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# Multimodal texts and socio-cultural differences: A multimodal study of two hospital homepages

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## Abstract

This study, adopting the socio-semiotic multimodal approach (Bezemer & Kress, 2016), examines the multimodal features of two hospital homepages which were collected from University College London Hospitals (UCLH) in London, the UK and Nanfang Hospital (NH) in Guangzhou, China. As a result, the image-text relations suggest that both the writing and images speak a lot in the two hospital homepages. In conclusion, it is important for professionals to be highly aware of professional practices and social-cultural contexts so that they can have competences in using multimodal resources and constructing institutional homepages.

**Keywords:** Mode, Module, Multimodality, Social Semiotics.

## Textos multimodales y diferencias socioculturales: Un estudio multimodal de dos páginas principales de hospitales

### Resumen

Este estudio, que adopta el enfoque socio-semiótico multimodal (Bezemer & Kress, 2016), examina las características multimodales de dos páginas web de hospitales que se recopilieron en el University College London Hospitals (UCLH) en Londres, Reino Unido y Nanfang Hospital (NH) en Guangzhou, China. Como resultado, las relaciones imagen-texto sugieren que tanto la escritura como las imágenes hablan mucho en las dos páginas de inicio del hospital. En conclusión, es importante que los profesionales sean muy conscientes de las prácticas profesionales y los contextos socioculturales para que puedan tener competencias en el uso de recursos multimodales y en la construcción de páginas web institucionales.

**Palabras clave:** Modo, Módulo, Multimodalidad, Semiótica Social.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The expansion of the Internet environment has produced new genres. Homepages, presenting typical examples of such new genres, work as the top-level document of a web site (Askehave & Nielsen, 2005), and function as official gateways to establish public images for companies and institutions. The use of the Internet as a channel for marketing and communication in medical services has been mushrooming in the past decade. The ubiquitous use of hospital homepages presents both exciting challenges and opportunities in how to communicate with existing patients and how to increase awareness of potential patients locally and internationally. Texts on the Internet can be considered as almost always multimodal. Multimodality pertains to conditions in which a variety of modes are incorporated to produce texts. Mode is a socially shaped and culturally given semiotic resource for making meaning. Modes, rarely occurring individually in a text, tend to appear in combination, or in other words, in ensembles Bezemer & Kress (2016) of image, writing, layout, etc. The meaning of a multimodal text could not be generated if only one mode has been used. Studying multimodal texts indicates examining characteristics and potentials of all modes occurring.

Some studies have been carried out on multimodal texts online for medical services (Sanchez & Fuentes, 2002). There are a variety of studies on mode applications to websites or homepages, describing different modes, such as writing Hallett & Kaplanweinger (2010), image Garrick & Pendergast (2014), Michelson & Valencia (2016), and sound

(Pennockspeck & Sazrubio, 2013). However, it is very rare to find any research focusing on modes of online multimodal texts via making intercultural comparison analyses, not mention particularly targeting medical services contexts. Aiming to bridge the gap, the present study, focusing on the key modes, examines two hospital homepages collected from the UK and China respectively. Writing is traditionally considered as the most resourceful and significant mode among all modes. But can it be a singular concept, particularly in studying online multimodal texts? If not, can modes occur in the same text be examined separately from one another? Can modes be studied in isolation from socio-cultural influences? These questions strongly appeal to the author; therefore the following two research questions have been posted in the present study: 1. How are different modes exploited in the construction of hospital homepages? 2. How are mode applications in the construction of hospital homepages influenced by professional practices and socio-cultural influences?

## **2. SOCIAL SEMIOTICS AND MULTIMODALITY**

Social semiotics Bezemer & Kress (2016) delivers a synthesis of several approaches to the study of sign making and social meaning, thus expanding the research scope from centring on formal semiotics to disclosing how social semiotic resources are used to make meaning and how signs are used in the life of a community. Social semiotics conceptualizes sign as a threshold for semiotic studies, a fusion of signified (meaning) and signifier (material form) (Bezemer & Kress, 2016). A sign has three general features: the relation of form and meaning is not arbitrary but motivated; the sign is shaped by the environment, or in

other words, makers choose a set of modes within the environment to make the sign; the sign is made in a set of modes which provide the potential for making meaning, thus denoting it has different effects from other signs made in different modes. Choosing and using modes which are realized in semiotic resources and making signs in and for specific environments' are closely related to social, geographical and temporal/historical conditions.

Social semiotics accentuates the significance of the correlation of semiotic resources using and meaning-making. Semiotic resources, existing in different forms such as textual or visual data, are essentially mediated cultural products, which are part of human knowledge systems Hannam & Knox (2005), and transfer discernible regularities of social occasions, events and hence certain stability but they are never fixed. The mode is a significant notion in multimodal studies. In representation and communication, a mode can be image, text, layout, music, gesture, speech, moving image, soundtrack, 3D object, etc. (Kress, 2010). Different modes provide different potentials for making meaning. Modes present the interaction outcome of the potentials inherent in the material and of a culture's selection from the bundle of aspects of these potentials and the shaping over time by (members of) society of the features selected. Therefore, modes function as material resources for making meaning, socially shaped and culturally available. The text is the convergence where modes are realized (Stöckl, 2004). It is important to comprehend the dynamics of meaning-making achieved by modes and be aware of modes have their individual characteristics which pre-determine how they can be used in a text (Stöckl, 2004).

Mode, as an organizing and shaping meaning-resource, is on par with discourse and genre. According to Kress (2010), discourse provides meanings to be realized, shaping the world of knowledge as ideational content and presenting a social-conceptual location; genre provides both the means for contextualizing/locating/situating that meaning in social spaces and an account of the social characteristics of those spaces; mode, being material and tangible, provides meaning-laden means for making the meanings. It is expected to go through the stages in a choice of modes, of discourse, of the genre to realize the fixing of meaning. In the social semiotic view, multimodal texts are produced within specific social contexts, and in ways which are appropriate to the interests of social actors in these contexts. Texts makers design multimodal texts with their specific purposes in participating in social and communicational occasions. The social semiotic multimodal approach Bezemer & Kress (2016) provides theoretical tools to examine multimodal texts, functioning like a fork with two prongs (Kress, 2010). The first prong attends to the social semiotic perspective, dealing with how signs are made; how meaning is shaped; what discourses and what genres are available and how they are used; what texts are and how they work; how representation and communication function; that modes occur in ensembles. The second prong attends to the multimodal perspective, focusing on what the potentials of each mode in these ensembles are, the fact that modes - image, architecture, speech, gesture - have specific affordances and differing semiotic means - differing means for framing, for instance. In essence, the socio-semiotic multimodal approach incorporates the ways of examining multimodal texts and social environments. Therefore the present study takes this approach to examine hospital homepages, a manifestation of online multimodal texts, which are

shaped and are highly dependent on socio-cultural environments of text production.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

The present study, drawing on the socio-semiotic multimodal approach Bezemer & Kress (2016), mainly examines the key modes and their functionalities of two hospital homepages used in the UK and China. A detailed comparison was made to examine the similarities and differences of the two homepages and their socio-cultural contexts.

#### *3.1 Data*

Medical services represent a typical setting involving the negotiation of different cultural values and professional practices. As renowned international metropolises, both London and Guangzhou take significant roles in international business interactions, and thus form ideal research sites for examining intercultural and global professional communication. The study focuses on two homepages respectively from University College London Hospitals (UCLH) in London, the UK and Nanfang Hospital (NH) in Guangzhou, China. University College London Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust is one of the most complex NHS trusts in the UK. Nanfang Hospital is an outstanding general hospital in South China. Both of the two hospitals, serving a large population of people domestically and overseas, are committed to providing top-quality medical services, excellent medical education and research. The screenshots of the

homepages were saved to consider the dynamic changes that can take place online. Live pages were used, when it was necessary, to examine some functions and determine hyperlink references in the homepages. Appendices 1-5 and Appendices 6-8 show the two sets of screenshots of UCLH and NH homepages, all of which were collected on 22 February 2016.

### *3.2 Integrated approach*

The present study adopts the qualitative method and case study approach to examine the two homepages, mainly scrutinizing three key modes, namely layout, image and writing. Modes tend to appear in ensembles (Bezemer & Kress, 2016). The study thus adopts an integrated approach to examine the key modes through combining a set of theories from the social semiotic view, including functionality of layout (Kress, 2010), visual grammar, and image-text links (Vanleeuwen, 2005). The study also examines text-external resources - professional practices and socio-cultural influences which shape multimodal texts. Firstly, the study examines layout, which refers to the arrangements of elements on a site of appearance, disposes of information in semiotic space, positions semiotic elements and their relations, and orients viewers/readers to classifications of knowledge. Layout, though non-verbal, is able to accompany writing and contribute to its meaning beyond the linguistic (Stöckl, 2004). In highlighting the functionalities of layout, Kress (2010) has proposed three questions to examine how layout functions as a mode, which are adopted in the study to explore the relative functions of layout in the hospital homepages. The analytical procedures are described in Table 1.

Table 1 Analytical attributes of layout in hospital homepages

Kress's three questions (Kress, 2010)	Meta- functions	Attributes of layout in hospital homepages
1. Can layout form message-entities which are internally coherent and also cohere with their environment?	the textual function	Modules of hospital homepages, their internal relations with each other and their external relations with the whole homepages.
2. Can layout represent meanings about the social relations of those engaged in communication?	the interpersonal function	Arrangements of information in hospital homepages and their social and ontological consequences on readers and designers.
3. Can layout represent meanings about the world of states, actions and events?	the ideational function	The constructive and indicative functions performed by the layout of hospital homepages to transmit knowledge, intended to achieve online marketing.

The three questions substantiate the conceptions of the three metafunctions, following Halliday (1994), namely textual, interpersonal and ideational. Attempting to test the questions, the present study focuses on the layout of the hospital homepages by examining the three metafunctions respectively. Secondly, visual grammar is adapted to analyze the images of the homepages. Visual grammar places primacy on three fundamental functions that any semiotic mode is expected to fulfill in order to achieve communicative purposes, namely representational, interactive and compositional. In the present study, represented participants, shots and social distance are analyzed in detail following visual grammar. Spatial distance reflects social distance, suggesting the

relationship between the human represented the participant in the image and viewers. A close shot is used to represent intimate social distance, through which the personality of the represented participant could be more clearly observed; however, the represented participant in a far distance tends to lose individuality and become a stranger to the readers. Thirdly, the study discusses writing by examining image-text relations. Drawing on the concepts of Halliday (1994) and Barthes (1977), Vanleeuwen (2005) proposes a system to examine the image-text links, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2 A system of image-text links

Image-text relations		
Elaboration	Specification Explanation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The image makes the text more specific (illustration)</li><li>• The text makes the image more specific (anchorage)</li><li>• The text paraphrases the image (or vice versa)</li></ul>
Extension	Similarity Contrast Complement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The content of the text is similar to that of the image</li><li>• The content of the text contrasts with that of the image</li><li>• The content of the image adds further information to that of the text, and vice versa (relay)</li></ul>

This study adopts the image-text linking system, discussing the occurrences of the two major relations, namely elaboration and extension, as shown in Table 2. In the case of elaboration, the information offered by Mode A restates the information offered by Mode B for purposes of clarification. In the case of extension, Mode A adds new information, linking it to the existing information offered by Mode B. Elaboration can

be achieved by specification or explanation. The extension can be realized by similarity, contrast, or complement.

## **4 SOCIAL SEMIOTIC MULTIMODAL ANALYSIS**

The UCLH and NH homepages present a set of similar and differentiated characteristics in mode applications. This section discusses the key modes occurring in the two homepages.

### *4.1 Layout*

#### *4.1.1. On textual function*

The UCLH and NH homepages consist of a variety of modes, among which the most frequently used ones are a layout, image and writing. All these semiotic resources are spatially arranged into salient units which are termed as modules at a macro-level producing the homepages as a semiotic entity (Kress, 2010). Module, as a catch-all term, categorizes the units which compose texts or semiotic entities (Kress, 2010). Ten modules have been identified in the UCLH homepage in the study. The ten modules of the UCLH homepage, as shown in Appendices 1-5, termed as Modules One to Ten, present separate sections which parallel one another and are vertically positioned in space. The ten modules and the modes which have been involved in the construction of each module are summarised in Table 3.

Table 3 Modules and modes of UCLH homepage

Modules	Modes involved	Communicative purposes
Module One	Writing	Presenting the basic information about medical services and professionals at UCLH
Module Two	Image; writing	Telling stories of hospital staff and patients
Module Three	Image; writing	Offering guidance tools to readers
Module Four	Image; writing	Presenting What is new at UCLH
Module Five	Writing; video	Elaborating Patient safety
Module Six	Image; writing; video	Providing the information about Work with us at UCLH
Module Seven	Image; writing	Presenting How we are doing; describing professional services
Module Eight	Image; writing	Guiding potential patients to appropriate sections of medical services
Module Nine	Image; writing	Presenting Future developments
Module Ten	Image; writing	Presenting institutional values; providing Contact us methods

As shown in Table 3, Module One, simply realized in writing, communicates the basic information about medical services and professionals at UCLH; Module Two, formed by the image and writing, presents stories of people involved in medical services including hospital staff and patients; Module Three, formed by the image and writing, provides the guidance tools to readers; Module Four, using the images and writing, elaborates What is new at UCLH; Module Five, involving the writing and video, presents the information about Patient safety at UCLH; Module Six, containing the image, writing and video, provides the information of Work with us at UCLH; Module Seven, using the images and writing, elaborates How we are doing and describes professional

services offered by UCLH; Module Eight, via adopting the image and writing, guides readers or potential patients to appropriate sections of medical services; Module Nine, produced by the image and writing, outlines Future developments of UCLH; and Module Ten, realized in the images and writing, presents institutional values of UCLH and provides methods to Contact us. The ordering arrangement of the ten modules is not random. They are positioned to develop a coherent storyline, sequentially introducing who we are (Modules One to Three), what we are doing (Modules Four to Eight), and what we will be doing in the future (Module Nine), and in the end highlighting how to contact us. Any rearrangement of the modules might ruin the internal coherence of the text and change the meaning. Six modules have been identified in the NH homepage. The modules and their relative modes are presented in Table 4.

Table 4 Modules and modes in NH homepage

Modules	Modes involved	Communicative purposes
Module One	Image; writing	Offering a set of hyperlinks leading to detailed information about NH; highlighting the key information occurring in the other modules
Module Two	Writing	Presenting basic information about all the departments of the hospital
Module Three	Image; writing	Offering a set of hyperlinks which lead to relevant medical services of the hospital
Module Four	Image; writing	Presenting What is new at NH
Module Five	Writing	Offering a set of hyperlinks which lead to other medical institutions; enriching medical service resources for readers
Module Six	Image; writing	Presenting institutional core values; providing methods to Contact us and recruitment information

As illustrated in Table 4, Module One, adopting the modes of the images and writing, provides a set of hyperlinks leading to detailed information about NH and highlights the key information which occurs in the other modules; Module Two presents basic information about all the departments of the hospital, merely referenced in writing; Module Three, via using the images and writing, offers a set of hyperlinks as shortcuts which lead to relevant medical services of the hospital; Module Four elaborates What is new at NH, which has been produced with the images and writing; Module Five, simply presented in writing, uses a set of hyperlinks which link to other medical institutions and enrich additional medical service resources for readers; and Module Six, produced by the images and writing, presents institutional core values and provides methods to Contact us and recruitment information.

The six modules tend to arrange messages in the order of significance. Most readers approach the hospital homepage for information about what professional medical services the hospital can provide to satisfy their individual needs. Modules One to Four, as shown in Appendices 6-8, positioned in the most frequently viewed places, on the top or in the central place of the homepage, present the core information about NH medical services and its professional staff. It saves readers' efforts in searching for information. If readers cannot find what they want, Module Five also gives them help by listing a set of hyperlinks connected with other medical institutions. The six modules do not indicate any storyline; nevertheless, they work cohesively to achieve quick and efficient guidance which facilitates readers in searching for information. The motivation, considering patients' needs as a core value of medical services, goes through all the modules, which evidently responds to the

NH's service principle, namely patients oriented, life respected, as shown in Module Five. If the arrangement of the modules alters, the internal coherence of the homepage will be changed. The modules are organized to achieve the textual coherence, and thus help to achieve the textual function of the multimodal text.

#### *4.1.2. On interpersonal function*

In the UCLH homepage, all the four major images in Module Two and one major image in Module Six are photographs, respectively presenting the images of four hospital staff and one patient. The four photographs in Module Two are positioned closely next to the direct quotations from the three hospital staff and the patient, and the major image in Module Six is also positioned in the right side of the writing *Work with us*, which all prioritize the images. Writing and images thus represent a typical left-to-right order, in which information in writing is assumed as already known knowledge to readers; while information in images is assumed as new knowledge to readers (Kress, 2010). The homepage producers are inclined to use the photos to send core messages and attract readers' attention.

In the NH homepage, the three major images presented as photos are positioned in the central place of the multimodal text. The images are centralized to highlight the core knowledge which the homepage producers expect readers to get; while the writing in surround attempts to provide supportive information. This develops a centrality-marginality pattern for the relation of the image and writing (Kress, 2010), in which

the images are highlighted in terms of the places they take in the multimodal text and thus attract more awareness of the readers. It is interesting to find that producer of the two homepages, designing different places for images and writing in the online multimodal texts, technically invite readers' attention and thus create an interpersonal environment with readers. It highly suggests the interpersonal functions of layout occurring in hospital homepages.

#### *4.1.3. On ideational function*

The UCLH homepage mainly arranges the writing and images in a left-to-right order, which indicates known information and new information respectively and can be regarded as a Western-style, denoting the taken-for-granted reading direction (Kress, 2010). Each module of the homepage is positioned in a vertical order which follows the traditional reading order in consuming reading materials. The NH homepage locates large-sized images in the central place of the multimodal text. The writing is positioned surrounding the images. The centrality of images and marginality of writing occur in the NH homepage, indicating the core information and marginal information. The six modules are not vertically positioned. They are arranged according to their significance in communicating core information. The modules delivering medical service information of NH are presented in the central position of the homepage. It also reflects how centrality is adopted to highlight core information. The hypothesis that layout contributes to achieving the ideational function of multimodal texts is evidenced by the findings of the taken-for-granted

reading direction in the UCLH homepage and the key-information-centred approach in the NH homepage.

#### *4.2 Image*

Images have the potential to capture and present the essence of things (Dillon, 2006). The major images on the UCLH and NH homepages were examined based on visual grammar. Photography could be prized as accurate and reliable transportation of real-world people and places (Barrett, 1980), representing a high degree of facticity. All the five major images in the UCLH homepage and the four major images in the NH homepage are presented in the form of photos. The two homepages tend to use people or objects in real life to speak for their medical services and institution. The major images in the UCLH homepage present real individuals involved in medical services as represented participants, intended to shorten the distance between the medical institution and readers. The images presenting the real staff and real patient encourage readers to feel that they could also receive friendly services from the UCLH staff and enjoy the same satisfaction as the patient reflected in the images.

The major images in the NH homepage respectively present distinguished doctors of the hospital, the hospital main building and the hospital management meeting. Chinese patients are more inclined to choose a medical institution based on what high-quality services the hospital can offer and what outstanding medical staff the service programme can involve. The represented participants reflect the

expectations of Chinese patients. An authority-respected theme is thus created in the images. The photos in the UCLH homepage adopt the close shot to present represented participants. The facial expression of the medical staff and the patient can be clearly viewed, which creates a close personal distance between the represented participants of the images and readers. One major photo in the NH homepage uses the medium close shot to present an outstanding professor as the represented participant, as shown in Appendix Six, which indicates a far personal distance between the represented participant and readers. The other two photos which also present human represented participants, as shown in Appendices 7 and 8, use a long shot to present groups of hospital staff, which creates a close social distance between the represented participants and readers. In these photos, the homepage producers avoid emphasizing any single individual in the images, thus impersonal business occurs. The longer shots are the devices to reduce the degree of individualization, which also supports the idea that collectivism is given priority in Chinese culture. Two examples of the images occurring in the UCLH and NH homepages are elaborated in detail to strengthen the evidence about how images function as a key mode. Figure 1 is one major image occurring in the UCLH homepage, presenting one female medical professional as represented participate in the image.



Figure 1 Image example of UCLH homepage

Represented participants constitute the subject matter of the communication and might be people, places and things. The first glance of Figure 1 can directly tell readers the human represented participant's identity in this image. With the help of her work outfit, she can be identified as a nurse. Kress and Vanleeuwen hold that there are two major types of representational structures, namely narrative structures and conceptual structures, occurring in images. The symbolic attributive process is a sub-category of conceptual structures which contains two participants, the carrier and the symbolic attribute. The former refers to the participant whose meaning or identity is specified in the relation; the latter refers to the participant that establishes the meaning or identity on its own. In Figure 1, the symbolic attributes, namely the nurse outfit the human represented participant is wearing and one building of UCLH displayed in the background, work together to establish the young lady's identity as a nurse at UCLH. The symbolic attributive process is developed by employing the human participant as a carrier and the object participants as attributes in Figure 1. It suggests that the homepage designers of UCLH tend to communicate the symbolic value by using the nurse's image and the objects readers are familiar with. It has the potential to create a close involvement of the readership with what is depicted in the images. In addition, the human represented participant - the nurse - is smiling in the image, conveying the message to readers that she is friendly and supportive to patients and ready to provide high-quality services to patients.

In producing images, the choice between a close-up, medium shot and long shot depicts the relations between represented participants and viewers; a close personal distance is produced, when the head and

shoulders of the human represented participant appear in a close shot. Figure 1 is a typical example in which a close shot has been adapted to present the image of the nurse, thus creating a close personal distance between the represented participant in the image and readers. Accordingly, a positive image of UCLH is projected, because the nurse, as a representative, stands for the medical care professionals of UCLH. The image presenting a nurse of UCLH suggests that the homepage designers intend to create a close relationship between readers and the medical institution and thus make them feel comfortable when reading the homepage. Figure 2 from NH homepage also adopts the symbolic attributive process to present a group of outstanding doctors and professors who work with NH and other medical institutions in the city of Guangzhou.



Figure 2 Image example of NH homepage

As shown in Figure 2, the symbolic attribute process of the image is created by a group of human represented participants as carriers and the object represented participants as symbolic attributes. In this image, all the

human represented participants are formally dressed, each holding a beautifully made trophy in hand, which indicates they are attending an award ceremony. The digital screen in the background presents the names and titles of these human participants and the institution names which they work with and also highlights the name of the event, OUTSTANDING DOCTORS in GUANGZHOU, by capitalizing the name of the event. The way the people dress themselves, the trophies and the digital screen all function as symbolic attributes to decode the identities of the carriers, in other words, the human represented participants of the image, as outstanding doctors. The female represented participant in the middle is from NH, which is suggested by her name and title and the relevant institution name shown on the digital screen behind in Chinese. As a representative, she speaks for the high-quality medical care and service provided by the professionals at NH.

Figure 2 adopts the long shot to present the human represented participants, which forms a close social distance between the represented participants and readers. A group of doctors are presented in the image as human represented participants. It indicates that the homepage producers avoid emphasizing any individual in the image and invite readers to give the human represented participants equal attention. It essentially develops an objective and impersonal standpoint for the readers to interpret the image, and in addition, highlights the priority which has been given to collectivism in Chinese culture. It is thus possible to conclude that the UCLH homepage, adopting the close shot in producing images, tends to create a close distance with readers or patients and make them feel pleased and comfortable; however, the NH homepage attempts to increase the social distance, thus shaping the tone of images into a neutral and

impersonal one and encouraging readers to interpret the meaning in an objective position. Both of the two hospital homepages prefer to use the symbolic attribute process in the image construction, considering that objects closely associated with experience and knowledge in daily life inform readers in an efficient way and help them interpret images, when they function as symbolic attributes to support the carriers, in other words, human represented participants, in the images.

### 4.3 Writing

Multimodal relations construct a complex interplay (Maier, 2008), and thus, it is important to examine the interrelation of visual and linguistic resources which prevail across the homepages of UCLH and NH. Two major types of image-text relations, following Vanleeuwen’s linking system, have been identified in the two homepages as shown in Table 5.

Table 5 Image-text relations of UCLH and NH homepages

Types		Concurrency in UCLH homepage	Concurrency in NH homepage
Elaboration	Explanation The text paraphrases the image.		√
Extension	Complement The text adds further information to the image.	√	

In the UCLH homepage, as shown in Table 5, extension occurs and is achieved by complement in using the text or writing to add information to the image (Vanleeuwen, 2005; Prihastiwati, 2019). It highly suggests that both writing and images function as important modes in the construction of the homepage. This image-text relation also resonates with the previous finding in Section 4.1 as indicated by the left-right order between writing and images in the UCLH homepage: the information in writing is assumed as already known knowledge to readers; while information in images is assumed as new knowledge to readers. The writing functions to enrich information of the images. Figure 3 is an example from the major images in the UCLH homepage.



Figure 3 Image-text relation example of UCLH homepage

Figure 3, including the writing and image, occurs at the top place of the UCLH homepage. The image highlights a human represented participant who can be identified as a doctor with his blue outfit and the background which presents a doctor-patient consulting room. The writing next to the image states we have prevented unnecessary treatment and provide quicker and more accurate treatment for those patients who need it. The writing extends the information communicated by the image and informs the readers that the UCLH provides high-quality services with quicker and more accurate treatment. The single image of a doctor

presented in Figure 3 is endowed with more meanings, thus functioning as the representative of the medical professionals of the hospital with their outstanding and efficient services. Therefore, the writing serves to enrich the information communicated by the image in Figure 3; the image-text relation is achieved via an extension.

In the NH homepage, elaboration occurs as the main relation pattern of image and writing, which is realized by an explanation (Vanleeuwen, 2005). In this relation, the text paraphrases the image. As discussed in Section 4.1, the images and writing are arranged in a centrality-marginality pattern in the NH homepage, which highlights the core information delivered by the images. Writing thus functions as a support or subsidiary paraphrasing of the images in this homepage. Figure 2 in Section 4.2 is also an example of the image-text relation occurring in the NH homepage. In Figure 2 as discussed in Section 4. 2, a group of human represented participants which are presented in the image can be identified as outstanding doctors in an award ceremony. The writing in Chinese below the image states, there are thirty-nine doctors working at NH who have been awarded outstanding doctors. The image-text relation is constructed as elaboration in the form of explanation when the writing functions to literally paraphrase the image and enrich the meaning of the image. The image-text relations suggest that both the writing and images speak a lot in the two hospital homepages, where images help to attract more awareness from the readership and the writing functions to enrich the meaning of the images and facilitate the readers' interpretation of the images. Therefore, both the writing and images have been adopted as key modes to construct hospital homepages.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The present study has recognized the key modes and their characteristics in two hospital homepages of the UK and China, which may further our understanding of the production of online multimodal texts in different socio-cultural contexts. Some interesting findings are as follows. Firstly, the layout of the hospital homepages is characterized by modules. As basic units composing semiotic entities (Kress, 2010), ten modules have been identified in the UCLH homepage, and six modules have been found in the NH homepage. Each module uses images and writing in ensembles to construct the hospital homepages. Modules have the potential to achieve three meta-functions, namely textual, interpersonal and ideational, contributing to forming multimodal texts in medical service contexts under the influence of core values of institutions and socio-cultural influences. Secondly, photographs as major images are prevalent in the two homepages to represent a high degree of facticity. In the homepage of UCLH, the medical professionals and patient are presented as represented participants in the images; in the homepage of NH, outstanding medical professionals are presented as represented participants in the images. The represented participants of the images reflect the patient-oriented approach the hospitals take, aiming to satisfy the different needs of patients in the two countries. Homepage producers show different tendencies to adopt a long or closer shot in creating images which suggest different types of social distance are involved in medical service contexts in the two countries. UCLH homepage producers in the UK, taking the close shot to create a close personal distance, tend to create a close relationship between the medical institution and readers or patients. NH hospital homepage producers in China, using the medium

close shot or long shot, prefer to project a professionalism-respected atmosphere in the online multimodal texts, thus increasing the social distance between the hospital and readers. It tones down the overt persuasion via leaving the plentiful room for the readership to make their own interpretation. Thirdly, two major patterns of image-text relations have been identified in the two hospital homepages: elaboration and extension (Vanleeuwen, 2005). Extension mainly occurs in the homepage of UCLH, which is achieved by complement: using the text to add information to the image. Elaboration mainly occurs in the NH homepage and is realized by explanation. The patterns of the image-text relation in the two homepages highly suggest both images and writing take important roles in the construction of online multimodal texts, functioning as key modes to communicate the core information and raise reading interest from the readership.

The present study has theoretical and pedagogical implications. The study has integrated a set of theories in the social semiotic view, namely functionality of layout, visual grammar and image-text links, to explore multimodal characteristics of hospital homepages. This approach enables the understanding of the properties of modes in online multimodal texts, via considering professional practices and socio-cultural influences, which hopefully might open more discussions on online multimodal texts in a much wider range of occasions within different professional and cultural contexts. The study also suggests it is important for professionals to be highly aware of professional practices and social-cultural contexts so that they can have competences in using multimodal resources and constructing institutional homepages. The present study has its limitations. It only examines two homepages from two countries. For future research,

more homepages can be used as an ideal corpus which will produce more interesting and convincing findings and address more socio-culturally diverse traits.

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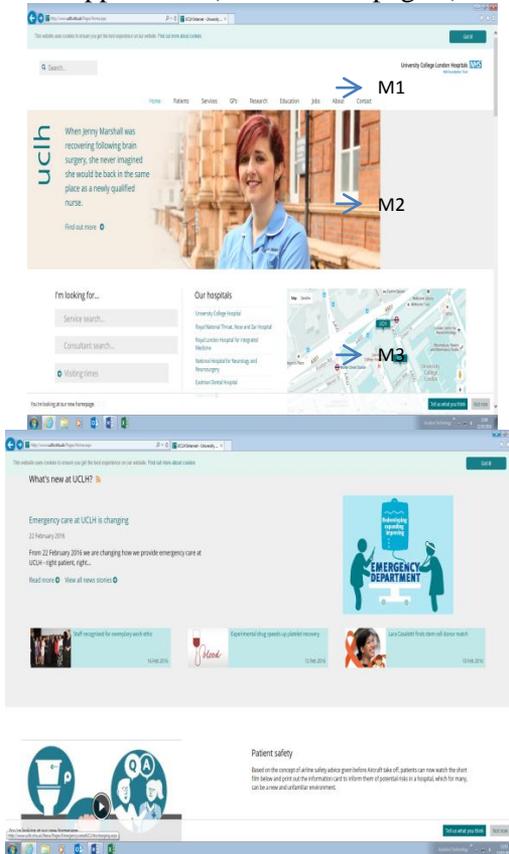
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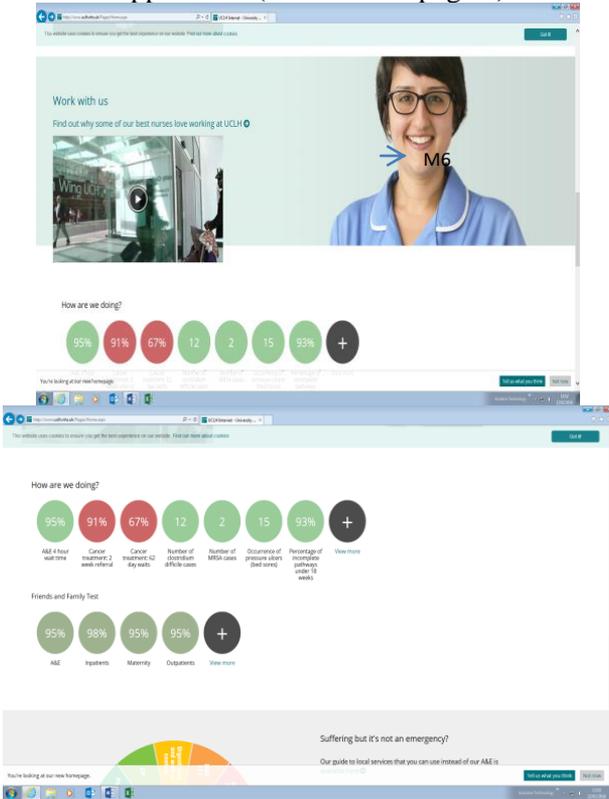
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## Appendices 1-8. Examples and modules of UCLH and NH homepages

### Appendix 1 (UCLH homepage 1) Appendix 2 (UCLH homepage 2)



### Appendix 3 (UCLH homepage 3) Appendix 4 (UCLH homepage 4)



### Appendix 5 (UCLH homepage 5) Appendix 6 (NH homepage 1)



Appendix 7 (NH homepage 2)  
Appendix 8 (NH homepage 3)





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