

An Exploration of CHAT in Pro Wrestling T-Shirts

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Dundovich uses his uptake of pro wrestling fandom to consider the impact the texts we create and support have on those we encounter in various social settings. Specifically, he argues that the clothing we wear is a text that represents ourselves as well as those that create said clothing.

Planning Out My Image . . . Just Like My Papers

Each day, after I'm (hopefully) home for the night, I'll spend some time picking the outfit for the next day's major events. Some things that run through my mind when I'm debating what to set aside for tomorrow include:

- How do I want to represent myself to the people I *will* encounter or *might* encounter?
- How confident am I in the outfit?
- What are considered appropriate clothing options for the event?
- Why might an unconventional option be a good choice for the event?
- What message am I sending if I choose to wear a shirt with words, symbols, or pictures?
- How could what I'm wearing be a way to socialize with new people or learn more about those I already know?

This planning style also extends to my writing practices. If you were to reread the above list and plug in words such as “text,” “content,” “readers,” and “expression” for words related to clothing, it becomes clear how closely related our apparel choices are to our writing choices. We want to present ourselves, as writers, in a specific way to our target audience. These similarities extend to the kinds of interactions we can have with our audiences or readers.

CHATting About a Clothing Choice, Just Like a Writing Choice

Illinois State University’s (ISU’s) Writing Program values these connections between writing and other forms of representation (what shirts we wear on our bodies in the case of this article). Mainly, it focuses on the interactions they can have with other creations, people, and institutions. This is discussed through a concept called **cultural-historical activity theory**, or **CHAT** for short. CHAT can be used for making sense of all kinds of things in the world, but in the ISU Writing Program, we use CHAT to analyze all different kinds of texts and literate activities through seven terms. According to Joyce Walker in her article *Just CHATting*, CHAT “refers to a set of theories about rhetorical activity (how people act and communicate in the world—specifically through the production of all kinds of texts)” (71–72). The key point in the preceding quote is “all kinds of texts.” I would argue that the clothing a person wears on their body is, in fact, a text!

What we wear is directly related to how we represent ourselves to our “audience,” how these audience members react to us, and whether avenues for conversation between the creator of the image and those that see this image are open or closed. For every piece of clothing we own, a person/company had to design it in a specific way. Sometimes we know why the creation was made, and other times we are left to our imaginations based on how we, as individuals or as a society, react to the creation of this text. Clothing designs are made to present some sort of message to the world, even if it’s as simple as, “This is a piece of clothing from our store based on the logo.” Similarly, the communication of the wearer of the shirt could relate back to, “I’m wearing this because I like the company.” Yet, as will be shown later, it can be much more complex and layered than that.

If we first understand that clothing can be texts, and that they can be part of larger activity systems that shape people’s ongoing communications, then it becomes clear that ISU’s CHAT terms can be used to consider how these texts might act in the world. In particular, I’m interested in using the CHAT terms representation, reception, and socialization.

Starting off, Walker refers to **representation** as focused around those involved in the creation process, specifically how they, “conceptualize and plan it (how they think about it, how they talk about it), as well as all the activities and materials that shape how people do this” (75).

While I did *not* make the design for what appears on my clothing, I still feel that the representation of the text that is the clothing I wear is a good comparison to the writing process. These activities related to the preparation and goals of the creators of a text sound just like the thought process I described when I’m planning an outfit.

For example, when I realized I was going to have a Thursday night class in the fall semester of 2018, I was heartbroken that it would cut into my ability to watch the NFL’s Thursday Night Football games. Despite this issue, I wanted to be able to show my support for pro football in another way. On one of the first days of the class that would cut into my football viewing, I wore a Cincinnati Bengals jersey as they were playing that night. When making this choice, I had to think about if wearing a shirt from my favorite NFL team, the Chicago Bears, would be the best way to get my message across. The Bears were not playing that night, and I didn’t have any apparel of the other team playing in that Thursday night game, the Baltimore Ravens. My decision on what to wear came down to what I wanted to express. My desired message was, “I’m sad that I can’t watch the full game tonight, but I value my education enough to attend class. Here is my way to support both.” As a result, I wore the Bengals jersey and got positive reactions from people I came across that night. I could’ve written a Facebook post, talked about it during that class, or written a paper about the issue in scheduling, but I felt like wearing the jersey was the best way to display my layered feelings on the predicament I was in.

This brings me to the second CHAT term I want to focus on, **reception**. Walker says, “Reception is not just who will read a text, but takes into account the ways people might use or repurpose a text (sometimes in ways the author may not have anticipated or intended)” (75). To continue my football jersey example, the goal of my clothing choice was to show my support of Thursday Night Football despite not being able to watch all of the game. An unexpected piece of reception I got from a reader taking up my text (a person seeing my outfit choice) was a question concerning where I was from.

“Cool jersey! Are you from Cincinnati?” I was taken aback by this response and didn’t even realize why he asked me the question. I don’t have a Cincinnati accent (I’m not sure what that even sounds like), have only been to Ohio once, and randomly got the jersey because it was at my local

Goodwill for five dollars. The issue with my thinking was, how could he have known all these facts about the jersey and me? This audience member only knew what I had shown him, just like what our readers know about us if they only read a single text we've written. In both cases, it was next to nothing as we had just met, and I'm nowhere near famous. This repurposing of my shirt as a sign of where I could be from was not something I anticipated, but I can understand it now. Because I live in a college town, it means many residents aren't from the area. My process of breaking down this reception of my text helped me become more conscious of my sports apparel choices when I'm in a college town compared with when I'm in my hometown of Wheeling, Illinois.

The last CHAT term I feel fits with clothing choices is **socialization**. Walker describes socialization as, "the interactions of people and institutions as they produce, distribute and use texts. When people engage with texts, they are also (consciously and unconsciously) engaged in the practice of representing and transforming different kinds of social and cultural practices" (76). The previous scenario is a textbook example of socialization. In my use of the Cincinnati Bengals jersey, my social interaction with the person that questioned if I was from Cincinnati helped me transform my understanding of why people wear professional sports jerseys. The realization that the act of wearing it in a college town can be done to maintain one's culture away from home was my **uptake**.

Another scenario where my views were transformed because of an interaction centered around the jersey was when I purchased it from Goodwill. Prior to this purchase, I had only gone to Goodwill to donate clothing or buy Hawaiian shirts, Halloween accessories, and ties. I had gone to the store on that day to checkout their tie collection as I didn't have a tie to match one of my button-up shirts. I didn't come out with a tie, but instead a high level of praise for Goodwill and recommendations for many of my friends looking for sports attire. My association with Goodwill and other secondhand stores has forever shifted because of finding a mint condition football jersey of a star player for only five dollars. Because of my uptake from the purchase, I am now more aware of the variety of items at secondhand stores and even an advocate of interacting with this institution.

Uptake is the process of taking up a new idea/ adjusting an existing one until it makes sense to us. This means that each person's uptake can be, and often is, extremely different than that of others.

Which brings me to the focus of the next section: How *does* professional wrestling fit into this discussion?

The Main Event of the Evening . . . Pro Wrestling Shirts and Culture!

I'd argue that there is no greater diversity in clothing than from those involved in pro wrestling and those that support these events as fans. If you were to look up shirts of three different wrestlers, the odds are extremely high you that would find a great deal of variety in terms of how these texts look.

Professional wrestling is essentially an athletic form of storytelling. There are scripted matches between two or more performers who have distinct characters they perform on the show. There are storylines shown by the matches (scripted fighting), backstage interviews with the performers, talking segments without a formal interviewer called promos, and more elaborate displays in which wrestlers further a storyline, or their character, by their actions in addition to their words. Nearly all of these are done before a live audience that reacts in whatever way they please. This extends to buying apparel/merchandise that supports anything from the overall wrestling company all the way down to individual wrestlers. Most frequently, this comes in the form of T-shirts.

The writers of these texts want to represent their product (their wrestling character) in many ways depending on their desired reception from their audience (fans or those that see the shirt), and this is affected by the subsequent socialization at all stages of the text's life from anyone involved. While I am not a professional wrestler, I support the industry by going to shows and, most commonly, buying merchandise. As I mentioned with the Cincinnati jersey, I decided what I should have on my mode of communication (my body) to display a message to my audience that would help show who I am as a wrestling fan and overall person in and around wrestling events.

My Prior Experiences Wearing Pro Wrestling Shirts

As a longtime fan, I was aware of the kinds of people that typically go to the Chicagoland area WWE (the largest wrestling promotion in the world) shows. There has always been a little bit of everything in the WWE audience, as one expects with any G- or PG-rated company. There are families with young children, teenagers or adults going in a group of friends, middle-aged adults going with their workplace peers, die-hard fans that never miss a show, and those that are pro wrestlers on a less global scale. If there was one thing most people in attendance had in common, it was that they lived in and around the Midwest.

Based on this, whenever I have gone to a WWE event, I have not worn shirts containing profanity, sexual innuendos, or graphic violence (qualities that many of the most popular wrestling shirts of all time have). I made this choice because of how I desired to represent myself to fellow wrestling supporters. This desired representation is that of a fun-loving wrestling fan that wants everyone in attendance to have a good time and be respectful of others. The shirts that I've worn have been of WWE performers that I consider my favorites and can be worn around any target audience (or even unintentional audiences) without backlash over the appropriateness of the image. This is similar to when I do not pick vulgar or controversial topics for class papers or Facebook posts when I want to spread positivity about something/an opinion without putting down other ideas.

Even with my squeaky-clean desired representation, I can guarantee that no shirt I have worn to a WWE event has been universally approved of. Different fans like different performers, and their disdain for a character, the person behind the character, or even the company itself can make them look down upon the shirt. Oftentimes, my favorite performers on the show are the "bad guys," "villains," or, in wrestling terms, "heels." This can cause fans that dislike the performer or that strongly support an opposing performer to receive my shirt negatively. It can also be taken as a way of me representing that I dislike the wrestler that the wrestler I support is going up against.

Going ALL IN on Wearing a Unique T-Shirt

My memories of wearing wrestling shirts caused me to rethink the three CHAT concepts as I debated which of my many wrestling shirts I would wear to one of the most unique pro wrestling events. This event, titled ALL IN, would be the first non-WWE performance to have over 10,000 fans in attendance in nearly twenty years in the US. According to numerous Tweets and podcasts, fans attending would be from around the world, something I had not experienced on such a scale at previous wrestling events that were held at Allstate Arena in Chicagoland. ALL IN, however, would be held at the Sears Centre, about twenty-five minutes from the other venue. This meant that many eyes that I would most assuredly never encounter again would be on my shirt selection.

This unique set of circumstances inspired me! I had to make a statement and stand out from the crowd as it was my only shot to represent myself in an interaction with the majority of these fellow wrestling fans.

These factors added up to me making a choice to wear a shirt that I would not wear to a WWE event—a shirt that read “F%#K RACISM WATCH WRESTLING.” The shirt was created by an independent wrestler called ACH. I discovered this shirt existed via a post in a Facebook wrestling fan group I’m a member of and immediately connected with the message. To me, I receive the genre of professional wrestling not only as a form of entertainment to escape the stress that comes with many areas of real life, but also as a way to bring people together from their shared enjoyment of this entertainment. Therefore, the message of the shirt was received by me as the following: “The world isn’t always a great place, but we can take a break from it to enjoy something that is meant to take us away from that.”

I was nervous about the socialization impacts the shirt could have. Prior to this, I had never worn any shirt with a curse word on it or one that made an ethical stance of any kind. It was as if I had just written a paper on a topic that I had never written about and was patiently waiting to hear feedback from my instructor or peers. If the shirt hadn’t been a dark color, my nervous sweating would have been evident from the moment I shut my car door in the arena parking lot.

And yet, I had not a single negative response to my shirt decision. In fact, I was approached by more people and engaged in more conversations than all the wrestling shows I had been to *combined*.

“I love your shirt!” “Nice ACH shirt dude!” “Go! Go! ACH!” “I thought about wearing the same shirt today!” “I like your shirt; it’s nice to see it on a day like today.” “Where’d you get that shirt?” “Whose shirt is that? I’ve never seen it before, but I kind of want to buy it now.” These were just a fraction of the comments I received from those that saw how I decided to present the text of myself to the wrestling community. The instant gratification I got from my audience felt better than any good grade I’d received on a paper or presentation.

I’m not sure if there’s one cause of the high amount of socialization from my target readers’ reception of the text, perfectly fitting the representation I wanted from wearing it to the event. Maybe it was the excitement the people felt for the show. Maybe it was the fact that they were all die-hard wrestling fans. Maybe it was the fact that I was in a different arena than before. Or maybe it was something that I hadn’t even thought of.

Fans of professional wrestling almost always cross over into another popular form of creative entertainment. A longtime fan of the wrestling industry and a frequent cohost of the successful podcast Wrestling Soup, Jon Draper has witnessed this unique connection numerous times. In e-mail

exchanges with me, he explained, “The primary places I see people wearing wrestling T-shirts outside of wrestling are comic book related events, such as conventions, and the local hardcore punk shows. I’m just so used to it by now, that I hardly notice. A lot of crossover people are into the same type of music, comics, and wrestling. It is similar to a culture of people wearing comic book related T-shirts, who don’t read comics, in certain aspects.” Draper would also not be surprised at the responses I received that night. In an e-mail thread, he elaborated, “It’s certainly considered more edgy and cool if you are wearing a less popular person’s T-shirt. I noticed this recently at the New York Comic Con, firsthand. It is a subculture statement, and it opens the door for fans to approach you about the T-shirt you’re wearing, not unlike independent music.”

When I asked him questions about the socialization around wrestling shirts in another set of e-mail exchanges, popular independent wrestler Colt Cabana also displayed a similar enthusiasm: “Whenever you see someone in everyday life in a wrestling shirt, I feel if you say something or acknowledge the shirt, it’s an instant connection. It’s kind of like a secret handshake out in the world, and I think that’s very special that wrestling can bring people together like that.”

Whatever doors the “secret handshake” I created opened with each of the people I interacted with that night, it was the most rewarding set of interactions I’ve had in person with fellow fans.

Why Wrestling Shirts Are so Valuable as a Form of Expression and Connection

Colt Cabana has a wide range of shirts that cover the three areas wrestling shirts fall into. When I asked him what some of his most memorable fan interactions have been surrounding his shirts, he said, “The I Star Colt shirt,” (Figure 1) “is an iconic one at this point. I always love when non-Jewish (which is most) people come up and buy that one and aren’t afraid to wear it around (not just wrestling shows). To me that shows a sense of openness spread through wrestling shirts.”



Figure 1: Cabana’s “I Star Colt” shirt is worn by people of all cultures and religions. Found at <https://coltmerch.com/product/i-star-colt/>

The frequent explicitness of wrestlers’ desired representation of positivity in their shirts varies of course, but I cannot recall a shirt that displayed a message that could be viewed as intentionally negative. This thought reaffirms why so many

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