

“Powerful,” “Proud,” and “Let’s Be Real, It’s Time:” Visitor Responses to a Fashion Museum Exhibition Centering Black Women’s Fashions in a Predominantly White Space

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In the spring of 2020 at Iowa State University’s Textiles and Clothing Museum, we mounted the exhibition *Collegiate Fashion & Activism: Black Women’s Styles on the College Campus*. In the exhibition, we analyzed the ways Black women college students attending predominately white institutions in Iowa express their Black and/or activist identity through fashion. We focused on Black women’s everyday clothing and its connection to Black student empowerment and/or oppression during the Black Lives Matter movement, a time in which there was a surge in Black activism (Taylor, 2016). We used counter-story telling, a tenet of critical race theory (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefanic, 2017), to make space for Black women’s voices and styles in 21st century fashion history. The university museum where the exhibition was mounted was founded in the 1920s, has over 9000 objects, and aims to document Iowa’s history with a focus on the college campus; however, the museum severely lacks documented examples from marginalized campus communities including Black people. Therefore, to tell this history in the museum, we interviewed 15 Black women college students who then loaned 40 garments or accessories for the exhibition. The purpose of this research was to examine the campus community’s response to this exhibition, which center’s Black women college student voices in a predominantly white space.

Museum exhibitions can be important spaces to construct and negotiate identity (Newman & McLean, 2006). Individuals who continually see themselves represented in exhibitions can understand parts of their identity by engaging with the objects (McLean & Cooke). Therefore, individuals who rarely see themselves represented, have less of an ability to connect with the narratives presented alongside the objects in these public cultural institutions. Invisibility of historically marginalized communities continues the negative stereotypes they face on an everyday basis (Fryberg & Townsend, 2008). Most importantly is that when historically marginalized communities do see themselves represented in museum exhibitions, they can experience a positive reaction and sense of self (Hall, 1992). To expand on the literature, we explored how individuals on a predominantly white campus experienced and responded to an exhibition centering Black women college students, a historically marginalized population (Crenshaw, 1989).

To achieve the purpose of our study, we conducted an online survey. As museum visitors entered the gallery, a QR code was available to scan that took potential participants to the 14-question survey. To be eligible to participate, individuals had to be 18 years or older. We collected demographic data including: race/ethnicity, gender, age, occupation, and where they live. Then we asked 8 questions about the exhibition including topics on representation of women of color, their reactions to the exhibition, if they would like to see more representation of women of color, and what they liked or wished were different about the exhibition. Additionally, we asked if the person identified as a Black or African American woman and if they said yes, we

asked how or if they related to the different themes in the exhibition. To analyze the data we report descriptive statistics and then used thematic analysis for the open-ended questions to identify themes and subthemes related to our purpose (Neuman, 2011).

In total, 77 people completed the survey. Participants were mostly White (n = 41, 53%), followed by Asian American (n = 14, 18%), Asian international (n = 6, 8%), mixed (n = 5, 7%), Black/African American (n = 4, 5%), Hispanic (n = 2, 3%), Indigenous (n = 2, 3%), Latino/a/x (n = 1, 1%), Kazakh (n = 1, 1%), and Omani (n = 1, 1%). There were 50 (65%) women, 24 (31%) men, 1 (1%) transgender/agender/genderqueer person, and 2 (2%) two-spirit people. Ages ranged from 18 to 66 (average = 23). Almost all participants were full-time students (n = 73, 95%).

When asked if participants had ever seen women of color represented in museum exhibitions, some said yes (n = 19, 25%). Many of the participants (n = 62, 80%) responded that they would like to see more representation, whereas a few (n = 15, 20%) said maybe. All of the themes identified in the data centered around the idea that *diversity is important* and should be considered in museum spaces. We identified that participants expressed a *desire to see more Black women in museums*. They wanted to see more Black women for numerous reasons. For example, they felt representation could help combat white supremacy and that everyone deserves representation. Additionally, they felt that increasing representation could contribute to more public awareness of different cultures and the development of empathy towards others. Of note is that many of the participants expressed that not only would they like to see more Black women represented in exhibitions, but that they felt there was a severe lack of representation of other marginalized identities such as Asian people.

Participants had an *overwhelmingly positive response* to the exhibition. They used words such as powerful, empowering, appreciation, and amazement to describe their feelings towards the exhibition. Participants also expressed they felt a sense of pride while being in the gallery. They felt the exhibition was interesting or intriguing because it filled a gap in their education on Black culture. Increased feelings of courage were also expressed by respondents. One person though mentioned that they did not have a feeling or response when in the exhibition. The four Black women participants in the survey connected with and related to *every* theme. In their responses, they related positive connections with the objects and the stories of the Black women.

Suggested *exhibition improvements* centered around *resource limitations* or *lack of museum best practice knowledge*. Overall, though, there were many congratulatory comments and a great sense of thankfulness for creating the space on campus; one visitor stated, “I went into the gallery and was suspended in awe and appreciation for all the visit meant.”

Our research highlights the importance of equity in museum exhibition representation. We also confirm past work that seeing oneself represented in an exhibition as a marginalized individual can elicit a positive sense of self (Hall, 1992). Although, our work highlights that individuals of privileged identities (e.g. white, men, etc.) also had a positive reaction to seeing marginalized communities empowered in a space that historically left that community out. Through our results, we offer implications for museum professionals to consider as they accession objects and plan for future exhibitions: representation is important and people notice and feel empowered by it. One participant said it best, “let’s be real, it’s time.”

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