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The Pussy Hat: An intersection between needlework, feminism, and identity

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On January 21, 2017, over one million individuals participated in the Women’s March on Washington. Media coverage noted the “strong collective visual statement” created by a “sea of bright pink” pussyhats with top corners resembling cat ears (Reuters, 2017, para. 1). Months before, an extensive campaign promoted distribution of simple patterns to knit, crochet, or sew and finished handmade hats were also available for sale. The making and wearing of pussyhats presents an interesting evolution in feminism that previously distanced itself from the “heroic pointlessness” (Taylor, 2007, para. 1) of handicraft and the fairly recent phenomenon termed “craftism.” According to Lewis (2012), “New feminist views are rather less judgmental. Perhaps it was a bit rash for women to turn their back on craft...” (para. 6).

“Throughout time and geography, needlework has communicated individual and social identity, beliefs, and aesthetic ideals” (Leslie, 2007, Introduction). Identity links individual behavior and the larger social structure, aiding in predicting behavior. Kleine, Kleine, and Kernan (1993) found identity salience depended on three enabling factors: esteem, social connections, and media connections. The purpose of this study was to employ Identity Theory to explore the making and wearing of pussyhats as “a weapon of resistance for women” (Parker, 1984, Introduction). In conjunction with the Women’s March on Washington, the Pussyhat Project was launched as a nationwide effort to create pink hats and reclaim the derogatory term “pussy” (Reuters, 2017 January 14). Utilizing handicraft to work through crisis is a coping strategy. In a study of those who had experienced profound loss, Pöllänen (2006) found, “These women felt they could have an influence on their future at least in one area in their lives. Craft helped them to believe in a satisfactory future. It clarified the purpose of life by maintaining positive relations to one self and to others around and by giving possibilities to personal growth.” (p. 133).

A Google search of the terms “pussyhat” and “pussy hat” between November 8, 2016 and March 15, 2017, encompassing the March 8th International Women’s Day/ A Day without a Woman resulted in a total of 1,240,000 and 534,000 results respectively. In both cases, the search engine noted similarities after 210 results displayed, so the total initial sample was capped at 420. The two lists were cross-checked to remove duplicates. For the preliminary phase of this research and as a means to conceptualize ideas from objective sources, results were limited to mainstream news articles and editorial reporting. Advertisements, social media/blog posts, and Etsy sites were removed by the two researchers using a constant comparison method. If there was a question as to whether or not an article fit the criteria, the researchers discussed until agreement was reached. This resulted in a total of 30 articles and editorials to analyze from news sources such as the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *The Guardian*, and *USA Today*; media news sources such as CNN, BBC, CBS, and NPR; as well as fashion/ lifestyle magazines such as *The*

New Yorker, *Time*, and *Cosmopolitan*. Full content was transcribed and analyzed for reoccurring terms with the number of instances recorded and ranked.

One hundred sixty-nine terms occurred at least ten times in the forty articles. Unrelated terms such as “can, will, really, across, going, don’t, etc.” were removed upon agreement between the researchers along with those with less than 10 occurrences, resulting in a total of 121 terms in the sample to be analyzed. Of these, the most common followed by the number of occurrences were march (167), hats (161), project (140), women (123), Women’s (121), people (113), pink (110), and pussyhat (99). Terms related to creating pussyhats were also found to be frequent including: make (50), yarn (48), knit (47), etc. Results revealed a significant presence of the following terms which aligned with the three enabling factors of identity salience. Esteem: rights (44), power (20), powerful (19), active (15), feminist (13), unapologetically (10), important (10), and feminine (10). Social connections: community (22), support (19), together (17), participate (16), stand (16), friends (11), social (11), and solidarity (10). Media connections/visibility: statement (24), symbol (19), political (17), revolution (10), represent (10), activism (10), and message (10).

While this preliminary study is limited based on the researcher’s commonly-agreed upon concept of mainstream news and editorial sources and does not account for the importance of social media in disseminating messages about pussyhats, results indicate the presence of an identity where needlearts and feminism intersect. Future research will utilize qualitative software analysis to address the full extent of media coverage and richer context in which these words appear. This study supports Lewis (2012), Parker (1984), and Pöllänen (2006). Making and wearing the pussyhat demonstrates an ever-evolving concept of feminism, which holistically encompasses the wide range of expressions and activities available to contemporary women.

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