

Negotiations of Black and Activist Identity Through Dress on the College Campus

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Historically, Black people have used dress and appearance to express their Black and activist identities (Ford, 2015; Kaiser, 2012). For example, in the 1940s after WWII, Black men wore zoot suits to highlight post-war racial and economic inequities, in addition to using the suit as a symbol of self-empowerment (Kaiser, 2012; Tyler, 2008). Similarly, during the late 1990s and early 2000s, styles such as bold jewelry and brightly colored garments in addition to the revolutionary Black-owned clothing brands such as FUBU, Karl Kani, and Cross Colours became reflective of Black culture and the initiative to create space for Black people in the fashion industry (O'Neal, 1998; Robinson, 2008; Romero, 2012). More recent examples of the interrelationship of dress and Black and activist identity emerged alongside the Black Lives Matter movement (BLM), which began in 2013 where both Black and non-Black people began adopting slogan T-shirts, buttons, or related objects on their body to overtly show support for the movement (Kagan, 2018). We extend past literature by analyzing how Black women college students attending predominately white institutions (PWI) in Iowa express their Black and activist identities through everyday dress. We focused specifically on the BLM movement era from 2013 to the present at PWIs, as there has been a significant surge in Black activism, and students of color often face discrimination and racism on majority white college campuses (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010; Khan-Cullors & Bandele, 2018). Our research was informed by critical race theory and Black feminist thought, as we examined relationships between dress, racism, power, and Black women (Collins, 2009; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

We conducted in-depth, semi-structured wardrobe interviews (Woodward, 2007) with 15 current Black women college students attending PWIs in Iowa. Prior to the interviews, each participant completed a demographic survey and also identified photos, garments, and/or accessories that reflected their Black or activist identity, which were used to elicit conversation during the interview. Topics of the interview questions included campus experiences, activism involvement, expressing Black or activist identity through dress, as well as how the surge of activism related to the BLM movement impacted campus life and dress practices. The transcripts and surveys were analyzed using open, axial, and selective coding (Creswell, 2018).

Overall, we identified three themes relating to Black women college students: *experiences on predominantly white campuses; negotiating Black identity through dress and appearance; and negotiating activist identity through dress and appearance.*

To highlight the uniqueness of the Black woman student *experience at predominately white institutions* during the BLM era, we asked participants about their everyday experiences while on campus, and many of them shared that they felt both safe and welcomed as well as unsafe and unwelcomed in the campus environment. Some of the safe spaces on campus were directly related to university multicultural programming events or offices where mostly people of color congregated as issues of both race and power were alleviated in these spaces. Examples of spaces on campus that were labeled unsafe by the participants included white fraternity parties

that are often dominated by white, toxic masculinity and spaces where various forms of written messages perpetuating racism and discriminatory initiatives were visible.

Each participant shared how their on-campus experiences influenced how they express *Black identity through dress and appearance*. Many of the participants shared that despite sometimes feeling unsafe or unwelcome due to everyday racist power structures, they felt an increased self-love when expressing their Black identity through dress because they were constantly embedded in whiteness. That is, the women identified dress as a tool used to love oneself in an environment that is frequently hostile. For example, participants sometimes wore bright colors or patterns, including African-inspired prints, to highlight their darker skin tones, which increased their self-love.

The participants also shared examples of *dress and appearance that express their activist identity*. Popular examples included slogan T-shirts or garments with people of color imagery. Some of the women also shared that they expressed their activist identity by wearing all-black ensembles in a militant aesthetic similar to Black Panther Party (BPP) members in the 1960s. Wearing all-black styles on campus was significant because of the similarities between the BPP movement and the current BLM movement. That is, members of the BPP demanded Black empowerment and an end to police brutality, similar to BLM supporters. Therefore, when they wore BPP inspired aesthetics, they felt connected to their activist identity.

Our research confirms past work that predominately white institutions are often hostile environments for students of color, specifically Black students (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010). Our work also confirms the continued use of bright colors in accessories and garments and bold jewelry to express Black identity on and off campus (Ford, 2015; O'Neal, 1998). Additionally, our research affirms findings that through self-definition (Collins, 2009) Black women resist societal definitions of what is acceptable—in this case, everyday dress on the college campus, as the participants explained that they wear politically charged garments as a form of activism that ultimately reaffirms their activist identity, despite the negative reactions from others in a predominantly white space. During the BLM movement, a time of heightened activism, the participants use everyday dress to combat systems of inequitable power structures embedded throughout the college campus (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). These Black women continue the long history of Black people using dress to both subtly and overtly negotiate their Black and activist identities as Black people continue to face systemic oppression on the college campus.

Our work has numerous implications. Findings from our study have implications to society as understanding different facets of Black women can work towards eliminating racism and discrimination as education is the first step towards developing a sense of cultural competence. Also, apparel brands can use information from this study to understand Black and activist consumer wants, and tailor more garments and accessories to satisfy these consumers. However, apparel brands attempting to capitalize on our findings must be very cautious when creating designs that cater to this market as the role of interest convergence, or white people helping Black people only for their own interest (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), can easily occur. Therefore, we recommend working *with* these communities in a co-design process to de-stabilize power structures (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

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