

Exploring the Meaning of the Pussyhat

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January 21, 2017 was a landmark day for a newly energized 4th wave feminist movement, with Women's Marches occurring in US cities large and small, and even throughout the world, with the key March held in Washington, D.C. The Marches, while notably inclusive with men, women, and children participating, were distinctive and unified in two symbolic and highly visible ways: creative signs and pussyhats. The pink pussyhat creation is attributed to Jayna Zweiman and Krista Suh who collaborated with Kat Cole to produce a simple pattern, and encouraged knitters to produce and distribute hats (typically free) to create unity among marchers (Oringel, 2017). Numerous variations of the pink pussyhat have been created; the pussyhat has become synonymous with the current movement supporting female empowerment, and simultaneously as a protest responding to the current US administration – so much so that the Victoria and Albert Museum has included one in its permanent collection (Casone, 2017). Clearly the pussyhat is widely recognized as a sartorial symbol in our contemporary popular culture. Thus, it is important to explore and document the meanings of this symbolic clothing artifact to its wearers.

We offer this exploratory research to document, describe, and analyze the experiences of female participants in Women's Marches across the US and specifically the meanings of the pussyhats they wore. Women who participated in Marches across the US were asked to complete a survey that was distributed through a convenience and snowball sampling method shared via email, Facebook, and Twitter. During a pilot 2 ½ week period, 187 usable surveys were completed. The participants indicated partaking in Marches from coast to coast, with 62% of our respondents having marched in Washington, D.C. Our convenience sample was comprised of 163 (98%) White women, ages 30-76 ($\bar{x} = 47$).

One hundred sixteen (62%) of our respondents wore hats specifically for the March; of those, 89 (77% of hat wearers; 48% overall) wore pussyhats. We used symbolic interaction theory (SI) to frame our qualitative content analysis, exploring and identifying the ways women connected their (and others') pussyhat artifacts with their communication strategies as marchers. We developed a coding protocol that identified *in vivo* codes within the women's narratives, then grouped those codes into categories associated with messages, resulting in emergent themes.

The women expressed reasons for marching that fell into five emergent, inter-related themes: 1) to make their voices heard and to demonstrate their beliefs, 2) to advocate on behalf of human

rights, including but not limited to women's rights, 3) to protest the current US presidential administration, 4) to stand in peaceful solidarity with like minded people, 2) to honor past protesters with concern for the future in mind.

The pussyhat was universally recognized; the women who wore pussyhats described them in terms including "cat hat," "hat with ears," "pink with little point on each side of head," "Grumpy Cat hat," "pink pussyhat," and "pussyhat." The range of pussyhats was well illustrated by one description, "...black with an embroidered cat face on it; it was a pussyhat." Women disclosed that pussyhats were home made, bought at mainstream stores, purchased at craft fairs, and received as gifts from both friends and strangers. They were knitted, sewn, and crocheted. Many women included their hats among the essential items taken to the Marches, while some learned about the pussyhat only in route or once they arrived. When asked about the meaning of their pussyhat, or pussyhats worn by others, marchers expressed symbolism far beyond the obvious "play on words" and "anti-pussy grabbing" definition. They noted that the pussyhats "identified me as a member" of the world-wide protesters who were expressing disagreement with the US political climate and supporters of women, LGBTQ, immigrant, and minority rights. Although secondary utility was noted (citing the usefulness of a hat on a cold winter day), overwhelmingly the symbolic meaning of the pussyhat outweighed its sartorial value. Multiple respondents declared they were "taking back the word pussy." Many survey respondents literally wrote "it was a symbol" of unity, solidarity, and/or empowerment.

Most women said that the pussyhats would be worn again at political events or protests, but not as part of their everyday wardrobes. Interestingly, wearing the pussyhat stretched some women beyond their comfort zones, remarking about last minute decisions to don one because it had been gifted, and alluding to peer pressure motivations. Several women declared "fear of being targeted" as a motivating deterrent to wearing the pussyhat again. Notably, one marcher announced, "It's overtly political, which I don't generally care to be." This statement captured the essence of the pussyhat as a symbol reflecting the marchers' sentiments that "we will not be silent" because "this is just too important." Because SI supports exploration of ways people use and understand symbols in their environments, its application in our analysis of the meanings of the pink pussyhat was a strong fit. Our narrative analysis presents the voices of women who participated in Women's Marches, lending insight into the cultural and social symbolic meanings of the pussyhats so many of them wore.

References

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