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Recruitment Rhetoric of Metro Atlanta-Based Corporations

by

Cameron Moore

Under the Direction of George Pullman, PhD

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2023

ABSTRACT

This thesis, paired with the website “Recruitment Rhetoric” <https://cmoore1240.wixsite.com/recruitment-rhetoric>, seeks to analyze the ways in which selected metro Atlanta-based corporations utilize and construct recruitment rhetoric based on three theories: the rhetorical situation, mythos, and cultish. From this analysis, this paper then constructs a pedagogical strategy to teach recruitment rhetoric in freshman composition courses at Georgia State University to help undergraduate students develop a rhetorical literacy around corporate recruitment as they enter the workforce. Ultimately, this project aims to start a necessary conversation in the field that develops and interrogates recruitment rhetoric literacy practices.

INDEX WORDS: Recruitment, Corporate, Transfer, Cultish, Pedagogy, Rhetoric

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2023

Recruitment Rhetoric of Metro Atlanta-Based Corporations

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my partner Tony Lanza; without his support, I would not have been able to finish this project. He has been an exceptional sounding board for ideas, a quality reader of first drafts, and an unending source of encouragement.

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1 INTRODUCTION

When the common public hears “rhetoric,” the most common interpretations are harmful and empty political speech or a question that doesn’t require an answer, as in a rhetorical question. Very few understand rhetoric to mean oration and even fewer use a definition that includes all persuasion. While the field of rhetoric continues to work through various definitions, the public is unknowingly at the mercy of the rhetorical forces acting on them. Therefore, it is in everyone’s best self-interest to develop a working understanding of rhetoric so they are wary of the texts altering their opinions and feelings, whether malicious or well-intentioned. Therefore, studying and analyzing rhetoric cannot be done in isolation; teaching rhetoric, especially beyond the bounds of the English department, is a necessary and imperative task rhetoricians should take up with gusto, with the ultimate goal of facilitating the overall public’s development of rhetorical literacy.

In his book *Literacy: An Introduction to the Ecology of Written Language*, David Barton presents an ecological model of literacy. Ecological models prioritize the relationships and co-relatedness of various elements. In this case, this model acknowledges the ways literacy is more complex than just reading and writing and prioritizes a communal understanding over a hierarchical or banking model. There are different types of literacy and everyone is literate in some way; we all acquire the literacies that are useful to us as a reflection of all of our literacy practices. So, if a group of people is looking to develop a new literacy, they must begin a new literacy practice to facilitate it. For example, to develop a rhetorical literacy, individuals could practice reading and analyzing rhetorically.

One population that would benefit greatly from rhetorical literacy are job applicants. Companies have experts designing webpages that persuade their target audience, often without

them realizing. By developing a rhetorical literacy, applicants can upset the existing power balance in the job market and nurture their own agency. Many job applicants think their relationship with a company starts on their first day, or during their interview; really, the relationship begins at first contact which is often an applicant's first visit to the recruitment page. No matter how simple a page, it is rhetorical; no matter how quickly an applicant navigates past the site to an interior page, they'll still be persuaded.

To develop this literacy, applicants should begin a new literacy practice. I am proposing applicants practice reading employers' career websites rhetorically in order to parse how the company is persuading them. Once the rhetoric is identified, applicants can analyze the web page to come to conclusions about what the company is trying to say and why. The website "Recruitment Rhetoric" is a helpful tool for developing this literacy. By learning rhetorical theories, seeing them applied to corporate career pages, and then leaving with a working schema that walks them through an analysis, potential job applicants have all the tools necessary to create their own literacy practices and begin reading rhetorically.

This thesis project serves as an initial proof-of-concept, exploring the recruitment rhetoric of metro Atlanta-based corporations to establish a tradition of multi-modal rhetorical literacy among Georgia State University students entering the job market. The first component of this study is a public artifact: the website "Recruitment Rhetoric," found at <https://cmoore1240.wixsite.com/recruitment-rhetoric>. This site was composed with Wix to display and interpret the visual and verbal rhetoric at work on several metro Atlanta-based corporations' careers or jobs websites and is intended to walk undergraduate students through the process of developing a literacy practice around recruitment rhetoric as they prepare to enter the workforce. Designed to be used as a pedagogical tool, this website can accompany a Georgia

State University freshman composition lesson on recruitment rhetorical literacy that further strengthens a connection between the university's College to Career module and the department's commitment to the foundations of rhetoric.

The second part of the study is this essay, which seeks to analyze the ways in which these corporations utilize and construct recruitment rhetoric, explore the ways the concept in general, and specifically the "Recruitment Rhetoric" website itself, can be of pedagogical use in freshman composition courses, and to start a necessary conversation in the field that develops and interrogates recruitment rhetoric literacy practices. The six selected corporations are all based in metro Atlanta: Chick-fil-a, The Coca-Cola Company, Delta Air Lines, Inc., The Home Depot, Inc., Mailchimp, and Waffle House. These corporations represent significant employment opportunities for undergraduate students in metro Atlanta, including Georgia State University students, across several disciplines. With competitive pay and benefit packages, these corporations have a reputation for offering careers, not just jobs; as a resume builder, these companies carry cache and name recognition for future opportunities. To prepare students to apply for jobs and internship opportunities, whether at these companies or similarly sized corporations, rhetoric and composition instructors can use these corporations' hiring pages as a pedagogical tool to develop recruitment rhetoric literacy among their students. By focusing on companies which are geographically relevant, instructors can foster greater engagement among their students, increasing the potential for knowledge transfer. When analyzing recruitment rhetoric, there are numerous strategies available, giving instructors the opportunity to customize a curriculum to further explore the needs of their students. The theories I've chosen to focus on include the rhetorical situation, mythos, and cultish.

2 RHETORICAL SITUATION

Published in *Philosophy and Rhetoric* in 1968, Lloyd Bitzer's "The Rhetorical Situation" has become a foundational concept within the field of rhetoric. Bitzer's explanation of a rhetorical situation revolves around an exigence: something "not right" that can be modified; the reason for the rhetorical discourse. Because of and in relationship with this exigence, "[t]he rhetor alters reality by bringing into existence a discourse of such a character that the audience, in thought and action, is so engaged that it becomes a mediator of change" (Bitzer, 4). A set of constraints, including ideologies, traditions, and motives, restrict the actions of both the rhetor and the audience. As the field's understanding of composition has evolved, so has Bitzer's rhetorical situation; instead of just verbal discourse, rhetoricians are eager to include digital, multi-modal, and non-verbal types of rhetoric. Thus, more modern versions of the rhetorical situation isolate the audience (reader, viewer), speaker (author, composer), and message as points on a triangle oriented around the purpose; in the background is the context. Bitzer's exigence is now commonly understood to influence the purpose and the context; his constraints are now integrated into each of the respective parts, allowing rhetoricians to isolate and study the constraints present in the audience, speaker, message, and context.

When analyzing the recruitment web pages of the selected corporations, the audience are potential applicants. Because these pages recruit for many departments across the business, these potential applicants come from diverse backgrounds with very different skillsets and experience. Such a diverse audience can be difficult to compose for, so many companies prioritize specific profiles of potential applicants when composing their recruitment page. For example, there might be several hundred open positions across multiple departments and locations and the page might get thousands of unique visitors per day. In response, companies might focus on the department

with the most openings, highest turnover rate, or those that require the most specialized skills which make hiring competitive. A company might also sort or categorize their workforce and create diverging rhetorical messages for subsets of potential applicants; for example, breaking the page into retail, supply chain, and corporate positions. In this way, the audience the page is designed for is distinct and separate from the actual disparate group of viewers that visit the page. The more corporations make assumptions and deploy strategies to prioritize certain applications, the more the imagined audience diverges from the actual audience. Understanding the difference between these two audiences is essential when analyzing recruitment rhetoric and can provide useful information for a potential applicant deciding to apply, preparing for an interview, or deciding whether to accept a job offer.

At first glance, the speaker of recruitment rhetoric is the corporation; however, since a corporation isn't a single entity with authorial agency, the corporation is actually the perceived speaker. While small businesses often "pull back the curtain" to reveal their team, large corporations leverage prestige and anonymity to craft a corporate recruitment identity. This corporate identity, perceived by viewers as responsible for the web page, is a composite identity carefully crafted to act rhetorically upon its audience. This identity is in relationship, but not synonymous with, the company's customer-facing and employee-facing brand identities. The actual speaker, or author, of a corporation's recruitment page is a complex team of content creators and a series of hierarchical approval decisions. From human resources, public relations, and legal, several teams are stakeholders in the recruitment page. Copywriters, photographers, and web designers come together to produce the page. At each step of the process, creative is presented and approved up the corporate chain; regular refreshes of the page are scheduled to support seasonal hiring and changing business needs. Corporate recruitment rhetoric uses a

cohesive design to give the impression of a single, perceived author; the numerous teams and approvals involved weave a layered fabric of intention and rhetorical savvy.

What message are our corporate speakers delivering? The message is in conversation with Bitzer's original concept of exigence. In this case, the thing that's "not right" is the corporation has job vacancies; these openings need to be filled to maintain and grow their business. So, the message is an attempt to correct this: to fill the vacancies. The message is a bit more complicated, though. The website can't hire someone—it's designed to begin the process, to invite and incite viewers to click further into the site and apply. Corporations are playing a long-term game though; unlike smaller companies, they will always have openings, so they're also trying to convince viewers to submit their resume for future positions and return to look for future positions. Essentially, the message corporations are developing is that they're a "good" company to work for and their positions are worth applying to; they're transmitting their corporate recruitment brand image as the message.

The context of a corporate recruitment rhetorical situation changes the most often and requires outside research, so it can be the most difficult to grasp fully. The context includes the company's reputation as an employer, their reputation as a company, recent trends in their industry, and the positions of all their competitors; it also includes recent news coverage, press statements, annual reports, stock history, and social media scandals. Every bit of the company's actions, as well as the companies they regularly interact with, combine to influence the context. Further, the city, state, national, and global contexts act on the context to influence how the company, the audience, and the message interact with each other. The corporation is often highly conscious of the context and employs several departments of employees to research and strategize; in contrast, the viewers of the page often aren't consciously aware of the entire

context impacting the interaction. Potential applicants that research more about the company and the industry have a better understanding of the context.

Since it's commonly included in existing freshman rhetoric curricula, the rhetorical situation is an accessible entrance to recruitment rhetoric for both instructors and students. Composition instructors likely have existing materials and pedagogical strategies for explaining the elements of the rhetorical situation they can leverage to create new lesson plans. For students, identifying the audience, speaker, message, and context helps them understand that companies are not merely displaying information, but instead have a rhetorical agenda. Also, understanding the elements of the rhetorical situation provides a useful foundation for further analysis.

3 MYTHOS

The second theory identified for the analysis of recruitment rhetoric is mythos. Originally used in *Poetics*, Aristotle used the term to discuss mythology, emphasizing the use of plot to create a complete story. Modern uses define mythos as “an integration or body of interconnected myths or stories, esp. those belonging to a particular religious or cultural tradition” (EOD). Commonly, myths are not considered historical or literal truth; instead, they are understood to be communal stories, evolved over time, that are retold to transmit and reinforce cultural ideologies. When used to analyze rhetoric, this term represents a convergence of these three definitions: a comprehensive set of stories has evolved over time, carries a cultural ideology, and is used persuasively.

Corporations often spend a lot of time nurturing their internal, employee-facing mythos, creating cultural stories that are repeated over time to reinforce employees' perceptions of the company. HR managers talk about “company culture” and “company values;” company founders are deified and the company's founding is told and repeated like a cosmology. The external,

potential applicant-facing mythos often looks really similar to the internal mythos; because potential applicants often convert to applicants, interviewees, and then eventually employees, the transition from the external to internal mythos needs to be seamless. Thus, savvy rhetors can analyze the external mythos to make predictions about the internal mythos which can inform the decisions they make when interacting the company.

When analyzing recruitment rhetoric, mythos is a great tool that takes analysis to the next level. It's important for students to recognize the ways a webpage works as a collection of narratives, how those narratives carry ideologies, and how those ideologies are used persuasively. Analyzing mythos requires a thorough understanding of the rhetorical situation and then further analytical inferences and assumptions; this provides a useful opportunity for instructors to teach students how to take a text-based analysis to the next level: instead of merely understanding what is happening in a rhetorical situation, mythos asks students to understand how they are being persuaded by a rhetorical text.

4 CULTISH

The third theory used to analyze recruitment rhetoric comes from Amanda Montell's book, *Cultish: The Language of Fanaticism*. In the book, Montell analyzes traditional cults, like Jonestown and scientology, to isolate language strategies of cults and other hierarchical organizations; then, she uses these strategies to analyze other organizations, like multi-level marketing companies and exercise trends. This situates these seemingly disparate organizations in the same conversation, letting Montell create parallels and connections. While Montell might not situate her work within the field of rhetoric, she borrows heavily from the field of linguistics and psychology and analyzes how people are persuaded by powerful organizations, outlining the beginnings of a useful theory for rhetorical analysis. The term cultish is a play on words; it can

be used as a noun and an adjective. As an adjective, cultish refers to an organization that's sort of cult-y; as a noun, cultish is a truncation of cult-English, a set of language used by a cult. In this way, Montell uses cultish to refer to the specific discourse language used within an organization that acts persuasively on members.

This tie to language is key for Montell's theory; she says, "From the crafty redefinition of existing words (and the invention of new ones) to powerful euphemisms, secret codes, renamings, buzzwords, chants and mantras, 'speaking in tongues,' forced silence, even hashtags, language is the key means by which all degrees of cultlike influence occur" (Montell 12). Just like in the cults (and cult-ish organizations) Montell outlines in her book, corporations use new language and other symbol sets to prime employees, shepherding them into the company culture. "Whether wicked or well-intentioned, language is a way to get members of a community on the same ideological page. To help them feel like they belong to something big. 'Language provides a culture of shared understanding'..." (Montell 15). For new employees, this process begins before they're hired, before they apply: when they first encounter the recruitment webpage as potential applicants. By identifying unique uses of language on a recruitment webpage, potential applicants can track trends and isolate cultish language.

Once potential applicants have identified cultish language on a recruitment webpage, then they can notice how the language is acting upon them and make predictions on what the cultish language is obscuring. "A linguistic concept called the theory of performativity says that language does not simply describe or reflect who we are, it creates who we are" (Montell 47). Companies are able to invoke language to manifest the employees they want; by using rhetorically-charged, company-specific language, recruitment pages nudge potential applicants into an altered frame of mind. This slight adjustment primes applicants to adjust how they regard

the company, usually toward or away from specific reputation in the company's favor. In *Cultish*, Montell cautions against empty language that may signal a less than ideal work environment. “Excessive ‘garbage language’ may signal that upper management is suppressing individuality, putting employees in a headspace where their entire reality is governed by the company’s rules” (Montell 197). “Garbage language” is common on recruitment websites and should be approached with skepticism.

Cultish companies know how to use language; they hire experts to help compose their websites. This language can be used to paint a picture of a company culture that's often too good to be true. “...they’re in the business of selling the transcendent promise of something that doesn’t actually exist. And their commodity isn’t merchandise, it’s rhetoric” (Montell 167). The metro Atlanta-based corporations all exhibit instances of cultish language on their recruitment webpages, from company-specific phrases, to thought-ending cliches, to garbage language. In some ways, this is expected; it’s a trope of the genre and most applicants know to take recruitment promises with a grain of salt. However, undergraduate students new to the job market might not be as savvy at dissecting the cultish language on recruitment webpages.

Using cultish as an analysis theory in the classroom is a great third act to the rhetorical situation and mythos; once students can understand what is happening and how it is happening, cultish gives them the opportunity to understand why that matters and how it impacts them. Cultish is a tangible theory that shows how a company’s language alters thought patterns, impacting thoughts. It also introduces a contemporary theory written in more accessible prose. Because this theory is the most accessible of the three, students will be able to see themselves reflected in the writing; this can be a great way for instructors to invite students into the practice of rhetorical theorizing.

5 CHICK-FIL-A

Chick-fil-a's recruitment website is an excellent example of mythos. The company uses strong, cohesive branding to present a corporate identity and corresponding ideology. For example, the top of their page (image 1) claims the company provides opportunities to "work in the people business" and that they are a "people-first" company. This isn't meant to be interpreted literally. Chick-fil-a is a fast-food company; they aren't in the people industry (one that might buy and sell human beings). Rather, their potential applicants are meant to interpret this copy and come to the conclusion that Chick-fil-a considers their positions customer service and in return for excellent service, employees can expect a company that prioritizes their employees. This wording, coupled with the many images of smiling team members, tells a narrative about how Chick-fil-a sees itself and, more importantly, how they want potential employees to see the company: as a company that values people.

6 COCA-COLA

Coca-Cola's career website has some light branding but is altogether generic, relying on corporate tropes and stereotypes. Usually, the design and high saturation of corporate language would make the page come off as cold, but Coca-Cola has a strong brand image outside this webpage that attempts to offset the copy used. This strategy is likely designed to create a juxtaposition between potential applicants' personal experience with the brand and the company's corporate identity presented here. Ultimately, the mythos Coca-Cola tries to present is that they're a Real Corporation with Real Jobs and an ideology revolving around "human potential" (image 1). This points to an internal company culture that tries a little too hard to prove itself and prioritizes professionalism.

7 DELTA AIR LINES, INC.

Similarly to Coca-Cola's career website, Delta's career website seems to respond to their brand image; but while Coca-Cola is trying to offset a frivolous (fun yet disposable) image with generic corporate messaging, Delta creates a strong company mythos to offset an potential negative service experiences potential applicants might have had as customers. In particular, Delta uses their benefits (images 6, 7) to help build their site's mythos. The language throughout the page consistently relies on flight and air travel imagery, presenting a cohesive brand image; this language doesn't actually provide details about the company though. This type of language is what Montell refers to as "garbage language" and contributes to the cultish feel of the page. Potential applicants should be wary that the corporate promises and ideology presented on the page might not exist within the company.

8 THE HOME DEPOT, INC.

Home Depot's career website has the strongest, most cohesive corporate identity of the sites presented. The site repeatedly used the company's signature colors, orange and black, and incorporates images of aproned associates to compose a narrative of what the company is like as an employer. To balance out this verbal narrative, the copy on the page is sparse and direct, only providing enough information to direct potential applicants to a subsequent page. With this strategy, Home Depot leverages visual rhetoric to do most of the heavy lifting of composing their site's mythos, presenting a solid identity without slipping in too much "garbage language" and cultish rhetoric.

9 MAILCHIMP

Mailchimp works within the tech and web design industry and their potential applicants will likely be experts in the field; therefore, their career site has to function as a text attesting to the quality of their work. The site is streamlined and simple, providing a balanced mixture of company branding and generic corporate language. Mailchimp's customer-facing brand is fun and whimsical; their career page isn't exactly congruent with that brand. Based on the myths presented on the career page, in contrast with the context of their overall brand, it seems Mailchimp is attempting a similar rhetorical move as Coca-Cola: distancing themselves from a playful tone to position the company as a serious, professional employer. In Mailchimp's case, it seems like they are attempting to outlive their reputation as a tech startup while maintaining some of the personality at the core of their brand.

10 WAFFLE HOUSE

Waffle House's page has a very deliberate arrangement, positioning the higher-paying, career-track positions at the top and the hourly restaurant roles near the bottom of the page. At first glance, this seems at odds with typical UX design, which focuses on getting visitors to the content they're looking for in the fastest, most intuitive way possible. Most of Waffle House's employees and open positions are hourly restaurant jobs, so based on UX guidelines, Waffle House should put those jobs near the top of the page. Home Depot's career website used this strategy, leading with the hourly store positions at the top of the page. By reversing this, Waffle House is making a rhetorical move. In a similar way grocery stores make you walk past all the snacks and cookies on the way to the milk most customers came in for, Waffle House has structured their site so potential hourly applicants must scroll past career-level jobs first before reaching the positions they came for. This helps compose a mythos about the company: Waffle

House is hoping to persuade their potential future employees that their company has opportunities to grow a job into a career. While the actual promotion opportunities may or may not match this mythos, this rhetorical move suggests Waffle House is concerned with their employee retention rate and is using their recruitment page as one part of their strategy to address that.

11 PEDAGOGICAL APPLICATIONS

Rhetoric, the English department, and first-year writing courses have long been used to connect the academic with the professional. From Aristotle's focus on training capable citizens and politicians in his *Rhetoric* to the educators of the Scottish Enlightenment teaching in English to better prepare students for business careers (Horner), contemporary instructors have both a wealth of experience to pull from as well as big shoes to fill. When looking to bridge the gap between the college classroom and students' future professional work, an important concept to understand is transfer. In *Understanding Writing Transfer: Implications for Transformative Student Learning in Higher Education*, Jessie L. Moore and Randall Bass define writing transfer as "a writer's ability to repurpose or transform prior knowledge about writing for a new audience, purpose, and context" (Moore and Bass 2). First-year composition classrooms represent liminal spaces between two high-stakes writing contexts: high school courses and professional writing contexts. These transitional courses act as sites charged with a high degree of transfer potential, making it an especially important concept for writing instructors to integrate into their courses.

Recruitment rhetoric creates an interesting opportunity for transfer in the composition classroom. While this research doesn't support a comprehensive curriculum, it could certainly be a helpful unit or lesson to supplement existing composition curricula. Instructors could introduce

students to recruitment websites using the Recruitment Rhetoric website. The “Theory” page would give students some of the rhetorical tools necessary and the corporate case studies on the “Practice” page would serve as examples. Then, instructors could use the schema on the “Praxis” page to create an assignment for students, such as asking students to identify several employers they’re interested in and then write a rhetorical analysis paper on one of the company’s career webpages. This activity would help students get in the practice of reading webpages rhetorically, applying both critical thinking and skepticism, better preparing them to enter the workforce with their agency intact.

At Georgia State University, the freshman composition curriculum aims to support transfer through the integration of a College to Career (C2C) module into Composition 1101 courses. The existing module uses a set of scaffolded assignments, a career narrative, literacy interview, and literacy in the workplace research paper, to foster student buy-in and an understanding that writing and literacy will transfer to a future work environment, regardless of the career path they choose. Students are also asked to complete a portfolio on a site called Portfolium and introduces them to career recruitment sites like LinkedIn. This curriculum does an excellent job of introducing students to the ways verbal literacy will follow them into the workplace; however, while the curriculum introduces rhetoric to students and challenges them to think rhetorically about how they brand themselves, the existing curriculum does not ask students to look critically at potential employers or teach students how to read rhetorically. If instructors are to fully prepare students for life beyond the academy, we must give students the tools necessary to navigate the job market, including a full rhetorical literacy.

Recruitment rhetoric represents a gap in both the business writing field and labor movement. Metro Atlanta-based corporations are an interesting case study for the ways career

websites act rhetorically on potential applicants. By developing a website that teaches potential applicants how to interpret career webpages as rhetorical texts, job applicants will be on more equal footing with the corporations to which they are applying. Further, first-year composition instructors can use recruitment rhetoric to create writing assignments that facilitate transfer and better prepare students for the job market.

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