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Expressing Identity Through Graphic Tees

At first glance, there may not be an obvious reason as to why people wear the styles they do. Although they were originally designed as an undershirt, since the 60's, t-shirts have been increasingly popular as normal day attire. Although they are comfortable, that does not seem to be the stand-alone reason for their fame. Graphic tees are a popular way for people to express their individual interests. Whether the objective is to stand out or fit in, t-shirts with writing and pictures on them seem to do the trick. It is no wonder why this is such a thriving, modern, trend.

Through personal experience, and the lives of my interviewees, I have found that an interest in graphic tees begins to emerge at a young age. During middle school, I started to notice t-shirts and the meanings behind them. This time in a child's life is one that introduces independence and a major increase in interaction with others as children transfer from elementary school. Typically they are entering a new and bigger school, and meeting different teachers with each class. Dependence they had on once familiar teacher and the same classmates no longer exists. They must learn how to function within the unknown, even if they are unsure of themselves. Rachel LeBeau, a youth camp leader, has been around the young age group all summer long and explains their behavior as expressed through clothing exceptionally well. "Graphic tees convey messages to others . . . they're popular for the younger age groups

because they want to make a statement.” This is also the age when socializing is newer; some kids are shy. The easy way to find new friends is displaying ones’ own interests right on the front of a shirt. It is a great conversation piece or ice-breaker for children who don’t have classes together. Images on the graphic tees catch the eye and attract children who might not have even noticed each other before.

Media, together with t-shirt industries, have made it easy for people to express themselves visually. Certain brands target different interests, and spread a notion about the individuals who wear them. It is not necessarily the brand of tee but the logo on the tee that communicates. For example, when Levi’s brand-jeans were developing, its target audience was the hands-on working class because denim is a durable material. Once jeans became popular for casual attire, Levi’s kept a connection with its initial laboring audience by changing the new look to a worn-down, rough, washed-out appearance. Now, when I see men wearing the Levi’s logo on a t-shirt, it makes me think they have a tough, active, outdoorsy personality.

It may be hard to believe a brand’s symbol can portray so much about a person. Matthew Hoppe, a thirty-five year old, explains the effort brands have put into personal interests. “They identify the brand with an aspect of their life like, FUBU, for us by us, which was a brand for African Americans; or my brother who calls himself a ‘Fox person’ because he identifies with Fox brand racing; or Nike for athletes.” Another thing to consider is the versatility of brands and their symbols. The meaning conceived by a brand can change through the generations. Levi’s brand used to be for laboring men and women in the world, but now many celebrities like Jonny Depp wear the brand. The evolution of graphic tees has created expression a fresh and regenerating fashion.

A more timeless and easily recognizable style of t-shirt has also developed. The straight forward approach is the one Tinner Johnson, a 2013 high school graduate, likes to wear. "They have the images of characters from a variety of shows, movies, and video games I like, and I want to let others know that I like those," she said. Johnson is after a more direct, visual response. Connecting with society is a key theme reflected throughout the t-shirt wearers interviewed. No one has to stop Johnson, to get to know her, before they can find out her interests; one glance says it all. Johnson talks about the material fixations of her free time, but events that affect the world also fall under the passions in others' lives. It is common to view the activities that people care about advertised on t-shirts. Sport teams, universities, and cancer benefits are a few of the many illustrations displayed across the public body on a normal day in the grocery store.

T-shirts are comfortable, which is a major factor in why people continue to wear them, but it is merely a bonus to the first and for most important element of expressing individuality. If comfort was truly the only thing being sought out, then why do so many spend the money to get a t-shirt based on the activities they enjoy? If physical comfort is the only issue, they would buy a fair priced shirt without concern for the way others may distinguish them. Without the desire to make a statement through clothing, companies who give away free shirts are achieving a loss in profit. The companies give away freebies because their logo will be advertised to the public as an interest. Because humans are curious and respond to what they perceive, an interest in others passions arise. This aspect is crucial in the sneaky ways of marketing, but essentially, the truth in expressing interests through t-shirts must exist before the advertising technique can.

The simplicity of the t-shirt has blossomed into the intricate paths of expression in society. Because forms of expression vary, so do the graphics on t-shirts. Media has caught onto the true drive of t-shirts with meaning, only to ignite the fire even further. The interviews conducted and advertisements based on human interests support the assertion that popularity in graphic tees is mainly about expression of an individual's identity. The popularity of graphic tees is here to stay for as long as individual expression is craved by consumer societies.

Works Cited

Hoppe, Matthew. Personal interview. 20 September 2013.

Johnson, Tinner. Personal interview. 20 September 2013.

LeBeau, Rachel. Personal interview. 22 September 2013.