

The PINTERESTing Thing about Communication

Communication is an essential part of human's life and has always been present in all sorts of mediums, either spoken or written. With the advent of the Internet and advancement of technologies as we move into the 21st century, communication has begun to evolve and is increasingly being carried out in the virtual sphere. However in recent years, some of these communication networks have been founded on images rather than text and have since gained traction as new communication mediums. Of interest in this paper is Pinterest, as it has gained immense popularity within a short span of two years. Being image-dominant, Pinterest thus differs from the traditional forms of communication, that being either spoken or written. This paper seeks to compare Pinterest to Crystal's (2006) features of speech and writing, and analyze this new medium of communication and its effects on society in general.

Pinterest is an image-based online social network whereby users share pictures, videos or links that interest them, which then appear as images in the form of pins on a pinboard. Following its launch in 2010, Pinterest has since grown to become the world's 35th most popular website. In terms of monthly usage time per visitor, Pinterest is the second most used online social network at about 98 minutes (statista.com, 2012, in Ottoni et al., 2013). According to the Pew Research Centre, users are generally young people, well-educated and have higher income. In addition, there are about five times as many females as males (Ottoni et al., 2013).

Pinterest essentially functions as a digital pinboard for users to share and organize things that interest them. As members, users can pin either user-created photos or images and information sourced from the Internet onto user-created pinboards. Users decide the theme to each pinboard and also the number of boards. Users can also privatize their boards thus making them visible only to themselves. Upon pinning an image, users can name the image and include a description of up to 500 words. Subsequently, the pin is shared with their followers, which is their Pinterest social network. Followers can like, comment or repin the image to his or her own boards. Pins obtained from the Internet would be directly linked to the source URL (Hansen et al., 2012, Mull and Lee, 2014). In essence, a pin is an image that is related to some meta-data information, namely a unique pin number, description, number of likes, number of comments, number of repins, board name and source (Mittal et al., 2013).

As Pinterest only gained significance in 2012 due to its remarkable growth, there are relatively few mentions of Pinterest in the literature (Ottoni et al., 2013). The few existing research explored how pinners differ in their demographics and motivations in using Pinterest (Ottoni et al., 2013, Mull and Lee, 2014), as well as its marketing and advertising value (Delo, 2012, Mozdzer, 2012 and Tornoe, 2014).

According to Ottoni et al. (2013), there are gender differences in Pinterest. Specifically, females favour lightweight interactions, which are “actions that allow users to interact with others without having to spend a lot of time thinking about what to say”, (Ottoni et al., 2013: 458). Females also tend to reciprocate social links, in terms of follower/followee relation. Furthermore, females are more active and generate general content, and have a greater use of affection and positive emotion words in their description. The two genders also differed in their motivations behind the use of Pinterest – females are more interested in commercial content while males tend to act as curators of items that appeal to them.

In another research, Mull and Lee (2014) explored users’ motivations in using Pinterest and revealed five dimensions of uses and gratifications, namely ‘fashion’, ‘virtual exploration’, ‘organization’, ‘creative projects’ and ‘entertainment’. The former three dimensions were present in previous similar studies of other social network sites, while the latter two dimensions were new to this research.

Periodicals have also established the importance of Pinterest in driving website traffic. Research found that Pinterest drove 3.68% of social media traffic to publishers in September 2013, more than that from Twitter, LinkedIn and Reddit combined (Shareaholic, 2013 in Tornoe, 2014). Many websites have since incorporated the “Pin it” button on their website for both marketing and advertising purposes. This button effectively functions as a browser bookmark and thus allows users to share content on Pinterest more easily. (Delo, 2012 and Mozdzer, 2012).

The growing usage of Pinterest amongst individuals and businesses has garnered interest among the scholarly and commercial worlds, thus accounting for the current literature on Pinterest. However, there is no research conducted with regard to Pinterest and language or communication. Crystal (2006) established that digitally mediated communication domains have properties of both speech and writing.

However, his criteria have not been applied to social media networks, which are a type of digitally mediated communication. It is also apparent that Pinterest differs from traditional online social networks such as Facebook and Twitter, in that Pinterest is image-oriented while the traditional ones are text-oriented. This suggests that Pinterest could have different, if not, interesting effects on language used for communication and on society in general. This paper thus seeks to address the gaps in the current literature, specifically concerning Pinterest as a communication medium.

According to Crystal (2006), there are 7 features to distinguish between speech and writing, and these are listed in table 1 below.

Speech like	Text like
Time-bound	Space-bound
Spontaneous	Contrived
Face-to-face	Visually decontextualized
Loosely structured	Elaborately structured
Socially interactive	Factually communicative
Immediately revisable	Repeatedly revisable
Prosodically rich	Graphically rich

Table 1: Seven features of communication medium (Crystal, 2006)

Using these features as a point of departure, it can be argued that Pinterest is both time-bound and space-bound. It is space-bound because of the five “rich pins” namely movie, recipe, product, place and article, which are pins that contain more information about the pin itself (Rich pins, 2014). The article pin, for instance, includes the headline, author, story description and source link, and enables users to read articles at their own pace and free time, by saving articles that interest them. Rich article pins allow articles to be recovered easily and pins remain valuable over time (Tornøe, 2014) and are thus permanent in a sense. Moreover, pinning, repinning, liking and commenting can all be done without requiring the other party to be present online concurrently, and also without knowledge of who the other party is. However, Pinterest is also time-bound in that as users continually pin images onto a pinboard, the pinboard’s layout changes and is thus dynamic and transient. Moreover, when businesses use Pinterest to promote campaigns, they typically target a particular group of users within a certain time frame, thus attributing to Pinterest being time-bound.

Next, it can be reasoned that Pinterest is more contrived than spontaneous. It is spontaneous in that there is no time lag between production and reception when both

follower and followee are using Pinterest simultaneously. However, it tends towards being more contrived because users can anticipate the effects of pinning, repinning, commenting or liking a particular pin, before carrying out the intended action. Moreover, if users in a follower/followee relation do not use Pinterest concurrently, there would be a lag-time between the production and reception of the pin.

Since Pinterest is an image-oriented online social network, it certainly does not involve any face-to-face interaction. Yet, this does not imply that it is wholly visually decontextualized. Pinterest is visually decontextualized since there is no immediate feedback when users are not simultaneously using Pinterest. However, considering that users have the option of assigning pins to various user-created boards, users are essentially creating a context for the images and thus contextualizing them visually. For instance, one would not be able to find pins of food on a pinboard meant for wedding ideas. Moreover, a look into the comments demonstrates the presence of deictic words, particularly “this” and “that” when users refer to the corresponding pin. Thus, Pinterest is not totally visually decontextualized.

Speech-typical words and constructions, such as slang and contracted forms, can be found in the comments, thus demonstrating that Pinterest is loosely structured. However, the bulk of the analysis should be based on pins, which are the building blocks of Pinterest. In this sense, Pinterest can be seen as elaborately structured. To share content systematically, users can either choose from 33 pre-defined categories or devise their own title when creating their own boards (Ottoni et al., 2013). Correspondingly, the pins have to be placed on pinboards with the relevant category. Peregrin (2012) further establishes the elaborate structure of Pinterest, by stating that users which use Pinterest to promote their brands and services can be classified into three groups – beginner, medium and advanced. Each group differs in the number of pinboards, the type of photos and the kinds of interactions and activities they use to engage their audience. For instance, a beginner user would regularly fill his or her board with pins so as to interest potential followers. A medium user would instead focus on choosing dynamic and colourful images so as to create a Pinterest identity and also encourage easy repinning by followers. In contrast, an advanced user would link his or her pins to other social media and apps, and participate in “live-pinning”. Moreover, when a user pins a link, the site scripts produce a set of images from the

link, from which users then choose one to represent the saved link (Tekobbe, 2013). Since Pinterest has little or no direct or text discourse, it is important to have engaging and powerful images, which are selected and presented strategically. Thus, it can be argued that Pinterest is elaborately structured.

Pinterest can be both socially interactive and factually communicative, depending on the motivations of the user. As previously mentioned, an increasing number of businesses are using Pinterest to interact with potential customers, so as to promote their products and brand image (Mull and Lee, 2014). For instance, Michaels, one of USA's largest retailers of arts, crafts, framing, floral and wall décor, used a "pin it to win it" approach to feature its new frame collection. To interact with its customers, Michaels encouraged users to choose a frame on its board and repin it to their own boards for a chance to win a \$500 Michael's gift card (Minsker, 2013). Pinterest is also socially interactive in that it allows users to share his or her own personality since users create themed boards and pin images to these boards, based on their passions and interests. With the option to follow another user, Pinterest thus allows people with common interests to interact. Nonetheless, Pinterest is also factually communicative in that registered dietitians (Peregrin, 2012), the public health sector (Public health infographics, 2014) and educators (Hansen et al., 2012) use this online social network to educate their followers through content such as infographics and news articles.

In terms of revisability, Pinterest tends towards being repeatedly rather than immediately revisable. Users can remove pins without others knowing that they were ever there, if they do not have a follower/followee relation. Users can also choose to withdraw the comments and likes they made. Thus, Pinterest is repeatedly revisable.

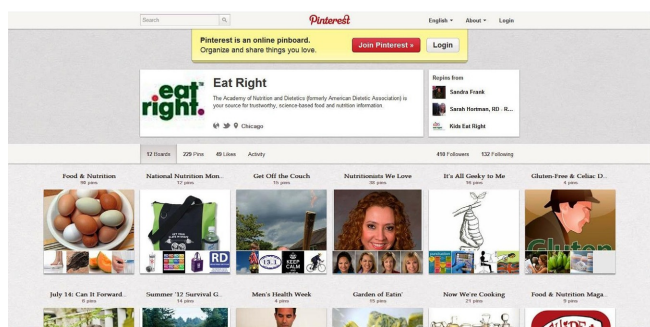


Figure 1: Screen shot of Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics' Pinterest page (Peregrin, 2012)

Lastly, being image-oriented implies that Pinterest is graphically rich and not prosodically rich. Beyond the images themselves, the pinboard rectangular interface also contributes to the idea of Pinterest being graphically rich because it contains a grid of images which are strategically arranged such that the pins appeal to users, as illustrated in figure 1.

Hence, extending Crystal's (2006) criteria for speech and writing to Pinterest reveals that Pinterest is similar to digitally mediated communication in that it selectively and adaptively exhibits properties of speech and writing. Specifically, Pinterest is both space-bound and time-bound, more contrived than spontaneous, somewhat visually decontextualized, more elaborately structured than loosely structured, both socially and factually communicative, repeatedly revisable and graphically rich.

However, it is important to note that the above analysis is based on the image-oriented approach of Pinterest. This in itself suggests some difference in how Pinterest has affected the language for communication as well as its general effects on society. Particularly, its rapid growth clearly reveals that images are becoming a new form of language for communication – not just amongst individuals who use Pinterest to share their personalities, but also between business and customers, whereby businesses use images to visually engage customers in order to promote an idea, product or service (Minsker, 2013). This form of communication is becoming popular since an eye-catching image provides the context and story in an instant glance, thus allowing the user to gain information, efficiency and enjoyment. In contrast, text-dominated data might be viewed as dreary, dry and uninteresting (Thomas, 2012). Thus, Pinterest has resulted in images being used as a new form of language in communication.

Besides examining language use in the analysis of communication, social relations also have to be considered. Specifically, relationships in Pinterest are asymmetric (Ottoni et al., 2013). User X can follow user Y without acquiring Y's permission, and in return, Y does not have to follow X. A user can also follow a specific user or a certain board of a user. Correspondingly, his or her following feed would be updated with content from the particular person or pinboard. Social interactions are encompassed in the pins by commenting, liking, repinning or sharing the pins. In a shared board, users can also add pins and invite other users to join it. In addition, users can comment on a pin without having to follow that particular user, thereby

giving rise to a wide range of balanced opinions (Mittal, 2013). The various features of interactions on Pinterest suggest a new aspect to social relations. For instance, the ability to invite other users to a shared board without first seeking the consent of current users skews from typical group conversation that involves either text or speech. Thus, Pinterest effectively demonstrates that communication can still be successfully carried out even amongst asymmetric social relations.

In terms of its general effects on society, its authoring tools have led to Pinterest gaining traction as an advertising platform. Its authoring tools, such as the freedom to pin any pictures and create and name one's own boards, allow anyone to participate easily on Pinterest. As a result, Pinterest is not just meant for sharing and community building, but also allows for individual enjoyment and the expression of one's own taste and style (Philips et al., 2013). Subsequently, businesses can find out what makes their target group tick, by searching for the relevant keywords on Pinterest. This would in turn inform them of the appropriate advertising methods to adopt.

Besides having an effect on how businesses adopt Pinterest as an advertising medium, Pinterest has also led to the growth of websites that cater to males, due to the gender divide on Pinterest. These websites, such as MANteresting and Dudepins, resemble Pinterest except that they feature images directed at the male community, such as that of muscles, cars, scantily-clad women and alcohol (Spitznagel, 2013). Thus, there is a nichification of the Internet based on gender lines (Spitznagel, 2013), which could, in the long run, influence the way communication is conducted on the net.

In conclusion, analysis has shown that Pinterest, like many other digitally mediated communications, has features of both speech and text. However, Pinterest stands out due to the fact that it is image-oriented. Particularly, it has impacted communication in terms of the language used and the social relations, and has also influenced advertising and resulted in a gender-divide of the Internet. Capitalizing on the fact that humans are typically visual creatures, Pinterest with its interactive layout, authoring tools and two-way communication, is definitely here to stay.

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