

Context Alteration in Clothing and Signage:
Implications for Graphic Design

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Abstract:

This thesis argues that Marshal McLuhan's theory "the medium is the message" can be applied to the concept context alters human communication. Analysis of two separate visual entities, clothing and signage, shows that the application of signage elements on clothing modifies the interpretation of the message from its traditional use. Clothing and signage are defined and compared as to how each visually communicates to the world. A conclusion that meaning will be reconstructed by the viewer through visual communication theory and rhetoric theory is explored.

Introduction:

Graphic designer Ellen Lupton reflected in *The Birth of the User* that "design has become a 'transmedia' enterprise, as authors and producers create worlds of characters, places, situations, and interactions that can appear across a variety of products. A game might live in different version on a video screen, a desktop computer, a game console, and a cell phone, as well as on t-shirts, lunch boxes, and plastic toys."¹ According to Lupton, Marshal McLuhan's theory "the medium is the message"² is no long a valid argument. This thesis will dispute Lupton's claims, and assure that McLuhan is valid and

¹ Ellen Lupton, "The Birth Of The User". *Looking Closer 5* (New York: Allworth Press, 2006) 24.

² Paul Benedetti, *Forward Through the Rearview Mirror: Reflections on Marshal McLuhan* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1997) 106.

still accurate. This thesis will assert that context, which is referred to by McLuhan as the 'medium' does alter human communication. Analysis of two separate visual entities, clothing and signage, I show that the application of signage elements on clothing modifies the interpretation of the message from its traditional use.

Overview:

Clothing no longer exists for the sole purpose of protecting the body. It has evolved to be worn for motivation beyond its original purpose, including safety, comfort, religion, culture, social status and political reasoning. Clothing and its counterpart, fashion, have formed a visual language that allows the wearer to articulate their personal views to the world. Signage is an element of environmental graphic design practice defined as "the graphic communication of information in the built environment"³. Humans need to systematically organize and visually unify the information of an environment. Signage works within this system to answer location issues, provide options on the next course of action and persuade the viewer to move based on the options recommended. There are essentially four purposes for signage: identification, direction, descriptive and regulation. Per Molierup defines them best:

"Identification signs identify a certain position or something located at that position. Directional signs say what will be found in the direction indicated. Descriptive signs describe the state of affairs at a location. Regulatory signs are sometimes

³ Chris Calori, *Signage and Wayfinding Design: A Complete Guide to Creating Environmental Graphic Design Systems* (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2007) 2.

referred to as ‘command and prohibition’ signs. They regulate the use of an area with a view to safety and utility.”⁴

All these signs serve the purpose of communicating their information on three visual communication levels. Technically, they must be readable and legible to the audience. Semantically they must make sense to the viewer so that they comprehend the information delivered. They must also be effective in persuading the viewer. This persuasion could be in offering a sense of validity or creating desire. Although clothing seems unrelated to signage, the two can be compared.

Clothing and signage might seem to be an awkward pairing for drawing similarities, but its actually very intuitive. These two means of communication have congruent purposes in three areas: creating identity, forming unity and promotion. These areas of communication will be addressed and explained through both clothing and signage. The examples explored throughout the following sections of this paper are interchangeable. Some examples are perhaps stronger at demonstrating the topics than others on certain levels, but they are all in some way connected. The elements work together as a team to properly aid the wearer in their choices and the designer in constructing effective signage.

Creating Identity:

Constructing a system of identification through garments is not a new historical development. It reaches back to the days of heraldry in the early twelfth century when royalty, rulers and fiefdoms desired a means in which they could

⁴ Per Mollerup, *Wayshowing: A Guide to Environmental Signage, Principles and Practices* (Italy: Per Mollerup, 2005)105.

distinguish themselves from others. William Metzig explains the invention of heraldry as “the creating of an ingenious system that codified insignia of personal identification, thereby establishing an exclusiveness of armorial bearings, a uniformity of nomenclature, a universality of cognizance, and, most importantly, a perpetuity through heritage”.⁵ The icon of the heraldry became a sort of mascot; a rallying point for soldiers in battle, an emblem on flags and a decoration on clothing that would later become military uniforms.

The tartan, or plaid fabric used in Scottish kilts, is another example of the early adaptation of identity construction through clothing. The designs are representative of different Scottish clans and families. As a result of this association, the tartan has become the signifier of family, kinship, brotherhood and nationality. It represents nobility and prestige. Today, tartan is worn for celebrations and represents heritage and ancestry.⁶

In our current culture, it is perhaps desirable to create one’s own personal identity and express it to the world, as in the days of heraldry. The human condition causes us to hold certain views, whether they are ethical, political or social, at a subconsciously high level of importance. We strive as individuals to express those views — which represent ‘us’ — to others, through self-image, mannerisms, language, actions and lifestyle. A method of presenting these ideas to the public through visual means is through clothing. Individuals choose the garments they wear carefully, in order to express their identity through ideals constructed within a garment’s type, style and surface graphics. A lot can be understood

⁵ William Metzig, *Heraldry for the Designer* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1970) 12.

⁶ Hugh Cheape, *Tartan* (Scotland: NMSE Publishing, 2006) 7.

about a person in a glance through the clothing they wear. This may include profession, hobbies, religions affiliations, social class, interests and body confidence. Many of these ideas are constructed through the relationship between the individual and the surface graphics upon the garment.

Individuals often express themselves through surface graphics such as trademarks. The interplay between a trademark and its corresponding brand is an example of semiotics and the theory of a “Sign”. The term Sign as it refers to semiotic theory is capitalized to avoid confusion with signage and a physical sign. Signage and signs are examples of semiotic Signs. This theory was created by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. He claimed that a Sign is made up of two inseparable entities, the signifier and the signified. A signifier consists of the thoroughly material aspect of a Sign.⁷ The signified is the mental concept that needs to be evoked by the Sign. An example of this theory is best described in the book *Introducing Semiotics*:

If we take the word “dog” in English (made up of the signifiers /d/, /o/ and /g/), what is engendered for the hearer is not the “real” dog but a mental concept of “dogness”: canine, quadruped, barks, has sharp teeth, waggy tail, buries bones, eats biscuits, howls, fetches sticks, growls, urinates on lampposts, etc. The “real” dog might be a Great Dane, West Highland terrier, a spaniel, a lurcher, a wolfhound etc., rather than a general dog.

So that a trademark can now be defined as a signifier, which references back to the signified, the brand.

⁷ Paul Cobley, Litza Janz, *Introducing Semiotics*. (UK: Icon Books Ltd., 2004) 11.

Commonalities exist between an individual's ideals and that of a company's brand philosophy. Due to the nature of media and consumer culture today, brand philosophies have been promoted to the public so often that they come to be considered common knowledge. By wearing a brand's trademark, a direct connection is inferred between the individual's views and the philosophy of the brand. This has become an effective way for a person to express themselves to the public. Because of the common conception of a brand, it is more practical for a person to wear the trademark than to try and illustrate the same ideals themselves. It is not a simple endeavor for an uneducated individual to try and create the same effective signifier and signified relationship that a trained professional or group of professionals has for a brand. Thus, it is far easier and often more effective for the individual to adapt the trademark of a specific brand into their wardrobe.

We live in a culture where the speed and efficiency of giving and receiving information is of the critical importance. Companies have already attempted to embed the brand ideals in our brains through advertising and promotion. By wearing a trademark, a faster connection is made with an existing brand than if the wearer creating a new one. An example of wearing a trademark for identity can be seen in the Gap's *Product RED* campaign clothing. By wearing one of the iconic shirts, a person is instantly identified as a caring, proactive individual. They are recognized as a person who is willing to spend more in order to attempt to extinguish the Aids epidemic in Africa.

Like clothing, signage also offers a method in which an identity can be constructed, but instead of the identity being that of an individual, it is now an environment. Similarly to the methods that an individual can use the trademark of a brand

to draw similarities between their desired identity and the philosophy of a brand, and environment can use the same means to surround a space with an identity. An example of this can be seen in the use of McDonald's double arches that are constructed as huge signs, illuminated and placed near an exit on the highway. This is a simulation of the trademark to identify that this highway exit is a means for a driver to not only get something to eat, but to be welcomed in the familiar environment of McDonald's. Similarly, the Krispy Kreme arrow is the identity for the drive through window of their stores so that a traveler can purchase their specialty doughnuts.

The philosophy of appropriation can also be used by mom-and-pop stores through hand rendered signage. These signs offer the identity and ideals of family, homegrown, comfort and care by showing intimacy through the hand of the artist in their rendering and being one of a kind. Alongside these methods of constructing identity through signage, wayfinding systems also offer a means to create identity to an environment. In *Wayshowing: A Guide to Environmental Signage*, Per Molierup states, "environmental signs inform readers about something relates to their location."⁸ The visual identity that is constructed through a wayfinding system allows the viewer to make conclusions about the environmental space of a particular designed compound. When a change in visual identity occurs, the viewer can conclude that they are no longer within the parameters of their originally identified environment. Therefore, it can be seen that both clothing and signage can form an identity for the entity they reside upon or within.

⁸ Per Molierup, *Wayshowing: A Guide to Environmental Signage, Principles and Practices* (Italy: Per Molierup, 2005) 105.

Forming Unity:

The concept of belonging, according to psychologist A. H. Maslow, is considered a psychological need that sparks motivation in humanity. Humans have a desire to belong in the sense that they strive to create affectionate relationships with other humans.⁹ These relationships range from desire to mate, create a family, and connect with friends through religious grouping, gangs and sports teams. A human being has the need to love and to be loved, both sexually and platonically. Without these connections with other humans, mental and emotional disorders can occur which could affect the quality of life for the individual.

The psychological theory of belonging can be witnessed in the wearing of sports apparel, especially that which contains a trademark of a specific sports team. Originally, sports apparel was created for athletes so that they could be identified as one team against the other. The clothing has since been adapted and sold to the public, as a means to express their support for their chosen team. It has also become a way for an individual to belong to a collective of people who also support the same team. By displaying oneself as a fan (a person who has intense appreciation) of a sports team, they instantly become a member of the family that supports the same team and is accepted without question.

The Encyclopedia of Sociology defines the concept 'belongs' as "the state in which an individual, by assuming a role, is characterized by inclusion in the social collectivity."¹⁰ This definition can be shown through a semiotic analysis of the socio-phenomenon of the rock t-shirt. By donning a rock tee, an individual immediately

⁹ A. H. Maslow, *A Theory of Human Motivation*. 28 Oct. 2007.
<http://advancedhiring.com/docs/theory_of_human_motivation.pdf>.

¹⁰ "Social Belonging". *Encyclopedia of Sociology*. USA: Macmillian Reference. 2006. 28 Oct. 2007.
<<http://www.bookrags.com/research/social-belonging-eos-04/>>.

becomes identified as a fan of a band or musical artist. The musical act, for the intent of this paper, can be referred to as a trademark. The defense for this reference has to do with the aura and energy that surrounds the musical style of rock'n'roll. The essence of rock'n'roll lies in the ideas of sex, power, rebellion and cool¹¹ that it represents. This, in turn, makes the aura of rock'n'roll a signified a.k.a. a brand, which turns the musical acts into signifiers, a.k.a. trademarks. The expression of opinion of ones favorite musical act through clothing creates social groupings on a visual level. As the authors of *Rock Tease: The Golden Year of Rock T-Shirts* explain, “wearing a rock tee not only announces to the world what you think is cool, it announces that *you* are cool too!”¹² A social group creates unity by accepting individuals who wear their particular band's t-shirt.

Signage, especially in wayfinding applications, is a method to fashion unity within an environmental space. Often an environment contains multiple elements — buildings, structures, and areas — that differ from one another in appearance and location. A system of sorts must be constructed in order to create a sense of belonging for all these elements as one congruent whole. Signage can create this unity, for it is an unobtrusive way to label a place without altering the space's individual integrity. This usage of signage as a unifier can be seen at the National Zoo in Washington D. C. A zoo is created through the grouping of multiple smaller varying spaces with differentiating appearance, usage and purpose. The signage system for this facility has to incorporate many different types of spaces in the environment including a multitude of different animal habitats, rest areas and stores. The system designed for the zoo is constructed in a

¹¹ Ed Chalfa, Erica Easley, *Rock Tease: The Golden Years of Rock T-Shirts* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2006) 8.

¹² Ed Chalfa, Erica Easley, *Rock Tease: The Golden Years of Rock T-Shirts* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2006) 9.

fashion that groups all the smaller areas together as a whole through stylistic renderings of simplistic profile images of the different animals, their tracks and consistent color usage, while identifying each individual area as its own entity. Unity through both clothing and signage offers a way to group people or places, and creates a sense of belongingness between them.

Promotion:

People who wear clothing that contains a company trademark create a relationship between the promotion of themselves and the promotion of the stereotype, style, brand or any other message that is contained within the design of the garment. When an individual chooses to wear a certain 'image' through their clothing, they transform their body into a form of print media that can be used for advertisement. They become a piece of marketing collateral in the same fashion that a poster or billboard would be used. For the benefit of the individual, this public broadcast allows them to express their desired (conception of their) identity to the public. They place themselves into a perceived social group and are thus addressed according to the perceived stereotypes associated with that group. This causes the circle of communication to connect the person to the concept. The person is now a form of advertisement of that stereotype.

Beyond the media, humans look to each other to understand and make decisions as to which views and social groups they wish to belong to and be associated with. For example, if an individual witnesses another person that they admire wearing a certain trademark, they extend their liking of a person to liking a brand. The individual would

therefore be more inclined to go and purchase that brand, based on that connection. For the brand, it becomes a form of free advertising. Chalfa and Easley enforce this concept, stating that “every time someone dons a rock t-shirt, they become a public billboard and an artist is promoted”.¹³ They also emphasize the beneficial relationship that wearing a trademark has on both the individual and the brand by stating, “the art of rock t-shirts is as important in self promotion as it is in artist promotion.”¹⁴

A common idea throughout the graphic design community is that the differentiating factor between commercial and non-commercial signs lies in a sign’s purpose. For commercial signs it is believed that their function is solely to persuade and influence while non-commercial signs are meant to inform. This definition between the two types of signs is not perhaps completely accurate. As Per Molierup states in *Wayshowing*, “environmental signs relate to their surroundings in a way that excludes pure advertising signs. However, the four categories mentioned here [identification, direction, description, regulation] may all include elements of advertising. This applies especially to shop front signs for commercial identification.”¹⁵ For example, a store with an elegantly rendered ‘OPEN’ sign in neon in a store front offers the fact that the store is either open or closed through illumination. The attractiveness and desire created through that colorful illumination and beautiful rendering of type and graphic may also persuade a viewer to go into the store.

¹³ Ed Chalfa, Erica Easley, *Rock Tease: The Golden Years of Rock T-Shirts* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2006) 181.

¹⁴ Ed Chalfa, Erica Easley, *Rock Tease: The Golden Years of Rock T-Shirts* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2006) 9.

¹⁵ Per Molierup, *Wayshowing: A Guide to Environmental Signage, Principles and Practices* (Italy: Per Molierup, 2005) 107.

Difference between Clothing and Signage:

There are two major differences between these two types of visual communicators. The first lies in materials used to create them. Clothing is most often constructed using a multitude of types of fabric, both natural and manmade. Other materials may include animal hide, rubber and plastic. Graphic elements that are applied to these materials are sewn in, printed on, and dyed into the materials. Signage has fabrication materials including metal, wood, plastic, concrete, glass and resin. The graphic images used in signage can be printed on with ink, cut out of vinyl, illuminated, projected on to the material, reflected, or computer generated through screens and light emitting diodes. In addition, signage offers methods of altering the content of the message it conveys in many ways appropriate for its purpose. Examples of signage that can change their messages are traffic lights, neon signs, split-flap message boards, projections, laser beams, grid boards, LED displays, liquid crystal displays, magnetic particles and fiber optic displays.

The other difference lies in the environment in which these communicators live, also known as their context. Clothing is first and foremost to protect the body, and that is where it will be seen. Signage is designed to live on buildings, metal posts, on highway routes, street side, and in nature. It is meant to be stationary while the body can move. Signage lives in the space of the cold inanimate object while clothing has the fluid seductive body as its habitat. These two spaces express identity about two totally opposing entities. One is alive, touchable, a person, while the other is rigid, inhuman and factual. Both contexts, or living spaces, evoke different emotional responses from the viewer through the nature of human interaction between what they mark or represent.

Obviously, there are more similarities between clothing and signage than differences, so they will make an effective test in crossing the context of signage to the body, and using the materials of signage upon clothing. They will essentially be furthering their collective habitation of the same persuasive and visual communication space in culture.

Further Defining Signage:

For the purposes of this paper and the visual component of this thesis that will be constructed as an experiment to test context alteration, it was imperative to further define signage, specifically what type of signage I will be used to conduct the experiment. As stated in previous sections of this thesis, environmental signage covers a multitude of different areas of visual communication, addressing special problems, including commercial and non-commercial entities. For this experiment, I will explore non-commercial signage. The reasoning for this direction has to do with the elimination of other elements of interpretation that could affect the reading of meaning by the viewer. This particularly lies in the idea of a brand in commercial signage. The connotation and philosophies that are associated with a brand can potentially alter the meaning interpreted by the viewer. In order to understand this complex addition to the meaning that a brand attempts to convey in environmental signage, it is useful to examine the theory of the death of the author by French literary critic, Roland Barthes.

In this essay Barthes' states his distaste with the methods by which readers interpret text as the perceived intentions of the authors as the sole resolved answer. The reader essentially takes everything known about the author, biography, history, location, demographic, religion, political views, etc., and uses that information to dissect and

explain the meaning behind a piece of text. Barthes explains that this method is weak and faulty, missing numerous alternative interpretations of the work. He suggests that by taking the author into account when dissecting a text, the reader is limiting the text and forcing the work to only have one singular meaning. Barthes believes that a reader must disregard the author from the process of interpretation of a text as to allow for multiple meaning and layers to be discerned from it. The fundamental interpretation of a writing come from the reader and how they digest a text based on their own personal history and encounters, not that of the writers. As stated by Barthes in the essay “a text’s unity lies not in its origin by in its destination.”¹⁶

Connecting this theory to the debate over commercial versus non-commercial signage, the concept of the brand in commercial signage acts similarly to the author in Barthes’ theory. Alternate views will most definitely be drawn into the signage if it contains the constructs of a brand. This can be explained through a previous example; the McDonald’s arches sign on the highway. While the immediate interpretation of that the physical sign is “the next exit leads to food” the viewer can also read other meanings into the sign based on their feelings and knowledge about the brand as a whole. Ideas of ‘unhealthy’, ‘fattening’, ‘corporate machine’ and other negative concepts about McDonald’s alongside positive ‘helping kids’, ‘fast service’ and ‘simplicity’ can play into the decision whether or not the driver will take the exit for nourishment. If this type of signage is used in the experiment, the additional messages that encompass the brand will be taken into account alongside the immediate reading, and that will adversely affect the feedback retained through the experiment. To avoid this misinterpretation, the

¹⁶ Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1977) 148.

proposition of non-commercial signage as the type of signage to be re-contextualized is posed. Non-commercial signage consists of highway signage, recreational symbol signs, transportations signs, hospital symbol signs, safety symbols for labeling, electronic labeling, mechanical labeling, Braille signals and meteorological symbols. These signs and signage systems are ubiquitous, utilitarian and in essence 'truthful' because there is no coherent 'author' or 'designer' in their interpretation process. They essentially have one signal narrative that can be extracted from their presence. We understand a highway sign as having validity and respect that the next exit takes us where intended without trying to interpret other extraneous meanings from its context. These types of signage will allow the experiment to effectively test the alteration of context through the simplicity of the message that they convey to the viewer.

Hypothesizing the Outcome:

“Communication is the art, act or fact of conveying information from one entity to another. This process can be either active or passive, conscious or subliminal, but in all cases it requires transmission and reception — and, of course, comprehension”¹⁷

Graphic design is essentially about communication. The practitioners are the shapers of messages and culture. The question remains in how context, fundamentally the medium in which a message is delivered, communicates differently and another. How does this re-contextualization alter the meaning from its original intent? The predicted answer to this question lies in both theories of visual communication and rhetoric. Both offer a

¹⁷ Charles B. McLendon, Mick Blackistone, *Signage: Graphic Communication in the Built World* (New York : McGraw-Hill, 1982) 3.

means in which an educated assumption can be made about how the re-contextualization will be interpreted by the audience.

Visual communication theory speaks of the interaction that happens between designer and audience. The construction of meaning, that is which is desired to be communicates, is an endeavor that is partaken by both the sender and receiver of the message, ie the designer and the audience, Visual communication can be broken down into two separate parts that can explain how a message is read. Process theory is the linear operation of communication that shows a direct path of message from sender to the receiver. Semiotic theories deal with the interpretation or meaning generated from a word or symbol. These theories will show the alteration of meaning in the re-contextualization. The process of communication of signage placed upon the human body will cause the reader to have to refer to information known about the two elements separately in their original form and then combine them together. This makes the process of creating meaning more abstract and less straightforward than usual. Semiotics and interpretation will cause the meanings of the signs to compound with the change of context. Purposely choosing singular narrative signage such as highway and transportation signage will cause the meaning to evolve from being singular to polysemous. Barthes suggests, “all images are polysemous — that is they have more than one meaning”¹⁸ In the re-contextualization, I am constructing a new ‘image’ that takes the separate entities of ‘clothing’ and ‘signage’ and forcing them to be assessed together as one unit. This will more defiantly alter how the meaning will be interpreted.

¹⁸ Jonathan Baldwin, Lucienne Roberts, *Visual Communications: From Theory to Practice* (UK: AVA Publishing SA, 2006) 36.

Another aspect of visual communication theory that serves to predict the outcome lies in the collaboration of designer and audience in construction of meaning. We, as graphic designers have the ability, through common perceptions and design assumptions, to sway the meaning which is translated by the audience in one direction or another, but it is not absolute. Those assumptions are perceptions that are used as tools in desired meaning construction are not perfect. Our audience comes from a multitude of differing backgrounds, histories and culture that may cause the interpretation of our 'desired meaning' to alter so much that it opposed the intended. Jonathan Baldwin and Lucienne Roberts note in *Visual Communication: From Theory to Practice* "No-one consumes the products of culture in a vacuum — cultural consumption is profoundly socialized and therefore our choices and tastes are shaped by our social relationships and environments".¹⁹ Within this re-contextualization, I am testing this 'consumption' that is being done by the audience. I am questioning the importance of medium in which a message is being transmitted. Marshal McLuhan answered, "the medium is the message" so how does the medium of clothing which live on the human figure alter the reading of signage? How will the audience take their individual experiences, their beliefs, and their cultural identities and translate meaning from this experiment? Take an example of a neon 'open' sign. Its original purpose is to tell a fact, whether the store whose window it sits in is open or closed for business. Once this open sign is placed on clothing and worn on the body of an individual, how will it be interpreted? Will the audience read it as its original purpose and look upon it as pure ornamentation? It appears exactly like an open sign placed on a t-shirt, therefore that is all it is, and leave the reading at that simplistic

¹⁹ Jonathan Baldwin, Lucienne Roberts, *Visual Communications: From Theory to Practice* (UK: AVA Publishing SA, 2006) 81.

interpretation? Or will they read deeper into the visual, discovering different levels of interpretation? Is the individual open for love? Open for friendship? Open to be bought? The face that this array of interpretations can already be accepted as possibilities goes to show that altering context will change meaning.

An additional means to which the hypothesis is supported that context alters meaning is in the field of rhetoric. Rhetoric can be defined as the art of evoking rationale, emotion and authority in an audience through language, with the intention to persuade and manifest reaction. Though born from literature and language manipulation, rhetoric can also be used as a tool in graphic design. Hanno Eheses, a professor in the Department of Visual Communication at Nova Scotia College of Art and Design has developed a method of teaching graphic design while implementing rhetoric as a design tool. In “Rhetorical Handbook from Design Papers 5, he explains, “All communication aims to direct the response of a particular audience in particular circumstances: even the most precise, scientific language has a rhetorical element.”²⁰ This response that is obtained from the audience is essentially the meaning they have derived from the communication process. The meaning translated by the audience is what is being tested through altering context in this experiment. The tool that is rhetoric through context change can be explored to view how it will potentially alter meaning.

Tropes, figures or metaphorical uses of words or expressions including antithesis, irony, metaphor, personification, metonymy, synecdoche, periphrasis, pun, amplification, and hyperbole, are one of the major elements in rhetoric. Though originally intended for literary purpose, tropes can be applied to images in the form of visual tropes. It is a

²⁰ Hanno Eheses, Ellen Lupton “Rhetorical Handbook, An Illustrated Manual for Graphic Designers”. *Design Papers 5* (Nova Scotia, Canada: Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. 1998) 8.

means to create meaning beyond the traditional translation of a sign. Essentially it is impossible to avoid visual tropes when creating graphic design. It is ironic by nature that signage, originally designed to solve environmental space problems to be placed upon the human figure. When visual tropes are deduced by the audience who are viewing these garments, new alternate meanings will emerge from their appearance, proving the hypothesis. In the following paragraphs, four of these tropes, irony, pun, personification and amplification, will be explained with reference to the re-contextualization. The will show both the traditional use of the signage along with how the change in context creates a visual trope and therefore alters meaning.

The visual trope as a tool of rhetoric is an effective way to theorize how the alteration of context will change meaning. There are a multitude of other visual tropes that could be applied to the re-contextualized garments, and the tropes are not individual to each garment. Multiple tropes could be distinguished in a single garment, creating a diverse array of possible meanings. These multiple meanings alongside the assemblage of meanings deduced from apply visual communication theory to the re-contextualization offers enough confirmation to theorize that the hypothesis of context altering meaning as correct.

Conclusion:

Through the analysis conducted throughout this thesis, it has been assessed that through communication theory and rhetoric, that context does truly alter meaning. In fact, when dealing with the test subject of this paper, signage re-contextualized on to clothing, the number of meanings compound upon each other. Marshal McLuhan's iconic

statement is confirmed true and medium does become the message. Ellen Lupton's comment in "*Birth of the User*" has been found to false. We have not yet met the instance in time where we have over designed in our commercial world. Context still remains an integral part of the meaning construction process.

Methodologies:

The visual created for this thesis explores context alterations. I have created a fusion of signage and clothing. Eight articles of clothing have been adorned with signage that I defined as utilitarian in the thesis. The signage has been applied to the clothing through visual cues that reference the original sign through symbol, type, shape and color. The signage is attached to the garments in methods that are traditional to ornamental methods, includes stitching, silk screening and heat transfers. Additional emphasis on materials was made to enforce the reference to signage through material sheen, reflective qualities and visibility of material at night. The goal was to create a series of garments that blur the line between clothing and signage. The garments are meant to cause the viewer to question how they interpret the identity of the wearer through their reading of the signage placed upon the garment.

The eight garments of clothing with signage applied are:

- pair of socks showing biohazard symbols
- baseball hat featuring an information booth icon
- woman's tank top with an exit sign
- man's polo carrying a general warning symbol
- skirt with do not enter signs
- detour sign upon a woman's t-shirt
- defibrillator icon stitched on a man's dress shirt
- woman's jeans showing a wide load sign

These articles of clothing and signage were specifically chosen to create visual tropes for the viewer to decipher meaning. Further emphasis on these tropes was conducted through the placement of the signage on each garment.

Clothing is meant to live in the context of the human body and means in which an individual can visually communicate their identity to the world. In order to further explore context alteration, photographs were taken of people wearing the clothing. It was important for this experiment to showcase the clothing upon the human and on a hanger. This photographic step was necessary in order to determine if recontextualization changed the meaning interpreted by the viewer. The execution of these photos was completed to emulate fashion photography. The models were photographed in a studio setting upon a neutral background. The basis of fashion is to create desire in the viewer in order to sell itself. Fashion creates this emotion in the viewer through photography that expresses life styles, idols, glamour and beauty that the viewer idealizes and identifies with. Creating desire through photography conveys to the viewer that these garments are fashion and to be taken seriously. The models used the photos were chosen to reinforce the desire in the photographs. Both model's body types are slender, which is accepted as beautiful by current fashion standards.

The essence of this exploration is to investigate how the viewer will construct a perception of the identity of the wearer based on signage that ornaments the clothing. To make sure that the identity of the wearer is based on the clothing alone, the photos are cropped to remove the eyes of the models. The eyes of a person are a main focus of the face. Emotions, personality and conversations can be expressed through the eyes. By eliminating them from the photos, the models become anonymous. This allows the

clothing to be the only method in which the viewer can assess information about their personalities and identities.

Visual Analysis:

During the construction of this clothing line, context for the signage has altered three times. The first change takes place as the initial concept of the experiment, using signage to adorn clothing. The original context for signage is spatial environments. The signage has been removed from its original living space and given a new home, the garments, which are in turn adapted to the human figure. The second change of context happens with the means in which the signage is applied to the clothing. Though color, shape, symbol and type are mimicked from the original signage, the material is not. By stitching, silk screening and heat transferring the signage onto the clothing, the connection between the new garment and the original signage become slightly abstracted. The third change happens through the photographs. While illustrating the garments in their proper context of the body, the photographs become a form of advertisement, reverting the signage to be recontextualized back into signs of sorts. Various recontextualizations in the experiment illustrates that signage has to be interpreted differently than the original. Although major formal similarities remain from the original sign to the garment, a further analysis must be taken by the viewer to understand the sign's new purpose. This reinforces Marshal McLuhan's statement that 'the medium is the message' and that context does alter communication.

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