



Bringing Trans Voices into Conversations about the Pussy Hat

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This research was inspired by previous work (Lastovich et al., 2017; Malcom et al., 2020; Paulins et al., 2017; Paulins et al., 2018) about the pink pussy hat – the quintessential Women’s March symbol. Despite the popularity of the pink pussy hat as a tangible way to show a desire to “grab back” women’s rights in the face of growing political conservatism, two glaring criticisms arose in response to the sartorial artifact: (1) not all women’s pussies are pink, and (2) not all women have pussies. The purpose of this research is to further investigate the pussy hat with respect to the second criticism by interviewing people who are trans.

Review of Literature. Vick’s (2017) *Time* feature article about the Women’s March and the pussy hat contained a summary of the March’s purposes, noting that gender justice was among them. Vick also cited, “transgender activists complained that the vagina is not an apt symbol for those who identify as women but might not have one.” In an investigation of the craftivism activities that produced the thousands of pussy hats worn at the 2017 marches, Malcom et al. (2020) observed that some marchers harbored negative feelings about the pussy hats and/or found them to be controversial, noting concerns for racism and exclusion of people who are trans. In fact, some anniversary march locations specifically requested that participants not wear their pussy hats due to the concerns that, symbolically, they were actually exclusionary rather than inclusive (Compton, 2018; Mandler, 2019).

Halberstam (2018) ruminates about the ways that feminism and transgender inclusive feminism have been historically separate, and sometimes “at odds” in terms of who should be empowered through feminist perspectives. The existence of trans exclusive feminism is an important aspect of pussy hat analysis, with people holding trans exclusive feminist views exemplifying concerns about the hat being relevant only for female-at-birth women. This is problematic for an organization that seeks to be united and inclusive.

Method. Six participants were recruited using an author network and snowball sampling. The authors contacted their own acquaintances who are members of the trans community, then those acquaintances posted the opportunity to participate in an interview about Women’s Marches and the pussy hat on various online platforms specifically used by people who are trans. Receipt of a \$50 gift

card incentive (funded by an internal university grant) supported recruitment efforts. We did not seek to assign gender (e.g. trans female / trans male) in our recruiting efforts, using the rationale that people who identify as women are women, and people who are trans all have unique and valued roles in gender-based conversations.

Interviews took place via an online meeting platform, reducing limitations of geography in the recruiting process and increasing the variety of geographic communities represented. All interviews were recorded, then the recordings were transcribed for content analysis. The interviews ranged in length from 39 minutes to 1 hour, 23 minutes. Interviews occurred between April and December 2020. Pseudonyms were assigned to each of the participants to ensure anonymity in the reporting of this research. Furthermore, because recruiting happened across the United States due to the outreach capabilities of online forums, and the ability to conduct interviews online, we are confident that the participants' identities and privacy are well protected.

Content analysis was conducted to glean individual insights and perspectives about the role of the pussy hat as a symbol. The general questions of the research were: (1) What do you know about the pussy hat, and what are your thoughts about it? (2) Do you see the pussy hat as a unified symbol? (3) Are there aspects of the pussy hat that trouble you? (4) Have your views about the pussy hat changed from the time you first learned about it to now? Additionally, the conversations were all framed with the understanding that their views as a trans person were of paramount interest, so probing questions and natural conversation yielded deep insights into their journeys and experiences as people who are trans.

Results.

Among the participants (see Table 1), two marched in at least one Women's March and all were aware of the pussy hat. Virtually all of the participants acknowledged that their very existence is political and controversial, so they did not see the pussy hat as a major issue. Connor, who self-disclosed as a trans man described his motivation to show solidarity to others in marginalized groups, and noted his empathy for women's rights as an "assigned female at birth [with] at least one foot in the community." With respect to thoughts about the pussy hat as a unifying symbol, Xavier noted that "everyone has a different version of what feminism is to them and what they're fighting for, so I don't know [whether] that could be considered united." Bailey (they/them) internalized the controversy associated with the pussy hat, stating "[My partner] knit me a hat; [I was] wearing it with pride,...but also feeling conflicted about it in terms of the message, and unintentional messages that were being sent." Baily elaborated about the messages by relaying a conversation at the LGBT center framed around the question, "are we saying that the defining quality or identity of a woman is the vagina?" Parker reflected, "I've had some pretty unfortunate interactions with individuals that view womanhood as a one-way street and don't

include trans people.” Toby shared that their decision not to attend a woman’s march was because of the pussy hat and their perception that “it does seem to be a very cisgendered-focused event.” Conversely, Micaiah sees the pussy hat as “just a simple symbol of womanhood” and shared the desire to “make one myself.”

Table 1: Demographic Profiles of Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Ethnicity	Education	Household Income	# in Household	Self-Reported Sexual Orientation
Bailey	38	Hispanic	2 Master’s	<\$50,000	5	Queer
Xavier	35	White	Master’s	<\$50,000	2	Panromantic, demi-hetero
Parker	31	White	Some College	<\$50,000	3	Bisexual, Pansexual
Toby	50	White	Associate	\$50-125K	2	Bisexual
Connor	40	Multicultural	Master’s	\$50-125K	2	Queer
Micaiah	29	White	Bachelor’s	\$50-125K	4	Pansexual

Summary, Conclusion, and Suggestions for Further Research. Although other priorities framed the participants’ lives, they recognized the pussy hat as controversial in ways that directly related to themselves. The participants disclosed in their interviews that people who are trans face marginalization in many facets of their lives, and offered a myriad of examples. It is notable that the participants in this study are highly educated but, as a group, earn relatively little income – particularly in light of the number of people reported in their households. Furthermore, their stories informed the researchers about the importance of compassionate communities and family members or pseudo families to provide financial as well as emotional support. Each participant offered suggestions about ways the women’s marches could be more inclusive.

As with any qualitative research, these findings cannot be generalized, but they do represent six authentic and important voices who have shared their insights about the pussy hat. Their thoughts and observations offer support to continue to question symbolic meanings of sartorial artifacts. Bailey effectively summarized, “As our understanding of gender and womanhood continues to evolve, the pussy hat also needs to evolve.”

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