



Celebrities, Signs, and Symbols: Engaging in Black Lives Matter Activism Through Body and Dress Practices

Dyese Matthews & Kelly L. Reddy-Best, Iowa State University

The #BlackLivesMatter (BLM) movement started in 2013 as a hashtag on social media in response to the continued and disproportionate killings of unarmed Black people by police. The movement itself is “an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise” (“Black Lives Matter”, n.d.). Since then, the movement has continued to thrive and earn the endorsement of ordinary citizens, activists, as well as major celebrities. With their social statuses, celebrities have played an important role in perpetuating the BLM movement verbally, and through many other types of nonverbal signs and symbols. The purpose of this research is to explore how celebrities have publicly supported the BLM movement historically and today through signs, symbols, and fashions. Therefore, in this paper we explore how celebrities used their platforms to display signs, body positions, and/or the use of fashion to support and perpetuate the BLM movement.

Using a cultural studies approach, we conducted a thematic analysis of popular press news articles and images related to celebrities supporting BLM. In order to provide historical context and a connection to the histories of oppression in the Black community, I begin my analysis in the 1960s. The numerous examples across time highlight different celebrities’ connection to and support of the movement. Body position, support through fashion, and historical reference were the different ways celebrities supported the movement.

Positioning the body or parts of the body in a specific way has been seen as symbolic in certain environments or contexts. As stated by Reischer and Koo, “the body is viewed metaphorically as a text that can be ‘read’ as a symbol or signifier of the social world that it inhabits” (Reischer & Koo, 2004). Considering the notion of empowering the Black community, celebrities positioning their bodies in specific ways has played an enormous role in the public awareness of Black empowerment movements. For example, Tommie Smith and John Carlos raised their fists in the air at the 1968 Olympics. This raising of the first was an early example of these resistance symbols through the body. The *New York Times* reported, “on the victory stand at the Mexico City Olympics, Tommie Smith and John Carlos raised their black-gloved fists in what was then known as the black power salute” (Lipsyte, 1993). The raised fist, historically and today, is a symbol of Black power or the demand for Black empowerment and equality as well as generational insurgency (Peniel, 2016). Although this simple form of protest, moving one’s hand into the air, was peaceful and silent in nature, it was not well received and shook the nation. Lipsyte stated, “without a hearing, Smith and Carlos were suspended from the United States team, thrown out of the Olympic Village and forced to leave Mexico” (Lipsyte, 1993). Despite the expected or unexpected possibilities of push back or negative backlash, these two Black men decided to stand up for what they believed in, in one of the most visible platforms for athletics as it is watched by millions of people throughout the world (Samuel, Tenenbaum, & Bar-Meher, 2016). This moment at the 1968 Olympics foreshadowed what is happening in the 21st century where celebrities continue to use their visibility to make a statement for change.

Moving into the 21st century, National Football League (NFL) player, Colin Kaepernick, used another body position as a form of protest while taking a knee during the National Anthem at the start of the 2016 football season. Journalist at the *Wall Street Journal* reported, “Mr. Kaepernick...ignited the

anthem demonstrations in 2016 to draw attention to racial inequality and other social justice issues” (Beaton, Umlauf, & Cole, 2018). Since the initial protest in 2016, Kaepernick continued to take a knee during NFL football games while the National Anthem was playing, influencing many other players to do the same. Kaepernick, and his fellow peers, used their bodies to draw attention to the same cycle of racial inequality that was being addressed by Tommie Smith and John Carlos in the late 20th century.

Dress, fashion, and other objects placed around the body display and negotiate symbols about the wearer as they move into different spaces (Kaiser, 2012). In addition to body positions, celebrities have used fashion to overtly support the BLM movement, as well as what the movement stands for. This specific use of fashion has made the movement itself more visible to various audiences. One way fashion was used to support the BLM movement is when *Grown-ish* television show star Jenifer Lewis wore a Nike jumpsuit to the 2018 Emmy Awards. The Canadian Press reported,

the look for Lewis...came after Nike faces backlash for featuring quarterback Colin Kaepernick as the company’s new face. She wore a red-and-black sweatshirt with Nike emblazoned on it and the studded swoosh...Lewis said she wore Nike ‘in support of Colin Kaepernick’s protest against police brutality and racial injustice’, referring to the quarterback’s controversy over taking a knee. (Italie, 2018)

Lewis purposefully used the fashioning of her body as a symbol of support for Kaepernick and to push back against the continued police brutality. This action was so profound for a number of reasons as celebrities wear elaborate gowns and suits at this red-carpet event, yet Lewis used this as an opportunity to speak out about injustices, in a subtle yet overt way for those who were knowledgeable of the recent Nike campaign. Additionally, when National Basketball Association (NBA) player, LeBron James wore an *I Can’t Breathe* t-shirt, he too used fashion as a form of resistance, rebellion, and promotion of his values aligning with the BLM movement.

The Black Panther Party (BPP) for Self Defense was founded in 1966 by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale as a grassroots organization (Tyner, 2006). The initial purpose of the BPP was to protect the Black community from police brutality by arming members with guns to patrol the overly-policed Black communities. Panthers patrolled the streets in black leather jackets, powder-blue turtle necks or wide-collared shirts, and black slacks or skirts” (Ford, 2015). This style is often recognizable and affiliated with the BPP as their style was very dominate and identifiable during the time they were an active organization. During the 2016 Super Bowl half-time show, Beyoncé and her performers awed the crowd with a BPP themed performance (see Figure 6). *The Guardian* reported, “With references to the Black Lives Matter movement, Malcolm X, and the Black Panthers, Beyoncé’s half-time show...might be the most radical political statement from the superstar in her 20-year career” (Elgot, 2016). Beyoncé and her dancers wore black berets during their performance, which is symbolic of the BPP because its members wore them faithfully. The dancers were also photographed numerous times with their fists in the air, symbolic of Tommie Smith and John Carlos discussed earlier. Beyoncé used her status as well as the platform of the NFL Super Bowl to highlight the political climate during the time, which consisted of similar political issues that members of the BPP were fighting against in the 1960s including racial inequality, police brutality, and racism.

Through a thematic and cultural studies analysis, we examined the various ways in which celebrities used signs and symbols to show support for the BLM movement. These celebrities have used their visibility in society to support and promote the BLM movement as they capture the attention of millions of people in the world. They have forced the public to listen, even if they do not want to, despite

the critical attention and outcomes it may cause such as forever damaging their reputation for some viewers or losing their multi-million-dollar career.

References

- Beaton, A., Umlauf, T., & Cole, D. (2018, September 9). The history of NFL players protests during the National Anthem. *The Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved from <https://www.wsj.com>
- Black Lives Matter. (n.d.). *Herstory*. Retrieved from <https://blacklivesmatter.com>
- Elgot, J. (2016, February 8). Beyoncé unleashes Black Panther homage at Super Bowl 50. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com>
- Ford, C. T. (2015). *Liberated threads: Black women, style, and the global politics of soul*. New York, NY: The University of North Carolina Press.
- Italie, L. (2018, September 17). Jenifer Lewis in Nike swoosh, Johansson a goddess at Emmys. *Canadian Press*.
- Lipsyte, R. (1993, October 17). Silent salute, ringing impact: Two small gloved fists, one large revolution. *New York Times*, pp. S1.
- Peniel, E. J. (2016). The many meanings of a fist. *The Chronical of Higher Education*, 62(37), B4+.
- Reischer, E. & Koo, S. K. (2004). The body beautiful: Symbolism and agency in the social world. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 33, 297-317.
- Samuel, D. R., Tenenbaum, G., & Bar-Mecher, G. H. (2016). The Olympic Games as a career change-event: Israeli athletes' and coaches' perceptions of London 2012. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 24, 38-47.
- Tyner, A. J. (2006). "Defend the ghetto": Space and the urban politics of the Black Panther Party. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 96(1), 105-118.