scott Frank and Jon Cohen, *Inception* (2010) Written and Directed by Christopher Nolan, *The Sleeper* (1973) Written and Directed by Woody Allen; *Blade Runner 2049*. Semiotics at the present state of the art is efficient when it comes to communication realized through “lazy texts”, i.e. texts as lazy machines (Eco), that require enunciative strategies for simulation of the reality effect and an active interpreter with a system of expectations, shaped by textual competence. However, when communication begins to be dominated by the transfers of “slices” of experienced or imagined reality with strong sensorimotor impact, then the mechanisms of signification and interpretation also change, as well as the paradigms which have placed signification and interpretation at the core of the semiotic inquiry. The conclusions of the chapter foresee the necessity of semiotic training which will be more open to other disciplines, fieldwork and laboratories—from the great school of anthropology (Mauss, Levy-Strauss), ethnography and qualitative research to the laboratories of cognitive sciences and the last advancements in digital user experience research.

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**Chapter summary:**

In this chapter I will trace the evolution of football since 1990, with a primary focus on comparing it to the situation prior to that year, and highlighting essential elements of its transformation into avant-garde *experience economy*. This is the less semiotic of all chapters. The theoretical reflections rely on market data, statistical evidence and previous research. Although these are studied by many, the original accent here is on the impact of the digital technologies and the phenomenological explanation of the football experience. One of this text's most important contributions is to articulate the common football euphoria in respect of two complementary kinds: the euphoria of identity, and the sensorimotor euphoria of embodied experience. The first is mainly related to 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 game development, where the preconditions for the sport's modern commodification (or *hypercommodification*, to use Giulianotti term) are rooted. Much of this chapter is devoted to a detailed analysis of how digital communication technology and the organization of football have changed in various ways since the 1990s, leading to player brands, to its corporate turn, and to its commodified experience becoming multimillion-dollar businesses.

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**Chapter summary:** This chapter is rather descriptive than analytical, with the aim to provide a semiotic insight into the substantial cultural changes in the way *sexuality is experienced* in the age of the internet. The main focus is on the way new communication technologies and the mechanisms of Web 2.0 have changed the intimate relations, how they have commercialized sex in its core functions, how the digitalization of prostitution has changed its commercial structure, etc., all in favour of transforming this crucial aspect of our lives to suit the experience economy. More concretely, particular considerations are dedicated to cyber dating and hookup culture, to erotica and pornography websites, to videogames, to webcamming, hidden cams, and online voyeurism, to sex workers' platforms, websites, and forums, to digitally engineered sex and to the dark side of the net: cyberbullying, online pedophilia, revenge porn, etc.

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**Summary of the chapter:**

Semiotics of transaction is presented here as a new approach, oriented towards the semiotic mechanisms of the transaction of economic value. After analyzing the nature of the main semiotic device for value transactions—the money sign—we have identified in its core the trust in the future of the economic system of exchange and the scarcity of its availability as a condition for its value and meaning. Such characteristics brought us to search for theoretical support in the existential analytics of temporality devised by Heidegger, where we found homology between economic

scarcity and the thesis of the primordial finitude of temporality, which is a scarcity of time. Thus we have distinguished two levels for the semiotic analysis of transactions—one deep/authentic level of the primordial formation of the value and one superficial level of the commercial practices of market exchange. From this point of view, the new digital economy seems to bring closer the two levels, transforming the availability of time for each person into the major economical resource. Chapter 8 Semiotic review of legal tender and digital money

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**Summary of the chapter:**

In the first part of the chapter, I shall summarize the most important findings of the semiotic study of the money sign. In order to comprehend the essential feature of digital money, it will be necessary to undertake a tripartition of the main types of money sign: namely commodity money; representative money and fiat money. I shall then employ this approach to position the most important contributions of other authors in the fields of semiotics and surrounding disciplines. The second part elaborates a semiotic approach to the notion of legal tender, wherein the latter is seen as a semiotic mechanism which provides specific conditions for the formation of the value of money. I shall combine a historical review with a focus on important theoretical reflections concerning the implementation of pure legal tender. The last part is dedicated to a proposal for a semiotic model of the fiat money sign. This model was developed and implemented as a reflection on certain critical indications of the global financial crisis of 2008–2009, wherein the ‘semioticisation of money’ was used for explication. My model is based on one of the most insightful definitions of money which sees them as “trust inscribed”

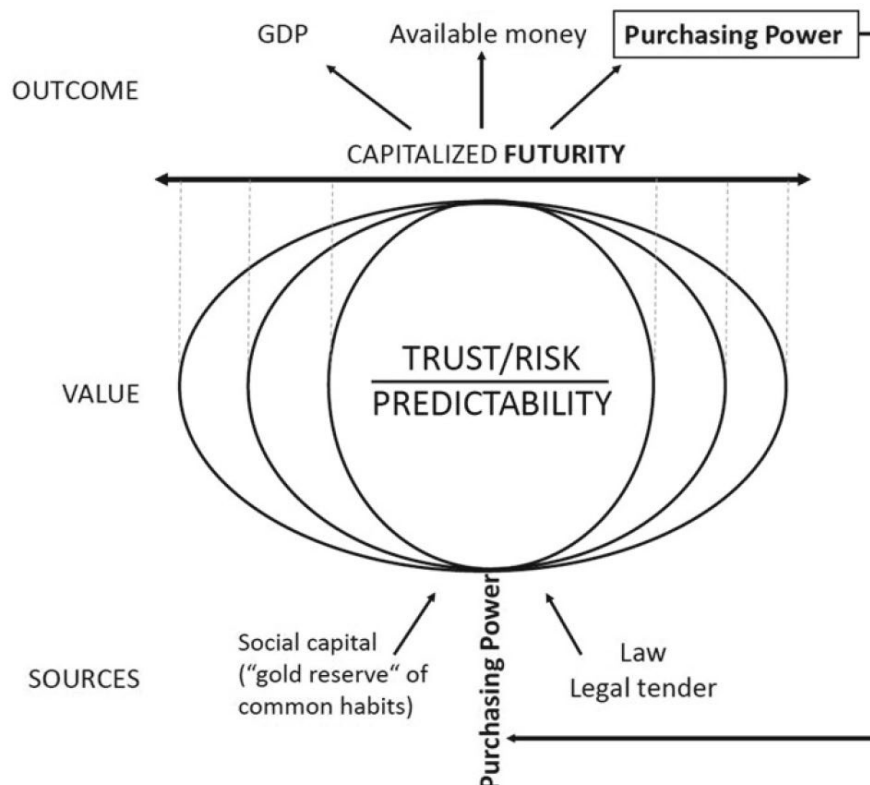


Fig. 8.4 Semiotic model of fiat money

## Part III Collective and individual identities in digital culture

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#### Summary of the chapter:

This chapter first examines the history and the role of the Bulgarian flag in the process of constitution of the Bulgarian national identity, starting from the second half of the ninetieth century. Afterwards is designed a semiotic model of the identity, which puts the major accent on its constructed character and its communicative flexibility while performing our social interactions. A basic divide of the communicative resources of the self sees opposition of the individual characteristics to the collective ones. Then follows an interpretation of the flows of value for the identity in the social intercourse, modelled as an “ego economy”, where the reception and production of recognition from and for the others is seen as an “ego currency”. With this model is evidenced the particular efficacy of the national symbols, to which is added the efficacy of the “nationalist libido”. Thus follows a part where the use of the nationalist flags, colours, symbols and narrative in new media prepares a fertile ground for the new digital populism, masterfully employed by the right-wing figures with important political results and disquieting prospects for the future.

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#### Summary of the chapter:

The basis of this study is the encyclopedic model of culture by Umberto Eco. Even before I turned my interest towards education in the digital age, I was struck by Eco’s idea of the encyclopedia conceived in the early 1970s: one which quite accurately predicted the structure of information on the Internet. *My main hypothesis concerns the formation of portions of encyclopedic competence*, where the advent of the Internet has obviously caused profound changes as evident in students’ approach to learning. I use another point of view for the same phenomenon arising from critical

sociology with regard to the changes in the structure of identity in the generations born into the Internet era. The third point of view comes from a brief study of how search engines have evolved 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 the search engines, are among the main factors in the emergence of a new type of identity in millennials, representing a *culture of navigation*.

**Chapter 11 A Semiotic Exploration in the Web 2.0 Emoti(c)onal Discursivity in Public Debates** . . . . . 159

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**Chapter summary:**

In 2018 the Istanbul Convention (IC) was declared unconstitutional in Bulgaria. The decision was taken after several months of fierce public debate among the Bulgarian people mostly on the Social media about the consequences of the adoption of the IC. The debate was dominated by a populist position which rejected the document. From this debate, the word “gender”, literally transcribed in Cyrillic (d\_end\_p) and without a literal translation into Bulgarian, became not only a neologism with acutely offensive connotations for the LGBT community, but also a generally accepted “universal” insult. I will argue that the very reason for the rejection of the IC in its core is semiotic. I share some reflections on the digital “undomestication” of the mind as a reversal cultural process to what is considered the domestication of the mind by writing (Goody 1977). Although cyber offenders act alone in front of their computers, their behavior is determined by the factors of crowd (or better e-crowd) psychology which goes far to explain many low-profile interventions in the debate. Such a framework also fits well within the logic of the so-called “post truth” situation. The final part of the chapter applies some well-established semiotic tools to list the major communicative codes of the meme and other visual cyber “attacks” to the falsely attributed ideology of IC.

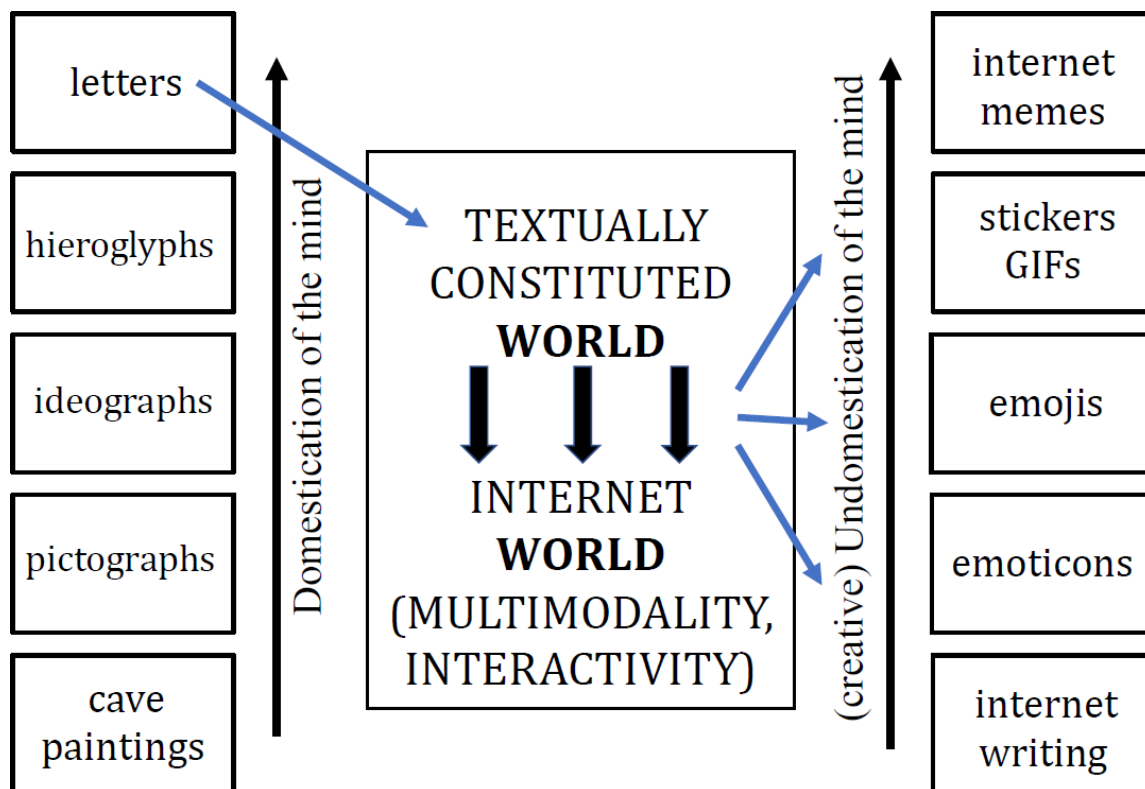


Fig. 11.2. Mirror pattern of mind taming/de-experimentation

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**Chapter summary:**

In this chapter, I shall look at the relationship between methodological textualism and eroticism and how this relationship develops in the digital culture, the age of hypertextualism. The starting point is the work of Roland Barthes on the concept of text and especially *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973), where we find enough evidence that the attitude of the French semiologist to the text is fetishistic with explicitly erotic references. Such an attitude is quite representative of the entire era of structuralism and post-structuralism. The era of hypertext (and the Internet in general) is changing the culture of text into newforms of intertextual exchange where the sensorimotor pleasure itself becomes the object of communicative exchange. The eroticism of hypertext is more explicit than that of text and takes on countless forms, which are difficult to place within a general model. The last part examines the consequences of hypertextual reality for educational institutions and their role in digital societies.

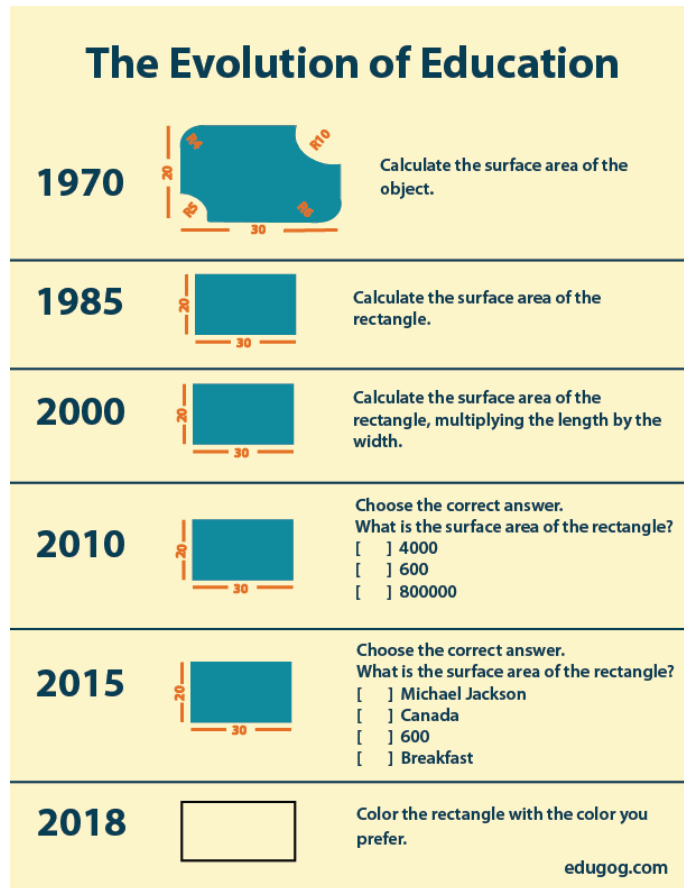


Fig. 12.1. Evolution of education (edugog.com)

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### Chapter summary:

In this chapter I shall examine the new forms of consumer rituals that have emerged after the advent of the world's biggest social media. I use as a point of reference and a theoretical model the classification of the consumer rituals as "instruments for meaning transfer", as describe in the famous book by Grant McCracken *Culture and Consumption* (McCracken, 1988). His classification includes four types of rituals for transfer of meaning from the goods to the consumer's identity, namely rituals of possession, exchange, grooming and divestment. If we examine the expression of the consumer behavior in *Facebook* we can, as a first thing, note that the whole process of

consumption has entered a new phase, almost entirely virtual, i.e. with very weak relation to the material, tangible phase of the consumption process. The whole platform encourages its users to apply their creativity in completely new forms with which they transfer meaning from their favourite goods, services, brands and lifestyles to their identity/profile. I am offering a list of the various options that Facebook offers for the consumer rituals, ordered by their semiotic impact in the process of the transfer of meaning. Such options are the name, the profile picture, the family state, the timeline, albums, etc.

### **Conclusions in Time of COVID-19**

The COVID-19 has been unfolding for nearly two years, dramatically coinciding with the story of this book. It may not be the deadliest pandemic in human history, but it is certainly the one with the strongest socio-cultural and socio-economic impact. No such catastrophe has been written about, photographed, broadcast and published as much as this one. We are talking about billions of manhours 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, precisely those consequences of digital culture which are the subject of this book. The phrase “the new normal” has become a standing joke for the extraordinary changes in all spheres of life that we are forced to accept involuntarily, in order to adapt to the current situation. The “new normal” today is a joke because it has not actually been established yet. It is still a work in progress, but the expression has served to mark the advent of stability after previous major world crises. The pandemic has caused *the paradox of the new normal* everywhere. The digital transformation had made societies more dynamic than ever, but there was a market, political and social logic to that dynamic. The mega black swan of the pandemic shook the whole system to its foundations and all logic of continuity with the past were severed. Millions of works in the humanities and social sciences such as the present one remained in a state of weightlessness, awaiting the unpredictable stabilization phases of the new normal. Let us take *money*, one of the most important themes in this work. Governments have doled out trillions to keep businesses breathing artificially in this period of forced productive and consumer stagnation. This is an entirely new situation in the relationship between the purchasing power of money and the actors in the social contract—law, government and society. Surely the “new normal” of money will be enriched by this experience. The utility of the semiotic models of the money sign here is not so much to predict exactly what it will look like after the pandemic, but

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