Article

DISS/PLAY – T-SHIRTS AS MOBILE MEME

Leigh Paterson

The term Diss/Play refers to the use of design features on T-shirts to communicate messages and the ways in which the wearer is able to "diss" (a colloquial term meaning to be contemptuous of someone or something) or play with ideas. In this essay, a variety of examples will be use to explored and investigate how T-shirts can be viewed as a form of social commentary that displays and spreads culture. Richard Dawkins' concept of meme includes the notion that the capturing of ideas or memories is re-articulated in the display of culture. In this paper, I unpick and explore the use of T-shirts as communication devices which produce, display and communicate ideas and memories.

T-shirts are a cultural node to help explore how fashion and communication design concepts are related through graphic expression or mark-making, defined in this context as visual forms that are used and combined as image(s) and/or text. T-shirts provide a physical surface where the transmission of ideas and sharing of culture can be revealed in the act of display. These garments' ability to capture and communicate culture mimics the ability of new media platforms to spread information through forms commonly known as memes. T-shirts that reference and reflect culture could therefore be considered a form of mobile meme.

T-shirts have the ability to aid in the promotion of ideas, allowing culture to be marketed, co-opted or commodified through graphic expression and mark-making. In this respect, a T-shirt's surface can be viewed as a platform with a unique ability to 'speak' to and for the owner, raising the question of how T-shirts are viewed and disseminated by the public at large. Messages are transmitted via the wearer in their everyday context, and have the ability to spread through the wearer's circulation in the public arena. A T-shirt in this respect is both a fashion artefact and a communication device. Hence it is important to recognise the unique power that a T-shirt may have as a worn entity to communicate to audiences and spread messages.

T-shirts create platforms for a wide range of ideas to be displayed. Wearers' identities or personalities can be expressed and aligned to the graphic content on display. Fashion mediates this practice between the body and the message by communicating to audiences via these worn garments, reflecting and replicating the function of advertising and print culture traditions. T-shirts allow fast forms of consumer-generated communication content by everyday citizens – forms which can create new ideas about branding and consumerism within and beyond fashion. The intersection of communication and fashion design in this context throws light on the ways in which culture is being referenced through worn visual forms. While this phenomenon is not new, the nature, style and delivery has changed. The promotion and range of graphic content has been facilitated by technology in terms of manufacturing, distribution and consumption of pop culture to audiences.

T-shirts can reveal highly responsive social and cultural actions and behaviour through their 'worn commentary,' facilitated within the function of fashion. The ability of fashion to be transient, fast-moving and referential allows such a worn communication experience to fit into habitual and participatory action and information exchange. In this sense, T-shirts might operate as transmitters of culture. There are few barriers in the creation and production of content on a T-shirt – an idea, a permanent marker and a blank T-shirt can provide an opportunity to comment on the world. The production and consumption of worn messages or commentary that references culture through the wearing of T-shirts in this sense parallels the way a meme operates.

This referencing of culture through the production of memes is discussed by Ryan Milner in *The World Made Meme: Discourse and Identity in Participatory Media*. Milner identifies cultural practices and pop culture discourses that embody fashion elements, and describes this form of narrative as "polyvocal" in reference to the ways in which collaborative identities are formed and produced and how they reflect social agency.[1] Aspects of culture and agency including conflict, consumption, appropriation and subversion can be explored through the production and consumption of T-shirt content. The ways in which T-shirts can be used to promote and explore culture reveals the influence of design behaviour regarding how a message, idea or memory might be spread to an audience.

Both self-referential and performative in nature, the messages on T-shirts are distributed on and through bodies as their host. Bodies can therefore morph into a graphic form analogous to a screen, whereby the host 'projects' transitory information; the body as host displays a message on a T-shirt, which in turn feeds off and informs culture at large. The ability to choose and change what to wear, and when and where to wear it, demonstrates the wearer's powerful ability to communicate a message or idea that connects and reflects culture. Individual wearers can promote their morals and ethics in this way, thus mimicking a newsfeed through spontaneous displays.

METACONSUMPTION: MEMES AND THE CONSUMPTION OF IDEAS

Because memes generally operate in a digital context and T-shirts typically require a body to host them, I am taking a certain liberty in combining analogue and digital technology traditions to describe how T-shirts might function as mobile memes. The internet is generally considered the space in which meme culture is produced and consumed – but this could change. Over time technology could mediate the wearing of pixels on the surface of a body - closely integrating analogue and digital platforms. For this reason, future technology may also see the body operating as a graphic surface. There are growing instances where online/offline culture is being referenced and produced simultaneously in the wearing and sharing of T-shirt content. Mememetic culture is blurring the online and offline distinction due to the way in which content is copied and popular culture is referenced and shared. Mobility arises due to the physical context of wearing a T-shirt and its public circulation, while the digital claim arises because a T-shirt can be seen as inheriting traits from online meme culture due to the copying and sharing of pop culture content that can be viewed in a public context. Ultimately the mobility of the wearer and the transmission of cultural ideas are facilitated via the T-shirts.

In this respect, mobile memes could be viewed as a transitory form of fashion, as a T-shirt allows ideas to be displayed and distributed freely and generally without restriction. The transitory element allows infinite repositories and replications of cultural forms and information to operate under analogue and digital traditions, influencing and referencing each other simultaneously through the practice of communication and fashion design. Over time, the distinctions and referential interplay between analogue and digital could be viewed as creating a kind of dynamic imprecision due to the transitory nature of the ideas displayed on T-shirts.

With this in mind, I would like to posit that bodies are a type of host that can be used as commodified space where ideas are exchanged and can grow. A mobile meme. A space whereby communication design and cultural capital can be referenced, replicated and regurgitated indefinitely as a form of worn commentary and identity in the style of a meme through the practice of fashion.

While the ideas that might be expressed on a T-shirt could be inherent to the wearer, the worn display allows third parties to be engaged in the translation of a message. This could be interpreted as a dialect that fashion can help facilitate through a continuum of cultural 'conversations' via these shirts. It is a dialect that is facilitated, transmitted and translated through imitation and adaptation, dependent on cultural conditions and lived experience. In this sense, T-shirts create and distribute ideas in ways which highlight a transaction between wearer and audience – a T-shirt can 'speak' to an audience, both literally and figuratively. A T-shirt is a platform that can display or transmit cultural messages and values which again may be seen speaking to audiences through graphic content.

Richard Dawkins discusses memes in relation to human culture as a soup, a form of cultural transmission that moves from brain to brain, allowing ideas to be shared and propagated: "Fashions in dress and diet, ceremonies and customs, art and architecture, engineering and technology, all evolve in historical time in a way that looks like highly speeded up genetic evolution, but really has nothing to do with genetic evolution. As in genetic evolution though, the change may be progressive."[2]

T-shirts can display cultural phenomena that might change and evolve through the experience of the wearer. Dawkins' theory could be used to negotiate this worn experience, particularly when considering how ideas drawn from culture are given the opportunity to spread. This can be seen in the work of Katharine Hamnett's slogan-bearing T-shirts, which mainstreamed the display of personal political affiliations and declarations through the function of fashion. Hamnett used her body as a political surface during a face-to-face meeting with Margaret Thatcher in 1984. Hamnett wore her T-shirt, which referenced public opposition to the siting of Pershing missiles in the United Kingdom, as a protest device. The slogan stated boldly: "58% Don't Want Pershing." On this occasion, her T-shirt functioned to confront the issue and disassociate Hamnett from Thatcher and institutional politics.

Hamnett's T-shirt was clearly a Diss-Tee. The experience of worn fashion as a form of campaigning, to protest or to promote an idea, would later inspire the production of a series of garments known as slogan T-shirts. Hamnett has commented on the nature of T-shirts stating "I wanted to put a really large message on T-shirts that could be read from 20 or 30ft away," she says now. "Slogans work on so many different levels; they're almost subliminal. They're also a way of people aligning themselves to a cause. They're tribal. Wearing one is like branding yourself."[3] Fashion's ability to display dissent in this way can be viewed as a powerful vehicle for creating change and cultural evolution by reframing an idea. In his book *Subculture: The Meaning of Style,* Dick Hebdige explored how lived experiences helped create collective meaning: "Social relations and processes are then appropriated by individuals only through the forms in which they are represented to those individuals. These forms are, as we have seen, by no means transparent. They are shrouded in 'common sense' which simultaneously validates and mystifies them."[4]

It is therefore important to reflect on the role that T-shirts play in social negotiations. A T-shirt speaks to individuals and could be considered a point of reference where culture is concerned. T-shirts allow a dialogue to begin – hence the social role of the T-shirt in its public display is not linear in translation and transmission. Rather, a T-shirt is an opportunity for culture to spread and evolve in forms that are difficult to control.

Herein lies the balancing act that fashion undertakes when attempting to communicate. Feminist perspectives, for example, can be communicated in many different ways and in terms that might be seen either to celebrate or denigrate its advocacy. In the style of Hamnett, in 2016 the House of Dior released a T-shirt proclaiming, "We should all be feminists," a declaration borrowed from author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.[5] In an explanatory statement, Maria Grazia Chiuri, head designer at Dior, said: "My position in a house as influential as Dior, but also my role as a mother, reminds me every day of my responsibilities and the importance of my actions."[6] The repackaging of Adichie's text, and Chiuri's position in repackaging feminism to be sold back to consumers who wish to align themselves with gender politics, is fascinating. This is a form of metaconsumption – a transaction that might be explained as the referencing or display of an idea that fits with a consumer's or wearer's world view. Both Hamnett's and Dior's T-shirts reveal different ways in which an idea might be communicated to gather support and rally for a cause.

By contrast, anti-feminist T-shirts are to be found for sale on websites such as redbubble.com, which sells an opposing view to consumers. T-shirts stating "Ask me about how your feminist agenda is cancer" and "This is what an anti-feminist looks like" provide contrasting dialogues and gender politics that reveal their wearers' opinions and positions. The opposing narratives and contrasting ideologies displayed by different T-shirts and worn by different wearers is analogous to a billboard or a twitter post. The space that exists between the communication of the message, the display of the garment or artifact and the audience in regard to the body gives rise to a form of negotiation, evolution and solidifying of ideas and culture relative to the host. In this context, the accepting or

rejecting of ideas relates to the complex social relations that Hebdige identifies insofar as it reveals how fashion can be seen to simultaneously validate and mystify popular culture.

Hamnett, Dior and Redbubble's translations of their respective positions relative to cultural–political discourse via the medium of T-shirts allow the operation or spread of messages and reflects cultural dialects in regards to the exchange of ideas. These worn iterations communicate ideas in a polemical context and translate and replicate messages and metanarratives. The renegotiated terms in which messages are curated, viewed and redistributed within the public sphere allows the exploration of ideas, including how they are perpetuated through the operation and function of fashion. While few would disagree that fashion has a role to play in communicating narratives, Bourdieu reminds us that things as "seemingly shallow as entertainment, fashion, and even food are in fact immensely important to the creation and dissemination of cultural capital, and are therefore of immense importance to public life."[7] Through the consumption and distribution of worn narratives, ideas and positions are solidified and negotiated in the public sphere. In this sense, slogan T-shirts borrow from communication design and political campaigning to simultaneously contextualise and decontextualise their messages through a worn form of contradictory political propaganda, that can reflect opposition, irony and parody.

T-SHIRTS AS MICROPHONES

Fashion thus hosts a matrix of narratives that are worn on bodies to communicate beyond sheer aesthetics – a T-shirt is a microphone, a platform and a movement. Fashion and communication design can capture and promote spontaneous acts of citizen reporting or citizen journalism, which can be challenging in its construction and display. A T-shirt and its mememematic iterations can be seen in terms of either the democratisation or destruction of the communication of ideas via the production of worn fashion. Steven Heller discusses design and its social ability to create division and hatred in an article published in Eye magazine and aptly titled "Designing Demons:" "Propaganda precedes technology as a means to soften otherwise rational minds into malleable clay."[8] Heller points to Marshall McLuhan's 1964 book *Understanding Media* to explain how varying forms of pictures and words can express differences in ideas, which can then be used to whip people into a frenzy; contradiction is an integral part of making meaning in messages.[9] Putting such ideas onto a T-shirt can either improve or erode the transmission of the message because of the personal proximity of the medium to the host and the mobility of the medium/host in creating an audience.

McLuhan's theory of the transmission of messages and cross-pollination of ideas was substantiated in the 2016 US presidential election. Celebrities with high public visibility and influence campaigned for their preferred candidate through the wearing of T-shirts. Both presidential candidates employed strategies that utilised worn propaganda to advance their cause. Marc Jacobs, for example, designed a T-shirt specifically for Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton, which was then strategically worn by celebrities for political gain. Images of celebrity wearers were reposted and reported online. Anna Wintour, Katy Perry and Lena Dunham were prominent wearers who functioned as mobile billboards as a result of their social media visibility. Perry was captured wearing a T-shirt similar to Jacobs' that stated: "Hillary Clinton is a badass." T-shirts were thus used to communicate with audiences in the negotiation of change, and bodies were seen politicking through fashion artefacts. Prominent public figures employed social media strategies to literally wear their idea of change and to create and distribute conversational prompts.

In this sense, fashion is performative and referential and can be a powerful driver of change in the political sphere. The experience of Australian activist Iain Fogerty illustrates that when politics intersects with fashion, things can be confronting and provocative. In 2015, Fogerty wore an "I'm with stupid" T-shirt near Liberal National Party campaigners during the Queensland election campaign and was subsequently arrested for causing a public nuisance.[10] This "cultural mutation" (a phrase borrowed from Dawkins' *The Selfish Gene*)[11] permitted the replication of an idea through fashion as a public relations exercise. Its aim was to draw attention to, promote and perhaps control dissent and open up other avenues of speculation and conversation to advance an issue.[12] Fashion and

communication design reflect this cultural mutation because of their ability to facilitate change and allow new ideas to present themselves beyond perceived control. T-shirts operate as a mouthpiece, offering the chance to provoke and promote ideas that form cultural statements derived from other cultural statements.

The promotion of provocative cultural statements replicated and appropriated on T-shirts as graphic forms can also be seen in a range of T-shirts designed by New Zealand clothing firm Mr Vintage in 2009. The garments were inspired by 1994 images of murder accused David Bain, in which he was shown wearing what was deemed to be unfashionable knitwear. This became a point of national conversation at the time, so much so that sweaters that resemble the same brightly coloured, homemade knitted jersey aesthetic are still colloquially referred to as "Bains." Mr Vintage produced screen-printed T-shirts that replicated the knit pattern involved. Although their stated aim was that the company only meant to comment on a "crime of fashion," fashion industry heavyweights condemned the T-shirts as a tasteless gimmick. "World" fashion label founder Denise L'Estrange-Corbet said people should remember that the trial was about "the murder of his family." "If proceeds from the sale of the T-shirts go towards his trial, then I think it is a good idea. If not, then it's a cheap way for a brand to lever publicity off something which so shocked New Zealanders."[13] The attempt to copy and parlay facets of popular culture in the reclamation and regurgitation of graphic content shows how swiftly culture at large can redefine itself.

T-SHIRTS AND TECHNOLOGY

Beyond such provocations, issues arise not just over the content but also regarding the structure and interface of information-harvesting through technology. Bodies have become a highly active stage whereby ideas are promoted or commodified in both analogue and digital contexts. Individuals use both fashion nodes and their physical bodies to respond to and galvanise popular rhetoric and collective capital in various spaces. The self-referential documentation of paradox, parody and 'drama' has seen T-shirts become vehicles for airing one's 'dirty laundry' online. Shame and bad behaviour are reclaimed as individuals are seen wearing their (literal and figurative) misfortunes on T-shirts in their respective digital environments. They are not seeking to remove or hide their embarrassing life events; on the contrary, they are displaying and promoting bad behaviour via social media.

Model Sarah Snyder and actress Winona Ryder, both high-profile American celebrities who have had very public run-ins with the law, have generated public exposure through the media using T-shirts as communication devices. In September 2015, Snyder, the then girlfriend of actor Jaden Smith, was charged with the theft of a luxury bag. She subsequently posted an image on Instagram of herself wearing a T-shirt of her mug shot. In 2001, Ryder became the face of the "Free Winona" campaign designed to support and communicate her arrest for shoplifting following a mental health struggle. The campaign's creator, Billy Tsangares, commented: "This type of humour is a way to be political without necessarily taking a stand that's going to offend somebody. This gives people an expression that is radical and at the same time meaningless."[14] Both Snyder and Ryder were making fun of themselves by wearing T-shirts created to spread and share information that related to their personal capital.

Exposing one's life as a branded individual builds personal or social capital in a contemporary environment facilitated by technology. Interestingly, even if what is being communicated is seemingly socially unacceptable, the capturing and recording of information on a T-shirt nevertheless reveals the ritual of story-telling and memory-making.

In this sense, nodes of conversations and communication design content as information are being continually shared and redefined. In 2016, University of Connecticut students Lexi Fragola and Jessica Zharnest created and wore T-shirts as Halloween costumes that combined all the sexually explicit texts (sexts) they had been sent via social media. Their exploits were profiled and spread on the Internet via a variety of pop culture websites. In 1966, the late Alan Dundes, a folklorist at the University of California, Berkeley, coined the term *latrinalia* to refer to the graffiti and mark-making found in restrooms. We have gone beyond the toilet door in sharing cultural capital through design – the anarchic commentary traditionally inscribed in and on public toilet doors is an analogous form of the graphic phenomena that is now being reconstituted through fashion and technology.

Like text on a toilet door written by faceless or anonymous scribes, the trail of communication does allow freedom of expression. But it also reveals something inherently problematic about the nature and type of communication exchanges. The display of everyday experiences through fashion creates new pathways to reference, replicate and borrow culture, and gives new life to old circumstances through replication of information – in the style of a meme. As a consequence, the everyday nature of pop cultural messages – in this case, sexual text messages – prompts reflection on social interactions, information that can be shared, and more importantly, on how the regeneration of content on T-shirts might begin to influence public discourse.

Where pop culture is concerned, T-shirts may well continue to mimic the digital screen, and vice versa and allow the idea of a meme to expand and redefine itself in the future. The future challenge to fashion may involve issues surrounding the physical – will fabric become obsolete and will individuals wear pixels? And as analogue and digital platforms potentially become more closely entwined, how all of this will matter to the practice of fashion and communication design will perhaps become increasing interesting.

This essay is an expanded form of a paper presented at The End of Fashion International Conference and Exhibition, College of Creative Arts, Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand, 8 - 9 Dec. 2016, entitled: *Diss-play – The transitory nature of fashion, corporeal bodies and mark making as mobile meme.*

Leigh Paterson is a communication design lecturer at Otago Polytechnic, School of Design, teaching graphic design and design history and theory. Paterson has a keen interest in typography, mark-making, pop culture and issues and intersections relative to design concerning; appropriation, technology, dissent, gender, space, subversion and banalities. Additional labour can be found at leighannepaterson.com

1   Ryan Milner, "The World Made Meme: Discourse and Identity in Participatory Media," Master's thesis, University of Kansas, 2012, 8 January 2012, https://kuscholarworks.ku.edu/bitstream/.../Milner_ku_0099D_12255_DATA_1.pdf (accessed 24 May 2017).

2   Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (London: Granada Publishing, 1978), 203-15.

3   Emma Sibbles, "Get it off your chest" *The Guardian*, 19 June 2009, https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2009/jun/19/slogan-t-shirts-hamnett (accessed 10 September 2017).

4   Dick Hebdige, Subculture: *The Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen, 1979).

5   Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *We Should All be Feminists* (London: Fourth Estate, 2014).

6   Madison Roberts, "Dior and Rihanna Join Forces on a Charitable Partnership," *Observer*, 28 February 2017, http://observer.com/2017/02/rihanna-dior-launched-charitable-partnership/ (accessed 3 July 2017).

7   Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London: Routledge, 1989).

8   Steven Heller, "Designing Demons," *Eye*, 2001, http://www.eyemagazine.com/feature/article/designing-demons (accessed 3 July 2017).

9   Steven Heller, "Quentin Fiore Massages the Medium," *Print*, 18 October 2012, http://www.printmag.com/imprint/quentin-fiores-medium-and-massage/ (accessed 13 August 2017).

10   Joshua Robertson, "Queensland Man Arrested after Waving Next to LNP Campaigners in 'I'm with Stupid' T-shirt," *The Guardian*, 7 January 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/08/queensland-man-arrested-waving-lnp-campaigners-im-with-stupid-T-shirt (accessed 3 July 2017).

11   Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*.

12   Ibid., 203-15.

13   Tom Fitzsimons, "Jumpers on the Bain Bandwagon," *Stuff*, 16 April 2009, http://www.stuff.co.nz/national/2271534/Jumpers-on-the-Bain-bandwagon (accessed 3 July 2017).

14   Vogue, "Free Winona," *Vogue*, 25 Jan. 2002, http://www.vogue.co.uk/article/free-winona (accessed 3 July 2017).