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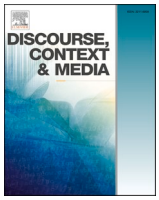

Crafting an audience: UX writing, user stylization, and the symbolic violence of little texts

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ABSTRACT

To date, little attention has been paid to how producers of digital media complicate notions of participation and audience in digital media. Taking the work of user experience (UX) writers as a case study, I offer an analytic framework for approaching the conceptual challenges that come with this. The empirical focus of my analysis is an emblematic example of UX writers' work: the ubiquitous microcopy (i.e. user interface texts) produced for cookie consent notices. Orienting to Jones's (2020b) work on digital and algorithmic pragmatics, I demonstrate how these "little texts" act in ways which are both agentful and influential. More than a matter of implicit audience design (Bell, 1984), UX writers actively use the affordances of software interfaces for inventing, stylizing, and *crafting* an audience. It is through this strategic stylizing of users that UX writers produce what Bakhtin (1986) calls a superaddressee. By positioning users in particular ways – and in particular moments – these little, seemingly inconsequential texts of digital media can thus effectively exercise a form of symbolic violence.

1. Introduction

Digital media have given rise to a range of new social practices and ways for people to interact with one another, leading scholars early on to ask whether digital media create new kinds of audiences (cf. Livingstone, 1999). Certainly, these new practices challenge how scholars of language are thinking about questions of audience and participation. While substantial research has been conducted on the kinds of audience roles that users take on in digitally-mediated interaction, less attention has been paid to how producers of digital media complicate notions of participation and audience in digital media. In this paper, I take the work of user experience (UX) writers as a case study for discussing how discourse analysts might approach these conceptual challenges. In simple terms, UX writers are language professionals working at web and software design companies, where they are responsible for writing user interface texts (so-called "microcopy"). My analysis focuses on an emblematic example of this work, the microcopy produced for cookie consent notices. While perhaps not an obvious site for examining audiences, my point is that these "little texts" (Pappert and Roth, 2021) in software interfaces also construct certain kinds of participants and participant roles, and hence constitute a fruitful site for exploring issues of audience and participation. Examining the kinds of audiences and addressees that surface in and through these texts, I suggest, can help us consider how digital media entail not just traditional notions of audience design (cf. Bell, 1984) but also a more explicit and active crafting of audiences, whereby some people are constructed as audiences and others not.

In what follows, I offer an analytic framework for addressing crafted audiences, which attends to participation structures, user stylization, and designed affordances. I first give an overview of each of these concepts and how they are implicated in audience crafting. I then offer an analysis of the microcopy that UX writers produce for cookie consent notices to illustrate how this framework may be used to address audience crafting in the work of UX writers. Specifically, I discuss how automated participant roles, the stylization of users as well as the design of imposed interaction lead to an encoding of both specific participant roles as well as particular social identities in software interfaces. Finally, I suggest that this may be understood as a form of the symbolic violence (see Kramsch, 2021), whereby the software interface is used as a means to impose not just an interaction order but also a particular social order onto users. It is by positioning users in particular ways and in particular moments that texts like cookie consent notices exercise their power and how these little texts are, ultimately, much bigger than one might imagine.

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2. Participation and audience in digital contexts

Questions of speakership and listenership are central to sociolinguistic understandings of how interaction works. Most scholarship in this regard is based in the classic work of Goffman (1981) and Bell (1984), who above all show that audiences are not passive recipients but active contributors to interactions. Technology, however, changes interaction, and with this, participation structures. The notion of audience, specifically, has been complicated in light of digital and in particular social media, where "context collapse" (Marwick & boyd, 2011) gives rise to new kinds of networked audiences. In this vein, Androutsopoulos (2014) examines audience design on Facebook, where users are confronted with the overlapping linguistic repertoires of their "collapsed" audience. Drawing on Bell (1984), he shows that audience design on Facebook is not entirely different from audience design in offline contexts, but it is complicated, with context collapse leading to new kinds of audience configurations. Similarly, Boyd (2014), in discussing participation on YouTube, highlights that participant roles may take on new or different meaning in digital environments. Specifically, he suggests that "ratified" takes on new meanings when nuances such as whether someone is registered or not add dimensions which offline, co-present interaction does not entail. With regards to production roles, Draucker (2015) discusses participation structures in Twitter interaction, arguing that in addition to Goffman's (1981) roles of animator, author, and principle, Twitter interaction can also include a *broadcaster* role, someone "responsible for distributing the talk to others" (p. 51) without being responsible for the actual production of the talk (as Goffman's animator is). As Draucker points out, such a distinction may not be needed for examining co-present, spoken interaction, but is useful for understanding interaction on Twitter. This limited overview of how Goffman's and Bell's work has been applied to digitally-mediated interaction is far from exhaustive, but it illustrates two points. First, it shows that while existing understandings of participation and audience do not translate directly to digitally-mediated environments, they still serve as a useful starting point for examining how and what kinds of production and reception roles are made relevant. Second, this work illustrates that the medium itself does not determine but nonetheless impact what kinds of participation structures can arise.

In digital contexts, questions of audience and participation have further been complicated by the role that software itself starts to take as a non-human participant. In this regard, Eisenlauer (2014) discusses how Facebook interaction may include texts that are created in a fully-automated fashion, such as time stamps that get added to status updates. Thus, Facebook becomes what Eisenlauer calls a "third author" – here, software takes over the production of the text. Similarly, algorithmic participants can also take on an audience role. This way, Jones (2021) points out, digital media contexts change the kinds of audiences that ordinary participants have to account for: our utterances on social media sites are also "listened to" by algorithms and, through them, by corporate actors. Again, these kinds of non-human actors behave differently than the kinds of participants that Bell and Goffman envisage in their models, which can lead to new kinds of participation structures with new kinds of consequences. This is what Jones (2020b, 2021) addresses with his proposal of algorithmic pragmatics, which concerns "the pragmatics of human-algorithm communication" (Jones, 2020b, p. 19) and hence acknowledges that meaning and action in digital communication are increasingly influenced not just by the communicative contexts that digital media provide, but also by the software itself as a non-human participant.

While (Jones, 2020b) is interested in the role of algorithms, my concern here lies with a different aspect of software, namely, the front-end interface and its production. Specifically, my point is that it is not only users that are implicated in participation structures, but also the producers of software. In digital discourse studies, the role of professionals such as UX writers, designers or software engineers – in short, the people producing digital media – is still discussed relatively rarely. They are frequently treated as an unknown or abstract entity, despite the fact that they significantly impact what kind of participation can (or cannot) take place. In this sense, and as Anderson and Borges-Rey (2019) illustrate, audiences are also constructed in the design process of digital media, and specific ways of engaging with digital media are thus always already present in the interface itself. In short, people's possibilities for performing certain actions and certain identities are shaped by producers and users. However, producers' imagined audiences can be quite problematic, as they are often motivated as much by internal politics as they are by the realities of actual users (Massanari, 2010). What is more, these audiences that are expressed through the interface have normative consequences, which is why I suggest that they deserve more attention from digital discourse scholars, specifically with regards to how users are thus stylized as particular addressees.

3. User stylization

Digital media interfaces always hail certain people as users and others not (cf. Althusser, 1971). It is in this way that interfaces also produce particular audiences by constructing an "ideal" addressee or superaddressee (Bakhtin, 1986; Piller, 2001). This, I suggest, is connected to how UX writers engage in the *stylization* of users. In sociocultural linguistics, stylization is closely linked to the concept of style and styling. Traditionally, *style* was understood as referring to speakers' linguistic variation according to specific speech situations (e.g. Labov, 1972). Today, style is typically understood as more dynamic, not as a passive attribute of speakers but as a resource that people can use to (actively) style themselves (cf. Eckert, 1996); it is also frequently understood as something that is accomplished multimodally (e.g. van Leeuwen, 2005). In other words, style is seen as something that people do through a variety of modes in order to position themselves as certain types of social actors. Style – or *styling* – is thus a resource for identity construction (e.g. Eckert, 1996; Cameron, 2000; Coupland, 2001). As Bell (1984) proposes, however, style is also linked to issues of audience in that stylistic choices are centrally motivated by who speakers are addressing. In this sense, style as audience design is a dynamic and implicit phenomenon, with speakers constantly and often unconsciously adapting their style for and in response to a particular audience. However, as Bell notes, speakers can also initiate a marked style-shift which involves "address[ing] persons as if they were someone else" (p. 186). It is in this way that audience design may also involve a more deliberate *stylization*.

While styling is typically understood as something that is part of ordinary, everyday interaction, Coupland (2001) takes *stylization* to be a more explicit, strategic act of projecting a persona via the use of recognizable sociocultural styles. A key feature of stylization is hence the act of "putting on" someone else's voice (Coupland, 2001). Other scholars, however, use the term stylization for slightly different, more specific purposes. Cameron (2000) and Thurlow and Jaworski (2006), for example, treat stylization as something that is done to people by others. In this sense, stylization is a top-down, prescriptive practice (Cameron, 2000) which, as Thurlow and Jaworski (2006) put it, entails the "the imposition of a style" (p. 194) onto others. It is this more deliberate, explicit use of stylization that I adopt in the current paper, understanding it as the strategic fabrication and projection of a recognizable sociocultural style by one agent onto another. Specifically, I understand UX writers as stylizing users by imposing a particular "built-in" social identity which also establishes (or enforces) a particular interactional role for users and thus a predetermined or at least constrained participation structure.

UX writers thus do not only implicitly write for an audience but also actively invent and craft their audience, producing what Bakhtin (1986) calls a *superaddressee*. Bakhtin (1986) suggests that utterances are always dialogic and directed *at* someone; as such, they entail the anticipation of a listener and, being shaped by this anticipation, include the addressee as such. Importantly, Bakhtin understands utterances not only

as oriented towards an actual, real addressee but also as oriented towards a "superaddressee": a projected, ideal listener that is imagined to fully and perfectly understand our utterance (Morson, 2006). In this way, Piller (2001) sees Bakhtin's work as particularly illuminating for understanding the ideal subject positions that texts construct: any text, software interfaces included, constructs the position of the ideal recipient. Essentially, this is the logical complement to Bell's (1984) audience design: speakers do not only adapt their utterances to their audience, the audience itself is also configured by the speaker. Through the utterance or text, some people are made into audiences, while others are not. In other words, interfaces always entail a superaddressee, a subject position that is created through user stylization and that users are asked to take on.

4. Affordances and designed interaction

Digital media interfaces impose not only social identities, through their (designed) affordances, they also impact users' actions. It is in this way that UX writers, together with their colleagues in adjacent professions, quite literally shape what users do with and through digital media (cf. Moschini & Sindoni, 2021, who make similar observations about professionals in software development). In short: interfaces have affordances that impact our actions. My understanding of affordance is rooted in the classic work of Gibson (1979), who coined the term to describe how objects frame – but do not determine – what organisms can do. While Gibson concerns himself primarily with the affordances of natural objects, affordances can also be "designed into the artefact" (Hutchby, 2001, p. 449). Drawing on Gibson, Hutchby emphasises that affordances are both functional and relational: functional in the sense that they enable and constrain certain actions, and relational in the sense that the affordances of an object differ for different organisms. Affordances are thus actualised in relationship with the individual organism while existing prior to and independent of the organism (cf. Hutchby, 2001, p. 448).

While Hutchby (2001) is best known for bringing the term affordances to studies of language and communication, the concept also has a longstanding tradition in human computer interaction, where Norman (1988/2002) is known for applying affordances to the design of tools and objects. Taking a more use-oriented approach, Norman argues that things ought to be designed in such a way that their intended use is obvious, and for this, designers should pay attention to the affordances that they design. As such, Norman's view of affordance diverges from Gibson's conceptualisation; Norman is primarily concerned with making the possible uses of objects visible and instrumentalizes the concept (see Scarlett & Zeilinger, 2019; for a comprehensive critique of Norman's approach to affordance, see also Lialina, 2019). Again, though, affordances are relational, and are thus determined by the designed object *and* the user. Links, for instance, obtain their affordance as links on the one hand because web browsers have been coded and designed to identify and display hyperlinks, but on the other hand also because people perceive them *as* hyperlinks (Hopkins, 2020, p. 4). Consequently, the concept of affordance allows us to understand interaction as determined by both producer and user.

Recently, scholars in media studies have suggested that digital media complicate traditional notions of affordance due to their dynamic and malleable nature (Bucher & Helmond, 2018) and their "different-yet-intersecting layers of materiality" (Scarlett & Zeilinger, 2019, p. 18), entailing both the physical layer of computer hardware and the virtual layer of the software interface. Kirschenbaum (2012) thus speaks of "forensic materialism", which includes anything located in the physical world, and "formal materialism", which pertains to simulated materiality via, for instance, software processes. The affordances arising from the simulated materiality of front-end interfaces of software make the ideological underpinnings of designed affordances particularly explicit: these are affordances whereby "technically *possible* uses become more or less *normative* through productive constraint" (Stanfill, 2015, p. 1062, emphasis in original). Taking affordance as our lens, we can hence examine how interfaces establish what users *should* do – and how producers of software like UX writers encode such interactions in the software interface itself.

5. Data and methodology

Crafted audiences and designed interactions challenge some of our established models of participation and audience design. In this paper, I hence use the work of UX writers as a case study for exploring how to address these conceptual challenges. UX writers are contemporary language workers – or wordsmiths (Thurlow, 2020) – typically employed in web and software design, where they are responsible for writing the words that users see when they interact with software interfaces. As such, UX writers' work is inevitably connected to other roles involved in software design, such as software engineers and designers. UX writers tend to work especially closely with UX designers and may also impact the visual and interaction design of software, although their primary responsibility are texts in software interfaces. These small pieces of text are what UX writers themselves call "microcopy" or "user interface copy". To be clear, most UX writers see their work as more complex than this; their work often includes also conceptual tasks pertaining to information architecture and content governance, which may result in non-user facing texts such as content models or style guides. Nonetheless, microcopy is the most emblematic and a rather consequential linguistic product that UX writers create, as it directly impacts the kinds of interaction that become possible for users. My analytical focus lies on one particularly prevalent example of this: the microcopy produced for cookie consent notices. Deceptively small or fleeting, these texts are a typical example of a "little text" (Pappert & Roth, 2021; cf. also Halliday, 1985): small in size, highly contextualised, and tied to a specific purpose (Hausendorf, 2009). While perhaps not an obvious site for exploring audiences and interaction (after all, there is no interaction with other human participants in cookie consent notices), my point is that cookie consent notices as "little texts" also construct different kinds of participants and make different kinds of participant roles and subject positions available when people interact with and through them.

In my analysis, I draw on a convenience sample of 151 English-language cookie consent notices, collected between October 2020 and November 2021, which reflect my own encounters with such texts. While I initially collected all examples that I came across, I eventually shifted to collecting only particularly salient examples, that is, examples that stood out as different from what I had seen before, with the goal of capturing a broad range of examples. Overall, my dataset includes cookie consent notices from a wide range of national and international websites, which were accessed through a Swiss IP address.[1] My choice to collect only English-language examples is motivated by the fact that many UX writers work only on English-language texts (texts in other languages are often translated by localisation experts). To be clear, my data is typical rather than representative (cf. Thurlow, 2006). My goal is not to provide a comprehensive account of cookie consent notices, but to offer a critical perspective on issues of audience and participation in the work of UX writers.

My research is also informed by a broader, discourse ethnographic engagement (Macgilchrist & Van Hout, 2011) with UX writers as the producers of these texts. This includes twenty semi-structured interviews with UX writers, engagements with online networking groups, participant observation at various professional events as well as countless casual conversations with UX writers about their work. I use this discourse ethnographic data to situate the work of UX writers and understand the way they think about and understand the role of audiences in their own work. Yet while this informs my research, the main focus of

[1] An overview of all websites may be found in the supplementary material published alongside this paper.

this paper lies, as mentioned, on microcopy. Needless to say, not all microcopy that users of digital media encounter is written by a UX writer. However, my point is that the practice of writing microcopy, including the microcopy of cookie consent notices, is part of the professional domain of UX writing and typically also understood as such by UX writers themselves. Finally, I do not claim that the examples that I discuss are representative, and my aim here is not to showcase all of this data – instead, my goal is simply to show a possible way for what future, more detailed analyses of crafted audiences in digital media might look like.

6. Analysis: Crafting audience in the work of UX writers

6.1. *Automated participant roles*

When we interact through digital media, we always interact on two levels, with other humans *and* with the software, both of which influence our actions. Digitally-mediated interaction hence always entails a "pragmatic duality" (Sjöström & Goldkuhl, 2004), which also impacts the kinds of participant roles that surface. I will discuss this by considering how websites ask users to accept cookies. To this end, Fig. 1 offers a compilation of cookie consent notices from my dataset.

A cookie is a small text file that a web server can store on a user's computer. Cookies are used to remember information about the user, for instance the user's location or the username that was last used to log in on a page. More complex cookies can also be used to record people's browsing behaviour, which can later be used to make inferences about the kinds of audiences that visit a site. However, this is rarely what people consider when they consent to cookies. Indeed, the different cookie consent notices in Fig. 1 hardly inform users of what cookies are, let alone what kinds of technical interactions (cf. Carmi, 2021) one is asked to consent to. Most of these texts are purposefully vague about the matter, speaking simply of offering "a better | the best | a great experience". Many make use of emphatic language ("We love cookies!"; "Count me in"; "Yeah. let's rock it") and playful, tongue-in-cheek references to actual cookies ("Sorry you can't eat them!"), all of which constructs a particularly (and, given the legal implications of these texts, incongruously) enthusiastic tone. As I will discuss in more depth later, the linguistic and semiotic form of these little texts thus obscures what other purposes cookies may serve – especially, what their purpose may be for corporations – and what kinds of ramifications clicking "Got it!" might have. But on a more basic level, cookie consent notices, usually implemented as modal popups, also create a specific interactional situation, whereby users are positioned in a relatively constrained participant role – one where they often have no other option than clicking agree (or turning away).

The constraint on participation is linked to how interactions like these are entirely determined by *when* such texts appear. There is an issue of temporality at work, whereby users are asked to be obedient in the face of urgency. As Jones (2020a) points out, these popups usually appear just when we wish to engage with what they obscure so that "*not* trying to adjust one's 'cookie preferences' [becomes] the rational

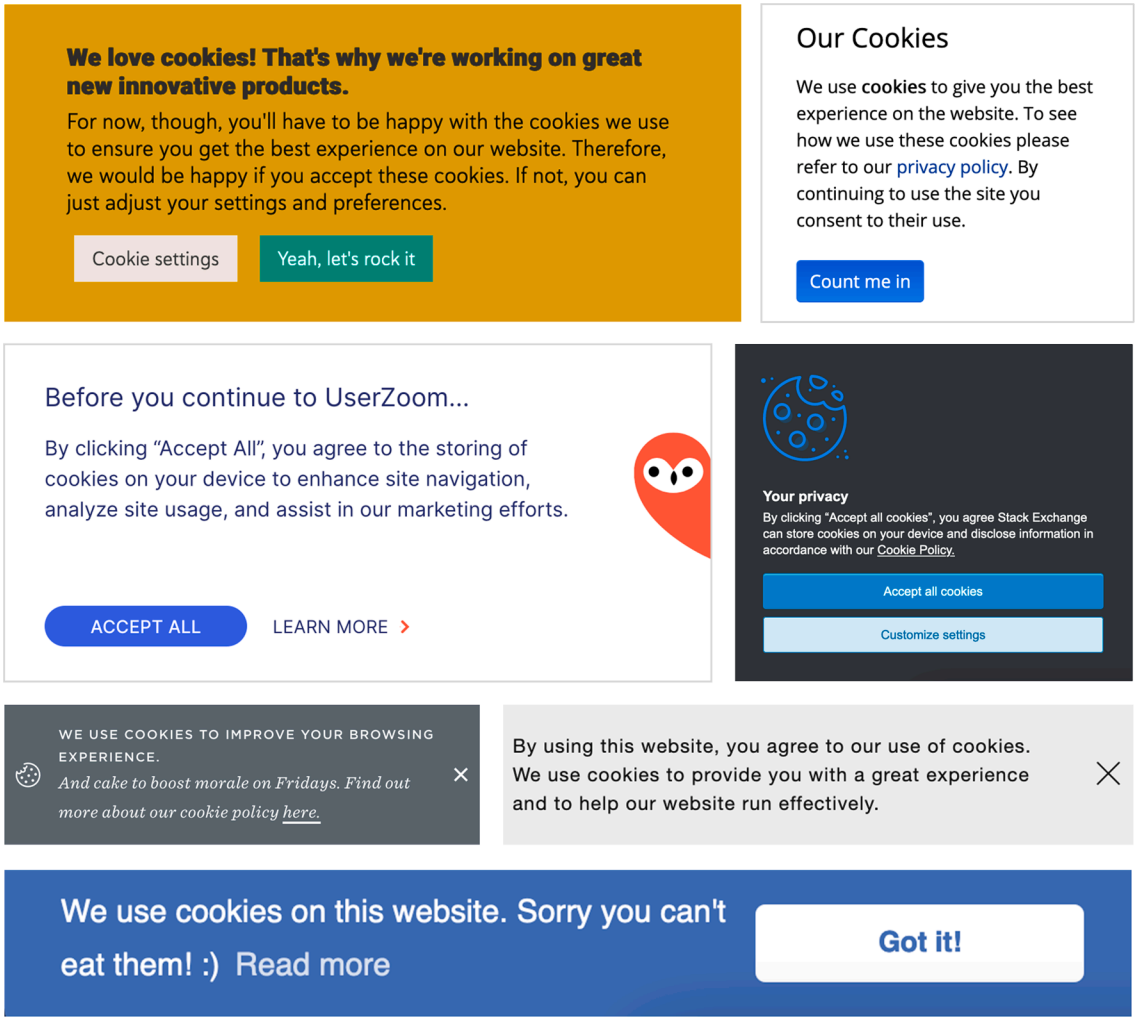

Fig. 1. Cookie consent notices. From left to right, top to bottom: Kokojoo, Titan Comics, UserZoom, Stack Overflow, Ideo, Sage Publishing, Boardgame Arena.

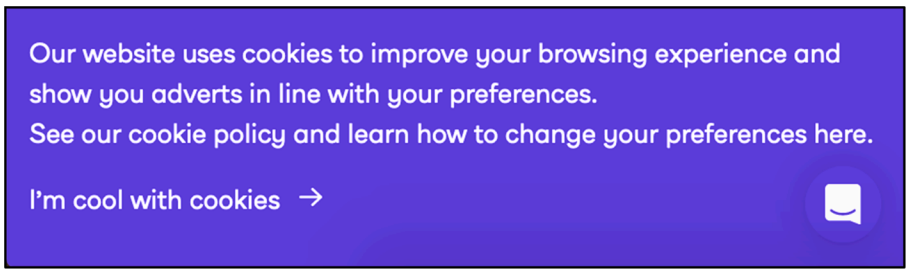

Fig. 2. Cookie consent notice: Crystal AI.

choice" (p. 94, emphasis in original). Clicking "agree" thus constitutes an action that means different things to the user and to the technological system. To the user, it's a quick click made in order to continue to what they actually came for; to the system, it constitutes the permission and the trigger to send specific cookies to the user's hard drive. The computational process and the textual performance diverge. Here, then, we have a different kind of automated action. This is not an automated text action in Eisenlauer's (2014) sense, but rather automation in the sense that people become conditioned to more automatically take the action that the software and those who built it would have them take. In this case, the software interface as well as its underlying technological system (i.e. the algorithm and its actions) significantly shape the users' interaction and, hence, the kinds of participant roles that they may take on in the interaction itself.

6.2. *Stylizing users*

Cookie consent notices do not only construct specific participant roles, they also construct particular subject positions for users. In other words, through these texts, users are also stylized in particular ways. Consider the cookie consent notice in Fig. 2: not only does this interface give me only one kind of action that I can take (agreeing to cookies), it also makes me take this action in a very particular way, that is, by declaring that "I'm cool with cookies".

Through this, the interface establishes a particular identity that I am supposed to perform in this exchange. We can see this if we try to imagine who might utter a statement beginning with "I'm cool with …". It's much easier to imagine this being said in an informal exchange between two friends than in an encounter between a judge and a lawyer. This is not to say that such an utterance would or could not be made in the latter instance, but it is generally associated with social encounters and social identities of the first type. It indexes a particular register (cf. Agha, 1999), and, hence, a particular speaker but also a particular addressee. To be clear, in this case, the website of this company was written in the same casual style, and I assume that this constitutes a deliberate stylistic choice – the company in question is an artificial intelligence start-up that might well want to construct a particular image for itself. In other instances, I found cookie consent notices that employed a more formal style. However, the point that I want to make here is that *any* style choice, even a supposedly "neutral" one, will index a particular register and hence create a particular subject position. It is in this way that users are stylized into predetermined social roles. Here, then, the impact of UX writers' work on audiences and addressees becomes especially apparent.

For UX writers, knowing their users (i.e. their audience) is a key concern. For this, they typically engage in a range of research practices, which, to name but a few, may involve interviewing users, showing draft copy to users or doing usability testing (often in collaboration with dedicated industry researchers). In this sense, UX writers write their texts *for* a particular audience, engaging in more or less conscious audience design (Bell, 1984). However, I argue that UX writers not only write for an audience but at the same time also invent and craft said audience through their work. To be clear, it is rare that UX writers are the only ones that impact microcopy; their work is often quite collaborative and may involve colleagues from business, design, engineering or, in the case of legally sensitive content such as cookie consent notices, also legal experts. Yet while these other professionals may impact the text, it is UX writers that are seen as the author of the final microcopy, and it is they who are responsible for its (linguistic) style – and, through this, for the strategic stylization that is done through microcopy. It is in this way that they construct a superaddressee (Bakhtin, 1986), a social identity that users, if they wish to use that software, have no choice but to take on.

By attending to user stylization, we thus see that the audiences that are designed and configured in the production of these texts are also social identities, and hence, a matter of normativity and power. There is a politics to these interfaces (Selfe & Selfe, 1994; see also Djonov and van Leeuwen, 2017), one that is, I suggest, particularly important to address in order to understand how people's interactions with and through software are also shaped by how professionals like UX writers "design" certain people as users, so that some people are made into (legitimate) audience members while others are not. In this way, the normative uses and users are demarcated from those who do not fit the configurations that are given. For as Stanfill (2015) reminds us, while users have the option to "go elsewhere, adapt, or contest this [a site's intended use]", the inbuilt ideal is still always present and "must be reckoned with" (p. 1961). Crucially, interfaces such as those of cookie consent notices implore us to *do* something and to interact with them. In doing so, we quite literally have to take on the subject position that they propose – ultimately becoming complicit in how we are being stylized by the producers of these texts.

6.3. *Imposed (inter)action*

Digital media interfaces impose not only social identities, they also constrain the interactions that may take place. This, I suggest, is linked to how UX writers (and other professionals in software design) design particular interactions through their work. Consider for instance the interface of the cookie consent notice in Fig. 3.

What is apparent here is that the interface, though presenting users with a choice of how to act, really only affords one kind of action: to consent to the use of cookies. We can select *which* cookies we allow, but ultimately, as I will discuss below, we cannot choose *not* to allow any cookies. What is more, the multimodal design of this interface very much suggests that one particular action is the preferred response (cf. Sacks, 1987): "Select all and confirm". Not only is this option visually the most salient one, it is also the only one that is presented in the typical form of an interface button – and, as such, the one thing that users are most likely to perceive as something that can be clicked in response to this popup (affordances are relational in the sense that we also need to

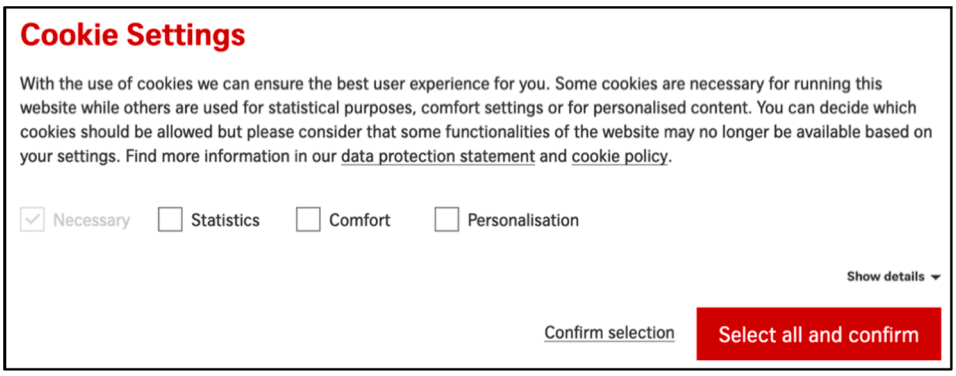

Fig. 3. Cookie consent notice: Swiss International Air Lines.

perceive them *as* potential actions, cf. Hutchby, 2001). While the interface does also afford other responses, such as clicking "confirm selection" to confirm a custom choice, this action is much harder to perceive. In other words, the affordance of these two actions differs. Indeed, I myself instantly clicked this big red button when I first encountered this popup, not quite realising what this would actually do, which is to select and confirm *all* four types of cookies and not, as I had assumed, to only confirm the necessary cookies. It is in this way that the interface ultimately imposes a particular action.

To be clear, UX writers themselves are not oblivious to such problematic aspects of their work. For instance, in a blog article titled "Cookies UX: just stop the madness", UX writer Rachel McConnell (2020) addresses the problematic microcopy of cookie consent notices. Discussing an example similar to the one in Fig. 3, she criticises the use of what she calls a "double bluff":

> Have I accepted or declined? That is the question I ask myself when I see these kind of wordings. The tick boxes aren't pre-selected, and yet I'm asked to *save changes*. I haven't made any changes, is this not the default? If I *accept all cookies* do these become ticked? Gah, my head hurts. (para. 8, emphasis in original)

In many ways, McConnell picks up on the same problematic that I want to unpack. What she identifies is an issue of affordance. Specifically, I suggest that the confusing nature of cookie consent notices that she comments with "Gah, my head hurts" is due to what I would call a *feigned affordance* – something that is suggested by an artefact without actually being possible.

As discussed above, the interface in Fig. 3 makes different kinds of actions possible, which differ in their affordance. Importantly, though, some actions are constrained altogether: it is for instance impossible to choose no cookies at all. What is particularly insidious is that the interface suggests that this might be possible. Each of the four types of cookies has a checkbox of the same shape and size. The one for "Necessary" cookies is selected by default. Users can choose to check and uncheck the other three boxes; however, unlike those, it is impossible to deselect this first box. By using the same visual logic, the interface implies that there is the same action potential, when there is in fact no real affordance at all. It is a feigned affordance (similar to what Gaver, 1991, calls a "false affordance"): a deliberately designed and seemingly possible action that turns out to be impossible to take. In this way, affordances act as conditions on say- and doability (cf. Maryns & Blommaert, 2002), making some actions possible and others impossible. They constitute the possible uses of an interface as they have been configured by its creators. The way that UX writers craft audiences in the microcopy they write for cookie consent notices hence not only constructs particular participant roles, it can even go so far as to impose particular (inter)actions.

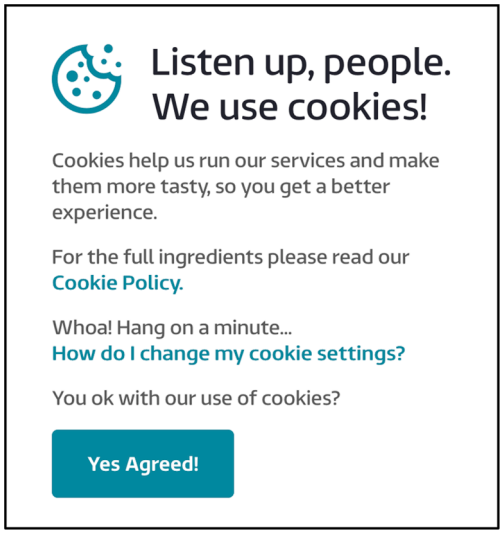

Fig. 4. Cookie consent notice: ITV.

6.4. *Cookie consent notices as symbolic violence*

Cookie consent notices always position users in particular ways and in particular moments. As I have shown above, more than a matter of audience design (Bell, 1984), UX writers – consciously or not – also invent, stylize and craft an audience when writing microcopy. Through this, they constrain the social and interactional role that users can take on, imposing both particular actions and particular subject positions onto users. It is in this way that these inconspicuous texts can also exercise a form of symbolic violence. As a way of illustrating this, I offer the cookie consent notice in Fig. 4.

Stylized as a casual interaction, this cookie consent notice, again, does not – or at least not in any direct way – inform users of how this company uses cookies. For this, users would have to read the cookie policy, a text that is often cumbersome to understand and, in part because of this, only rarely read by users (Meier, Schäwel, & Krämer, 2020). Instead, the cookie consent notice offers the vague explanation that "Cookies help us run our services and make them more tasty, so you get a better experience". At its core, there is a discrepancy between the locution of this text (what the text says) and its illocution (what it is meant to do; cf. Austin, 1975): veiled in humorous wordplay, the text remains unclear about the use and purpose of cookies and simply urges users to click agree. But perhaps most intriguing is the stylized depiction of an actual cookie and the playful reference to such cookies in the text: cookies supposedly make the company's services "more tasty", while the cookie policy is said to contain "the full ingredients". Such visual and verbal puns are an altogether common practice in cookie consent notices

(recall Fig. 1), but this familiarizing metaphor obfuscates what cookies actually are. It is quite telling that today, nobody seems to be able to explain or reconstruct *why* cookies are called cookies, though there are at least three different popular origin stories that relate the term to baked goods.[2] Clearly, the metaphor is not self-evident. More importantly, though, it downplays any potential ramifications (recall that there is no mention of what kinds of cookies one agrees to). The use of colloquialisms ("You ok with…?") and emphatic language ("Whoah!"; "Yes Agreed!") further contributes to this by indexing a casual register. The request to consent is made in such a harmless, friendly way that it is difficult to contest, and yet, ultimately, it constitutes an invisible obligation to click "Yes Agreed!". I suggest that this then not only constitutes a conversational inequality (the conversational options available to company and users are clearly unbalanced), but also a form of symbolic violence (Kramsch, 2021; see also Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), whereby users are incited to act in a particular manner that is said to be in their best interest while actually serving the interests of others and violating their privacy.

Following Kramsch (2021), I understand symbolic violence as closely connected to the perlocutionary effect (cf. Austin, 1975) of utterances: it is about getting people to do something, though in such a way that the request is misrecognized as natural and legitimate. Cookie consent notices like the one in Fig. 4 specifically exploit this; they are framed as harmless, commonplace, and beneficial to the user while exerting subtle pressure (cf. Kramsch, 2021, p. 115) to give consent. This is done through symbolic means; through the linguistic/semiotic form of the cookie consent notice and through the repetitive, or, as Jones (2020a) calls it, iterative nature of these little texts: "Every action of clicking 'I agree' makes it more likely that I will do the same next time, because 'I agree' has come to be the means by which I can be 'on my way'" (p. 94) – in other words, clicking "agree" becomes part of our habitus. It is precisely in the way that cookie consent notices are framed as a moment of consent that I see their violence: they seemingly give users control but demand acquiescence, resulting in both a loss of agency and a violation of people's privacy in which they are ultimately made complicit. Hence, we can understand this as a form of symbolic violence whereby companies impose a certain social order which serves their own interests onto users (cf. Kramsch, 2021). The crux is, as Kramsch (2021) reminds us, that all of this is done under the guise of "naturalness" – apparently, this is simply how digital media work.

7. Conclusion: Crafted audiences and the symbolic violence of little texts

"New media, new audiences?" is the question that Livingstone (1999) asked two decades ago in the inaugural issue of *New Media & Society*. In discussing how audiences might indeed be "new", she notes the importance of "the 'implied' audience – the audience as presumed, imagined or mythologized" (p. 63), referring primarily to the audiences that are implied in discourses *about* digital media. While my focus here is different, I believe that her words are just as relevant today in our work as scholars of digital discourse. Sociolinguists and discourse scholars have developed useful frameworks for understanding and explaining how different kinds of audiences affect interaction and participation structures, and many have shown that these approaches can also be modified to understand such phenomena in digitally-mediated contexts. However, while scholars have examined – and should continue to examine – the kinds of audience roles that people take on in digitally-mediated interaction, less attention has been paid to the presumed, imagined, and mythologized audiences that are also present in digital texts: the audiences that are stylized and crafted by professionals like UX writers in the interface design process and how, as a result of this, interfaces construct and constrain the kinds of individuals that may participate in interactions in the first place.

In this paper, I have attempted to sketch a framework for scholars to deal with these other audiences. First, I have discussed that we need to – as others (e.g. Jones, 2020b; Eisenlauer, 2014) have already suggested – account for non-human actors, asking how software interfaces become part of and affect participation structures. Such an approach can help us better understand the kinds of interactional conditions that digital media create, and how these can lead to interactions which mean one thing to us as users but another to the technological systems with which we interact. Second, when talking about audiences and digital media, we also ought to consider the kinds of ideal addressees that the software interface presupposes. In this regard, I have suggested looking also at the superaddressees (Bakhtin, 1986) that surface in and through interface texts as such, and the processes of user stylization that lead to these superaddressees. Finally, I have explored how software interfaces shape audience and participation through the lens of designed affordances and the imposed interactions that may result from this. This allows us to understand digitally-mediated interaction as determined by user, system *and* producer (in this case, UX writers). Designed and especially feigned affordances urge us to inquire how certain action potentials are built into an interface, thereby shedding light on how interfaces always allow for only certain kinds of legitimate participation and certain kinds of legitimate participants. Ultimately, this shows us that participant roles are strongly configured through the interface and the kind of users that producers of digital media presume.

The view of audience and participation that I propose in this paper is not new, and it is certainly not unique to digital media. Nonetheless, I propose that paying attention to how audience surfaces in this way can be fruitful for a broader understanding of the concept of audience in digital discourse studies. Ultimately, this perspective can show us that digital media entail not just audience design but also the more literal design and configuration of audiences. It is in this way that digitally-mediated interaction is also centrally shaped by audience *crafting* and the way that professionals such as UX writers encode certain uses and users in the software interface itself – for instance through the microcopy that they write. More broadly, my analysis also highlights the significant role of little texts (Pappert & Roth, 2021), which have, at least in Anglophone traditions, been relatively overlooked in discourse studies and sociocultural linguistics.[3] The cookie consent notices that I discussed in this paper are certainly "little", but, as I hope to have shown, they are by no means inconsequential. As scholars and as ordinary users of digital media, we often misrecognise their importance; however, paying attention to them can reveal much about the symbolic power – and often also symbolic violence – that can be implicated in such little texts. Indeed, it is exactly because they are so small and fleeting that these cookie consent notices can shape digitally-mediated interaction in significant ways, impacting the kinds of audiences and participant roles that become possible in the first place.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

[2] For an overview of different popular origin stories, see https://cookiecontroller.com/what-are-cookies/ (accessed 25 November 2021).

[3] A rare exception is Halliday's (1985) appendix on "the grammar of little texts" in his *Introduction to Functional Grammar*, which is, however, only six pages long and has been removed in more recent editions of the book. By contrast, scholars in German linguistics have, especially recently, started to address such small but important texts in more detail (see e.g. the edited volume by Pappert & Roth, 2021).

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