



Same Time, Next Year: Evolution of the Pussyhat's Symbolism

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The United States has seen a rise in activism since the election of its 45th president (Sydell, 2017), and in response to a myriad of politically fueled issues. In the year since the 2017 Presidential Inauguration, and the infamous debut of the pussyhat at the January 21, 2017 Women's March, the pussyhat has emerged as an enduring, though increasingly controversial, symbol of feminism and activism. Notably, as with any politically and emotionally charged symbol, conflicting meanings and viewpoints have surfaced. Through widely available news feeds, members of our society have learned about craftivism (Greer, 2014; Reimel & Arneson, 2017), diversity and inclusion (Compton, 2018; Shamus, 2018; Quito, 2017), and intergenerational (Gambino, 2018) aspects of pussyhat symbolism. Documented controversies have resulted from many conversations among people who support the feminist and resistance movements, but also identify shortcoming of the symbolism of a pink hat that literally represents female genitalia of only a privileged and "majority" group of women. Despite widespread acknowledgement that "not all pussys are pink" and "not all women have pussys," photographic evidence documents that large numbers of women attending anniversary marches in 2018 donned pussyhats, and many of those were pink.

While initially debuting as a fun, creative textile/clothing artifact that both intended to, and effectively did, unify marchers, the pussyhat's symbolism has evolved. Recognition of, and concern for, the symbolism associated with pussyhats prompted response from the pussyhat creator, Kristin Suh, who contends "The hat is a metaphor, not just for women who are cisgender ... but any person or group who can related to feeling marginalized" (Compton, 2017). However, various Anniversary Women's March organizers included requests for refrain from wearing pussyhats, such as this post on the Pensacola Women's March Facebook page:

The Pink P*ssy Hats [are] exclusionary ... we ask that march goers refrain from wearing this hat and instead, pick an alternative headwear that focuses on collective women's liberation for ALL women: transgender women, multinational women, disabled women, queer women -- the most marginalized.

This qualitative research was undertaken to gain insight into the experiences of female participants at 2018 Anniversary Women's Marches, specifically to learn about their perceptions and meanings associated with pussyhats that they and/or their fellow marchers wore. Using symbolic interaction (SI) theory as our foundational framework, we gathered usable data from 66

women who marched in locations throughout the US. Our sample population had a mean age of 47, was predominantly White (88%) and marched in locations spanning 7 states and Washington, D.C. Our survey was distributed via social media, with a 16-day collection window from 22 January to 7 February, 2018. Similar to findings presented in a study of inaugural year marchers (Paulins et al., 2017), our survey participants cited three general reasons for marching: about 1/3 of them noted a *desire to be politically active*, build on the momentum of activism, and continue to fight for justice and equality for all; another 1/3 cited their desire to *stand in solidarity with and for women* and support women's issues; about 10% exclusively referenced a desire to continue to *protest and resist the current administration*, with another 10% mentioning both supporting women and the resistance.

Among the women in our sample, 21 (32%) wore hats at their march, with 14 (21%) of them sporting self-described pussyhats (5 wore the same hat as in 2017). We note that, *if* the two different research samples are comparable, fewer than half as many women wore pussyhats in 2018 compared to 2017 (Paulins et al., 2017). (Also important to note – nationwide, the weather in 2018 was substantially warmer than in 2017.) To be clear, we did not pose any leading questions about the meaning of the pussyhat nor did we specifically explore controversial meanings that evolved in the past year; our survey question stated, “What is your interpretation of the meaning of the “Pussyhat?” Both pussyhat wearers and non-wearers overwhelmingly interpreted the symbolism of the artifact with anti-Trump meaning, a literal defiance to his “grab ‘em by the pussy” comment, and a show of support for women's issues. Despite the positivity presented in respondents' statements, only 2 (14%) pussyhat wearing marchers reported that they regularly wear their hats, 3 (21%) acknowledged that they've worn the pussyhats to other protests, but 5 (36%) said they had not worn their hats at any other time than the Women's Marches. One of these women explained, “I don't wish to offend women of color, or trans women, who may feel excluded.” Eight respondents out of our entire sample (12%), all of whom were White, referenced controversial and negative symbolism of the pussyhat, demonstrating that the incongruences for inclusivity of women who are transgender and/or of color is increasingly recognized. Interestingly, descriptions of pussyhats sometimes included implied acknowledgement (and attempted mediation) of this juxtaposition, such as “dark blood red sparkly yarn pussyhat” and a rationale was given for not wearing a pussyhat: “I refuse to make POC [people of color] and LGBTQIA [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual] people feel uncomfortable by wearing a pink hat they can view as exclusionary.”

In conclusion, the pussyhat artifact remains a strong symbol of women's solidarity and empowerment, even while it is increasingly understood as a non-inclusive and controversial symbol by a small but important portion of marchers. Symbolic interaction clearly occurs, with meanings, and even recognition of potentially controversial meanings, in the context of pussyhat wearing. This exploratory work provides a strong rationale to continue to research pussyhats in the context of gender inclusivity and multiculturalism. We encourage future research to be focused on seeking voices of non-White women who can contribute their perspectives and experiences related to the symbolic meanings of the pussyhat.

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