



Visual rhetoric: Significance and application to fashion and dress scholarship

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Numerous scholars have emphasized the importance of theory related to the advancement of scholarly endeavors within the clothing and textile discipline. The development of theory related to visual rhetoric (VR) represents an interdisciplinary approach that can be applied to fashion and dress (FD) scholarship. Though not a conventional theory with which to examine FD, VR is a valid perspective with which to analyze the symbolic processes by which FD perform communication. I argue that forging an interdisciplinary alliance with this framework through increased use and exploration related to FD scholarship would strengthen the FD body of knowledge. This paper describes VR, how it has been applied in FD scholarship thus far, and suggestions for future use that will assist in advancing the FD body of knowledge.

VR is the strategic use of symbols (in visual and tactile forms) to modify and influence another person's actions and behaviors (Foss, 2005). VR has not been widely applied to the fashion phenomenon, but there is enormous potential for its use based upon previous interdisciplinary research applications. For example, VR is often used in advertisements and is applicable to the study of consumer behavior in FD scholarship. The interdisciplinary nature of VR is even reflected in its direct relationships to existing named theories (including heritage culture theory, the cultural insight model, and semiotics) that have been applied to the visual arts and fashion. VR is also referred to as a field of study and method or principle of visual design (Ma, 2008). In this vein, VR can also be the strategic use of symbols to please an audience. Designers would be more equipped to engage in the creative processes associated with fashion and functional design if working from a framework that allow for a more comprehensive understanding of their own inspirations, the design problem and the image that the client or consumer wishes to convey when wearing the finished design.

A central tenant of VR is that visual imagery provides a more comprehensive understanding of the human experience that is not always available through the study of discourse. In contrast to visual imagery, discursive language has a defined set of meanings and units (i.e., grammar and syntax) and, therefore, can only refer to a limited range of observation and thought (Foss, 2005). The generalized meaning of visual imagery in FD dictates that fashion, in general, is a meaningful set of signs, but not all signs have to be meaningful to everyone in order to function as rhetoric. For the purposes of expanding the body of FD knowledge, this may refer to the point at which individuals fall on the fashion diffusion curve or the extent to which an individual chooses to actively participate in the fashion process. In this way, fashion could be understood in terms of a selective process and examined from the perspective of how consumers select products to wear and the criteria for making such decisions.

Brummett (2008), one of the few rhetorical scholars to look at fashion and style, has examined the ways in which fashion and style contribute to the commodification and capital of

garments through a rhetorical lens. For example, he notes that a sumptuary law is the epitome of an influential sign positioned within material reality. Fashion pulls the world together in ways that serve different interests, as can be seen in the fashion diffusion curve. Future work could include how VR is used to (1) establish certain individuals or cities as fashion innovators and/or (2) build lifestyle branding or a persona for a product or apparel company. Berry (2012) and Thain (2012) have already begun to examine such topics through the lens of fashion communication and social media.

VR also has several potential applications in historic and cultural FD scholarship. As a theory, VR could be used to explain the influences on fashion through time. It can account for the ways in which images come to possess meaning. The meaning of an image is dependent upon time and place. When referring to fashion, the use of rhetoric may allow an individual to understand why and how an item or idea became fashionable. In this vein, perhaps the VR theory shares a sort of symbiotic relationship with the historical continuity theory. As an extension of its potential application to historic and cultural FD scholarship, VR has begun to explore the element of visual display (known as the rhetoric of display). VR is especially applicable to the display of objects and information in the museum setting because there are a variety of ways in which history can be conveyed. VR could be used to examine the content and layout of a museum exhibit containing historical and cultural FD. Reeves-DeArmond (2012) used VR as a theoretical framework to explore the use of film characters, recognizable via costumes worn in their respective films, in the museum setting and their impact on visitor motivations and experiences. Reeves-DeArmond advocated for further studies related to this subject matter.

The themes of communication and VR are central to the study of FD and deserve further exploration. The scholars discussed in this work have enhanced and expanded the body of literature that applies VR and, in so doing, provide a call to action to continue their work.

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