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# Grabbing Back: The Form and Meaning of the Pussy Hat

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## Grabbing Back: The Form and Meaning of the Pussy Hat

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**Introduction/Significance.** Much has been written in the media about the Women’s March that took place January 21, 2017, in Washington D.C., around the country, and on seven continents, and the reasons for females to march in support of their genders’ progress toward justice and equality. One of the powerful icons of this resistance, the pussy hat, bears further examination. Two female activists designed the original patterns, shared them online, and encouraged women around the world to make the cat-eared hats (Pussy Hat Project, 2017). Hats were easily created by women with varying skills, by knitting or crocheting fiber or cutting and sewing on fabric. Women who were unable to march due to health reasons or disabilities considered hat making to outfit marchers as their mode of resistance. The pussy hat was prominently displayed on the cover of Time magazine and in an essay by Vick “The Resistance Rises” (February 6, 2017). The accompanying photograph, which captured the march in an aerial view with the background of the Washington monument and flags flying, clearly impresses the viewer with the sea of hot pink perched on the heads of the protesters. The purpose of this study was to understand motivations for participating in the Women’s March. The researchers aimed to document events at the marches, explore marchers’ perspectives, and observe communication (both verbal and nonverbal). The research questions were: 1. Why are people marching in the Women’s March on Washington on January 21, and 2. What role does dress play in the march?

**Theoretical Framework.** We used symbolic interaction theory, specifically, the essay “Appearance and the Self” as a guideline to analyze the data (Stone, 1962). “A primary tenet of all symbolic, interaction theory holds that the self is established, maintained, and altered in and through communication” (Stone, 1962, p. 19). This essay expanded symbolic interaction theory to explain the role of appearance. Non-verbal symbols allow the *viewer* to interpret a wearer’s *identity* through social transactions and discourse. We also interpreted the meaning of the pussy hats as symbols through the form, viewer, and context aesthetic analysis framework (DeLong, 1998). Form encompassed factors perceptible through the senses such as color, surface texture, shape, and silhouette. Meaning could differ across individuals, influenced by viewers’ personalities, beliefs, attitudes, and backgrounds. Finally, the context involved cultural, seasonal, temporal, and geographic factors that influenced meaning formation.

**Methods.** The study aimed to answer the research questions by using an inductive approach with observations and audio recorded interviews of the event attendants 18 and older. Authors collected data in Washington, D.C., and in St. Paul. The goals of the ethnographic process were to observe dress as a tool of nonverbal communication and to understand referent meanings of the pussy hat. The interview schedule included demographics and 11 open-ended questions. Videos were recorded, photographs were taken, and interviews were transcribed. Qualitative data were used to provide form, viewer, and context insights underlying aesthetic

responses. Validity strategies included member checking, rich and thick descriptions, bias clarification, negative case, and peer debriefing (Creswell, 2009, pp. 191-92). Data were coded and placed into categories showing meaning relationships, further creating finer categories that revealed blends, patterns in attitudes, and viewpoints (Richards, 2009, p. 95). Frequency counts of common themes were calculated using Microsoft Excel.

**Results.** The aesthetics of the hat and its relation to the movement were the focus of this research. We interviewed 40 participants (mean age 42), 20 in D.C. and 20 in St. Paul. Thirty-five of the 40 participants were female, 26 had bachelor's degrees or higher, and 27 were white. Sixteen out of 40 interviewees were marching for women's rights, 13 for equality and human rights, 13 to speak out against Trump, nine to support healthcare, and other intersectional topics. Marching relieved negative emotions, which 25 out of 40 participants felt after the 2016 election. Many stories were told by the marching women about the excitement of making hats and being creative together. For example, seven women from an Episcopalian church gathered to knit and embellish their hats with patches, sequins, and beads. Many forms of the hat emerged—its hot pink color, its simple, rectangular shape that when worn created meaning and that easily fit various head sizes. A family from the East Coast expressed meaning and identity viewing non-verbal symbols through discourse by stating, "It was powerful, supporting each other, other cultures, we all got, at least I did, chills just being in with the crowd. You could feel the positive energy...it was uplifting. You got connected because even though you didn't know the person next to you, it was like, yeah, I support you. The hats. The hats, yeah. We didn't know. We just saw the hats everywhere, and it's like, what does that mean? It's like power...women's power. Grab it back is what it was..."

**Conclusions/Implications.** Pussy hats provided salient visual communication representing women's empowerment and support. The making of the hats became a form of activism, which mobilized supporters of the movement. The Women's March gave supporters a cathartic release through unity and the building of new social networks. Women discussed feeling empowered and more self-efficacious as they worked through negative affect with like-minded individuals.

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