

Rhetorically Listening to Vogue's Coverage of Sustainability

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Background: Apparel and fashion scholarship and industry have demonstrated interest in sustainability; overall production processes (Gam et al., 2009; McDonough & Braungart, 2002), new materials and consumer perception (Press, 2018; Resta et al., 2014), and consumer behavior and interactions with apparel and fashion media (Hiller & Kozar, 2012; Hustvedt & Bernard, 2008; Joy et al., 2012; McBee-Black & Ha-Brookshire, 2020) have all been subjects of interest. More specifically, Jones (2019) performed a descriptive, multi-modal discourse analysis of *Vogue* based on selected articles of the magazine from 1990-2015. This paper's purpose, was to perform a rhetorical analysis to identify and describe themes within explicit and implicit coverage of sustainability within *Vogue* over the course of a publication year and recommend interventions for strengthening the communication between the fashion industry and fashion consumer concerning communication based upon rhetorical listening.

Theory and Method: With its origins in both analytic and pedagogical concerns, rhetoric provides a method of both analyzing meaning- and sense- making through communication and a grounding to offer interventions to improve communication. As a specific method of rhetorical analysis, the lens of rhetorical listening seeks points of “*understanding of self and other*” through identification in “*commonalities and differences*” developing “*cultural logics*” not through a dichotomy of authorial intent or audience understanding but in a consubstantial “third ground where rhetorical negotiation is exposed as always already existing” (Ratcliffe, 1999, pp. 204–205). Rhetorical listening provides a means of understanding how the consumer is positioned in a conversation in fashion and apparel media and what role(s) are open to the consumer through that positioning. *Vogue* was selected due to its high readership; the 2018 publication year was selected because it marked a three-year anniversary since the adoption of both the United Nations 2030 Agenda for sustainable Development and the Paris Agreement under the United Nations Framework Convention on climate change, signaling an international understanding of the need for sustainability work and providing time for implementation to have begun. Additionally, 2018 was also the first year since 2015 to return search results from a ProQuest database search for “sustainability” in *Vogue* for both a letter from the editor and a cover. To accomplish this analysis, data was collected through a page-by-page reading of the 2018 print run of *Vogue*, including text and images to address the following research questions:

RQ1: How is sustainability 'realized' to consumers through popular press, as presented in *Vogue* magazine? *RQ2:* What sustainability communication interventions may be suggested to improve effect expression within *Vogue*?

Results: While *Vogue* does provide coverage of sustainability, the coverage follows a pattern of consumptive fulfillment, where the consumer needs only to shop following the recommendations of industry experts and media who will do the determining regarding sustainability. Coverage of

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sustainability is often implicit, sustainability is often presented as a choice or accessory, and dissonant or competing claims are made without argument or evidence being presented concerning topics such as fur. As an overall statement of the sustainability philosophy presented in *Vogue*, the statement from a January article is representative of *Vogue*'s coverage:

January is for optimists. It's the time of resolution and headlines promising "NEW YEAR, NEW YOU." And this drives us nuts. Because good health and radiant happiness- WELLNESS, essentially – should always be our guiding principle. It's a complex ambition involving mental and physical rigor, cutting-edge nutrition, HEAPS OF SLEEP, and the ability to endure hard luck and heartbreak. From a STYLE point of view, though, it's relatively simple: Choose clothes (and kicks) that are made responsibly, that move with you no matter how far or how fast you leap, and that make you smile. GET HAPPY, basically, which is your right – every day and every month [capitals original]. (Wintour, 2018, p. 39 January)

Improved coverage is sometimes present. For example, in the cover story "Glorious Gisele" from the July issue, Gisele Bündchen repeatedly challenges *Vogue*'s framing of sustainability and fashion through her responses to questions, emphasizing pollution and treatment of animals.

Discussion: Based on the results, three interventions are recommended to improve media coverage of sustainability.

Intervention 1: Demonstration of Argument and Evidence: Argument and evidence should be included in *Vogue*'s coverage of sustainability to address dissonant or competing claims made about sustainability. Argument and evidence should also be made apparent in fashion media to aid in the education of consumers concerning sustainability. A move toward clear argument and evidence would also aid in consumer education concerning sustainability in fashion and apparel, potentially providing better frameworks for consumer behavior.

Intervention 2: Rhetorical Weaving of Sustainability: For the subjects of media coverage, a low-risk strategy of providing responses that explicitly and in nuanced ways discuss sustainability should be adopted. Weaving the concepts into what a subject says allows those without the authority to directly challenge *Vogue*'s framing, those who might lose the offered coverage, to include the information while avoiding hostility by answering the question posed by or providing the text desired by *Vogue* but in a way that effectively communicates about sustainability as well.

Intervention 3: Rhetorical Education for those Seeking Entry to the Fashion Industry: Fashion and apparel educators should seek ways to implement sufficient rhetorical education for those seeking entry in the industry to effectively weave sustainability concepts into conversations with fashion media and other spaces of interaction with consumers. Additionally, such education would challenge the positioning of fashion media that offers overly simplistic models of sustainability on the grounds of the credibility of the outlet and its effects on the credibility of those covered by the outlet.

Conclusion: While *Vogue* does cover sustainability, its coverage is based in a simplistic model of consumptive fulfilment that should be challenged. Based on a rhetorical analysis of the 2018 publication year, three interventions are proposed to demonstrate argument and evidence, weave sustainability into the coverage, and provide rhetorical education sufficient to weave sustainability and recognize the choices made by and in particular media outlets.

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