Persuasive-Pervasive Technology: Rhetorical Strategies in Wearables Advertising

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ABSTRACT

This article positions wearables advertising within the realm of rhetoric and presents an analysis of rhetorical strategies employed by commercials that represent four wearable devices, namely Google Glass, Fitbit Charge, Apple Watch, and Microsoft HoloLens. Through a methodological framework built around visual analysis and visual rhetoric, the author presents a set of approaches that elucidate the specific rhetorical strategies of euphoria, empowerment, and enrichment of experience, which leads to a pervasive-persuasive construct of information centrism. The author then discusses the implications of such construct for the ideology of technology, particularly in industrial and pedagogical settings.

KEYWORDS

Advertising, Informationism, Visual Analysis, Visual Rhetoric, Wearable Technology

INTRODUCTION

We are living in an exciting time witnessing the increasing proliferation of ubiquitous computing across private and public domains, within for-profit and nonprofit sectors, and over our personal and professional lives. An emerging avenue in this respect is the development and growing adoption of wearable technology, which aims at reducing human effort in interacting with computer machines and augmenting user experience with reality. The rationale for wearable technology is also rooted in the convergence of media platforms in a seamless and pervasive manner, allowing the user to move within and between multiple spheres of interaction—either for communication, entertainment, learning, or simply experiencing something—more easily. As seen in most commercial communication today, companies designing, developing, and distributing wearable devices latch onto the significance of these interactions as a taken-for-granted structure in their advertising to targeted consumers. For instance, in a commercial that will be analyzed in this study, Google showcased its exciting new device, the Google Glass, and demonstrated through the video commercial how the device could provide automatic real-time, on-the-go information (such as traffic condition, or mapped navigation) for its wearer, thus enhancing the experience of the wearer’s when interacting with his or her physical surrounding.

This kind of advertising results in a discernable spectacle and hype among the general public about the utility and entertainment values of wearable technology today, instead of a critical assessment of the commercial messages that are crafted rhetorically to inspire desire and purchasing impulse. From national commercials to international presentation platforms such as TED Talks, these commercials have garnered huge attention and interests from global audience, suggesting that the ideologies

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within the advertising messages can be as salient as—if not more salient than—the wearable products themselves. An example would be the Microsoft HoloLens; even before the device was released to the public, Microsoft HoloLens’s introduction video on YouTube has already garnered 15,150,340 views (as of this writing) since going live online on January 21, 2015. While there is evidence for popularity, there is little understanding of the intentions and effects of these ads; research into the rhetorical nature of wearables advertising is scarce. A quick search on Google Scholar with keywords “wearable technology” and “rhetoric” yields merely over 3,000 results, many of which are reviews of the same source. In her spearheading work, Ready to Wear: A Rhetoric of Wearable Computers and Reality-Shifting Media, Isabel Pedersen writes, “The language surrounding the emergence [of wearable technology], however, structures us as much as we structure these new inventions” (2013, p. 3). Inspired by Pedersen’s work, this project aims to address the issue by rhetorically critiquing a selection of wearables advertising with an intent to identify the types of discourse surrounding wearables and the impact of such discourses.

While recent studies have examined consumer narratives and in-situ observations of user behaviors with wearables (Tham, 2016; McGrath, forthcoming), the body of scholarship lacks a focus on the actual commercial materials and advertising texts themselves. To address this gap, the present study is guided by the following research question.

RQ: What are some rhetorical strategies employed in the advertising of wearables such as Fitbit Charge, Apple Watch, Google Glass, and Microsoft HoloLens, and what do they tell us about the ideological conviction of wearable technology?

In the following sections, I first explicate the theoretical conduits for visual research on cultural discourses within the context of wearables advertising, followed by a description of the methodological processes in this study. Then, I present an analysis of four sets of wearables commercials and summarize the findings through a comparative report. These findings lead to a discussion of specific rhetorical strategies pertaining to the wearables advertising examined, as well as the industrial and pedagogical implications of a pervasive-persuasive construct in wearables advertising.

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATION

Advertising, like other domains such as marketing and law that hinge on the use of persuasion in achieving their respective functions, traces its roots to rhetoric. Rhetoric is often defined as the finding and using of “all available means of persuasion” (Aristotle, 2007) to affect the opinion and actions of others. As a persuasive discipline, advertising excels in a particular realm of social influence that is sales. For this reason, advertising is typically more concerned with the results of persuasion rather than its processes. Many advertising pundits point this out as well. David Ogilvy, a pragmatic adman, professes in his own words, “I do not regard advertising as entertainment or an art form, but as a medium of information. When I write an advertisement, I don’t want you to tell me you find it ‘creative.’ I want you to find it so interesting that you buy the product” (qtd. in Petit, 2014). As a scholarly discipline detached from traditional English and speech or communication studies in the North American academic terrains, advertising is usually considered a branch of the social sciences housed within departments of mass communication with subtracks such as film and cinema studies, journalism, radio and television broadcasting and production, public relations, and web or digital media studies. Naturally, given the methodological preference of scholars and practitioners in these areas, advertising has adopted inquiry methods that range from the moderate to the highly empirical as its default approaches to research. Academic journals such as the Journal of Consumer Research and the Journal of Advertising represent these empirical approaches.


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