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“Chic but scrupulous down to the very last stitch”: The language of “Style Ethics” in American Vogue

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Sustainable fashion, slow fashion, eco-fashion; they all appear ideologically at odds with Vogue’s core mission to “immerse itself in fashion, always leading readers to what will happen next” (Condé Nast, 2013). Even so, Vogue proudly proclaims its contribution to the sustainable fashion discourse via its online encyclopedia, Voguepedia (Vogue, 2013). This study examined how Vogue engages, shapes, and alters the sustainable fashion discourse within the limitations of a high-fashion magazine. It focuses on one particular Vogue phenomenon; the ‘Style Ethics’ section, which has regularly appeared in the magazine since March 2009. Vogue’s position of power in the fashion media landscape (Köning, 2006) suggests the magazine’s presentation of sustainable fashion has the potential to set the limits of a sustainable fashion discourse and thus must be critically examined. To that end, this project asks how Vogue lexically represents eco or ethical fashion in its pages.

Thirty-six articles were digitally collected from the American Vogue Archive and analyzed. This represents all of the “Style Ethics” articles published by American Vogue between 2009 and 2013. All of the articles occupied a single page of the magazine with an average word count of 166 words per article, with a range of 78-281 words. The articles were analyzed following methods for critical mass media analysis outlined in Paper Voices (Smith, Immirzi, & Blackwell, 1975). While Paper Voices dealt specifically with newspaper discourse, the theory and method has been successfully adopted by magazine analysts including a study of language use in British Vogue (Köning, 2006) which offered further methodological direction for this study. The articles were qualitatively analyzed at four linguistic levels: Content, Lexicon, Tone, and Cultural Reference. What follows is a brief summation of major findings.

Several themes emerged after coding the text within the thirty-six articles. Three of them—Associative Validation, Overlexicalization, and Ideological Squaring—will be discussed. The content of the editorials changed over time, most significantly from emphasizing relatively unknown brands with a core eco or ethical ethos to promoting one-off eco or ethical projects of major fashion brands (i.e. Vogue advertisers). The editorials relied on powers of association to give relevance and context to unknown brands and the sustainable fashion perspective, in general. For example, celebrities and models with known eco/ethical principles were featured, their ideologies made apparent in either the body of the article or in the product caption. Highlighting Cameron Diaz’s involvement with Al Gore’s campaign against global warming (April, 2009), Alicia Silverstone’s vegan lifestyle (April, 2011) and models that donate portions of their fashion week incomes to charities (May, 2011; July, 2013) connected the featured brands, products and designers to a larger discourse on ‘alternative’ ways of life. The fashion editors as well as the individuals quoted within the articles frequently overlexicalized objects and...
processes meaning an “excess of quasi-synonymous terms for entities and ideas that are a particular problem in the culture’s discourse” (Fowler, 1991, p. 85) were used. Overlexicalization of materials and methods, such as “pieces are made by artisans in fair-trade workshops in Nairobi and Nakuru” (April, 2010) suggests who makes the pieces and where they are made are a point of social contention in this discourse. Further points of contention in this discourse were revealed when agents challenged un-named oppositional perspectives (the other side of the sustainable fashion/unsustainable fashion dichotomy) and engaged potential critiques by stating what the sustainable fashion ideology is ‘not’. This rhetorical tactic is known as “Ideological Squaring” (van Dijk, 2011, p. 397). For example, “doing the responsible thing doesn’t mean you have to sacrifice good taste” (September 2009) and “[w]e won’t make anything that’s cookie-cutter” (May, 2013).

The most obvious discursive practice, however, is the isolation of this topic to one area of the magazine. By segregating these brands and products from the rest of the luxury goods portrayed it implies they are outside the core discourse of the publication. In actuality the goods promoted in the “Style Ethics” sections share many of the same qualities as the luxury goods promoted elsewhere such as craftsmanship, rarified materials and desirable brand names (Fionda & Moore, 2009). This has both positive and negative possibilities. Segmenting the discourse draws attention to eco- and ethically-minded brands, products and design projects that may otherwise be lost in the dominant discourse of the magazine. On the other hand, it has the potential of alienating readers who do not identify with the sustainable lifestyle/movement, limiting the number of individuals who consider the products as desirable.

References


