Judge this shirt by its cover: An analysis of slogan T-shirts worn by Black women millennials for social equity

Dyese Matthews, Cornell University and Kelly Reddy-Best, Iowa State University

Slogan T-shirts enable wearers to communicate powerful messaging through overt representation of one's loyalties, opinions, and/or affiliations (Talbot, 2013). The variety of styles, affordability, and uniqueness of slogan T-shirts allows individuals to express opinions on politics and societal issues (Talbot, 2013; Klerk, 2018). Slogan T-shirts are often a central part of social movements' messaging outlets; for example, punks in the mid-21st century London scene wore shirts with satiric imagery of the Queen (Sklar, 2013), and more recently the Black Lives Matter movement supporters wore T-shirts printed with slogans such as "I Can't Breathe." Additionally, LGBTQ+ community members and their allies frequently wore slogan T-shirts in the 1980s and 1990s to aid in public visibility, which "enhances solidarity and advances public rhetoric" (Penney, 2013, p. 289; Katz, 2013). ACT UP activists, a group committed to direct action to end the 1980s AIDS epidemic, organized protests and wore slogan T-shirts during the events to garner media attention as they were frustrated by the lack of media coverage (Katz, 2013). In this research, we expand past literature by analyzing how Black women millennials utilize slogan T-shirts to negotiate self-identity and communications of activist messaging as millennials have significantly increased their engagement with cause movements (Taft, 2018). Our research was informed by Black feminist thought and style—fashion—dress as we explored the relationships between Black women, dress, racism, and power (Collins, 2009; Kaiser, 2012; Tulloch, 2010).

With IRB approval, we conducted in-depth, semi-structured wardrobe interviews with 15 Black women millennials (Woodward, 2007). Prior to the interviews, each participant completed a demographic survey and also identified garments and/or accessories that reflected their many intersecting subject positions including Black, activist, and woman identities (Kaiser, 2012).[1] These items were then used to elicit conversation during the interview. In total, 40 garments and/or accessories were identified by the women and 10 of them were slogan T-shirts. These slogan T-shirts are the focus of this study; as a garment that can be worn "almost every day" by many, a T-shirt is one of the "most important [garments] to people as an embodied material practice" (Woodward, 2016, p. 43). Each interview was transcribed and coded (Creswell & Poth, 2018). After identifying the 10 slogan T-shirts, we then conducted an object-based analysis in conjunction with the interview data, resulting in a richer understanding of the T-shirts and their meanings (Prown, 1982). We identified three themes relating to how Black women millennials created and negotiated meanings of these T-shirts related to self-identity and activist messaging: a) claiming space, b) gender equity, and c) criticizing cultural norms.

In the theme *claiming space*, the messaging on the slogan T-shirts captured the essence of Black women acknowledging their right to speak up for themselves, to voice their opinions, and

[1] All participants of this study identified as cis-gendered women. The call for participants included transgender, non-binary, and cisgender women.

to unapologetically recognize their self-worth (Kern, 2020). For example, a T-shirt owned by Marie read, "WE ARE THE ONES WE'VE BEEN WAITING FOR." While describing why she wears this shirt Marie stated,

> There was a 'men-inst' club started at my school to advocate for the rights of white men. *That* would be when I got my Black Lives Matter shirt, and I got a bunch of RAYGUN [slogan T-shirts]. I have one shirt that says, 'we are the ones that we have been waiting for,' something Barack Obama said.

Here, it was evident that Marie felt compelled to claim space as a Black woman as the threat of white supremacy quickly became a reality within close proximity—within her own school. The Barack Obama quote on the slogan T-shirt represents the ways that Obama claimed his own space as the first Black President of the United States from 2009 through 2017.

Messaging on the slogan T-shirts also communicated the importance of *gender equity* where the Black women demanded an end to all gender-based discrimination (Zhang, Pistorio, Payne, & Lifchez, 2020). One T-shirt owned by Oni read, "PIZZA ROLES NOT GENDER ROLES." Another owned by Marie depicted an image of a modified Mount Rushmore. The original faces of past US presidents were replaced with images of US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, US Senator Elizabeth Warren, and First Lady Michelle Obama. The phrase "MT. NASTY" is printed below the image, which references when Donald Trump called Hillary Clinton a "nasty woman" during a 2016 presidential debate—evidence of his continued misogyny and repulsive behavior towards women. A soaring eagle above the mountain is symbolic of the future the United States that is both female and free. Wearing these slogan T-shirts direct efforts to call out male privilege, sexism, and intersectional oppression.

In the theme *criticizing cultural norms,* the messaging on the slogan T-shirts overtly criticized topics and ideas that society has deemed as "normal," including discriminating against people with dark skin and silencing people who speak out against racial inequities. For example, Aja owns a shirt that read, "across cultures, darker people suffer the most. why?" This quote from music artist Andre 3000 conveys a message that challenges the idea that people with darker skin should be deemed less than within society (Garza, 2014). Similarly, Aja owns another shirt by Nike that read "EQUALITY," part of the 2018 Colin Kaepernick campaign that called for an end to police brutality against people of color (Wyche, 2016).

Through a thematic and object-based analysis, we examined the various ways in which Black women millennials used slogan T-shirts to negotiate self-identity and communications of activists messaging. Despite the mundane nature of the T-shirt (Woodward, 2016), our work confirms that people still use slogan T-shirts to overtly express one's subject positions and opinions on politics in modern contexts (Penney, 2013; Katz, 2013). Through our results, we actively combat the perpetuation of "controlling images," of Black women, which are "designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural;" we created space for Black women to freely express and define the self and related assertions (Collins, 2009, p.77). Last, apparel producers (small scale and larger brands) can utilize these findings to design garments that meet Black women millennial consumer needs; however, they *must* consider interest convergence, a tenet of critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

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