
MEAN WHAT YOU WEAR

This year's T-shirt has something to get off its wearer's chest

SUN STAFF

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PUBLISHED ON AUGUST 3, 2004
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Correction: A photograph accompanying an article on T-shirts in yesterday's Today section appeared without crediting its source: www.ShopMetroSpy.com. Some folks wear their hearts on their sleeves, but young folks like to wear their thoughts across their chests.

For a while now, popular thoughts bandied about on tank-tops and T-shirts tended to be flirty or flip, fun in their nature. Princess. Diva. I'm with Stupid. I Want Your Boyfriend. I Love My Attitude Problem.

But in this election year, with a slumbering economy and a war raging in Iraq, the tone on tees has taken a more serious turn.

In shopping malls and T-shirt shops, clothing with sayings that espouse a political belief or promote a social or civic cause has been gaining popularity.

Instead of advertising sexuality, availability or quirky parts of the wearer's personality, T-shirt slogans these days are just as likely to announce what's in a young person's head or heart.

"Kids are getting serious," said Ruth P. Rubinstein, associate professor of sociology at the Fashion Institute of Technology and author of *Dress Codes: Meanings and Messages in American Culture*. "And it's not just sending a message to others, it's also sending a message to yourself. Who am I? What am I doing?"

Alberto Moreno, 19, a criminal justice major at the University of Maryland, said he wears his socially conscious tees to educate others on the College Park campus. When he throws on a Che Guevara T-shirt, or one with Malcolm X or Bob Marley on it, Moreno said he is telling his peers to remember those who came before them and fought for rights they currently enjoy.

"In this day and age everybody is focused on the next party, and people lose sight of what's really important," Moreno, of Lanham, said. "When I wear shirts that have a message, people look at it and think, and it makes them re-evaluate things."

Political statements are a particular favorite among young message-wearers, especially in this charged election season.

Some are nonpartisan in their declaration of activism, such as those shirts that say simply, "VOTE," seen on celebrities like Avril Lavigne and Cameron Diaz.

Last month, Sean "P. Diddy" Combs launched Citizen Change - a campaign designed to encourage the nation's 42 million 18- to 30-year-olds to vote in the upcoming presidential election. Among other things, the campaign includes a line of T-shirts that shout boldly, "VOTE OR DIE."

Other shirts take a partisan stance - and still manage to keep the flip factor alive.

Bush is sooo four years ago.

Democrats are girlie men.

Ketchup has carbs. Vote for Bush.

More flowers, Less Bush.

And then there are those whose slogans cannot be printed here. It is a family newspaper, after all.

But don't be fooled by the cheeky tone some of these T-shirts take. The young people who don them are serious about the messages they're sending. And the messages they're sending are serious.

Look at the phenomenal popularity of T-shirts that declare "Jesus is my Homeboy," worn by major celebrities such as Ben Affleck, Ashton Kutcher and hip-hop figures, said author Vicky Thompson.

"It's now popular to share your beliefs in a very personal and visible way," said Thompson, author of the book, *The Jesus Path*. "Pop culture spins personal beliefs into smart T-shirt messages, making these principles fresh and accessible for the masses. 'Jesus is my homeboy' is a Gen-X anthem to hanging with the holy man.

"I believe that today's technologically-literate generation wears their beliefs like Internet advertising banners on their chests," she said. "This phenomenon extends from politics to human rights to religion."

Young people want to emulate their favorite celebrities, fashion observers said. But they also understand that, sometimes, pop stars aren't nearly as important as politics, or real people.

"The economy is important right now," Rubinstein said. "Kids have no jobs and that colors how they feel about things."

The lagging economy might explain the explosion of T-shirts bearing the likeness of 1960s Cuban revolutionary Ernesto 'Che' Guevara, some experts said.

For many months this spring, T-shirts with Che's face ranked No. 1 on the T-ShirtKing.com's best-seller list, said Bill Broadbent, president of the online company. While it has dropped from the top spot, the shirt still sells in the top 10, he said.

Although most young people probably have little idea just what historical events catapulted the beret-and-fatigues-wearing image of Guevara to the level of cultural and pop icon, at some level they recognize that he represented "the people," and fought against "the establishment" - buzz words for any under-employed young person, Broadbent said.

Titilayo Golden, a 20-year-old finance major at the University of Maryland College Park, said she took a hard look at society under the leadership of President Bush and felt like her beloved Che Guevara T-shirt spoke volumes about her feelings about a forecasted recession and tax breaks for the wealthy - without saying a word.

"I've always been taught, 'Yeah you can be optimistic, but you also have to be realistic,'" Golden said. "And Che was very realistic. Che stood for what he wanted to stand for at a time when people were against him. And he didn't worry about what people thought about him."

Clothing designers have capitalized on the socio-political and cultural wave of young people like Golden.

"We're in a war and we're involved in a lot of politics," said Stefanie Toonkel-Greenspan, owner and designer of Priorities clothing line in New York. "So because of the times that we're living in, we kind of had to make [our clothes] a little more meaningful."

Priorities - which sells slogan T-shirts among other items to more than 1,600 stores - has been selling shirts that say "Bush is sooo four years ago" at a Republican-alarming rate,

Toonkel-Greenspan said.

Priorities still sells a variety of sassy, glibly sloganed T-shirts, but observers said that trend could only last so long, since many young people are interested in showing that they're more than just flirtatious or fresh.

"I have a young staff here," said Brandon Holley, editor in chief of ELLEgirl magazine. "And they have been wearing very political and cause-related T-shirts lately. I think it is cooler to be associated with some kind of worthwhile cause, rather than to just say, 'I'm a princess,' 'I'm yours.'"

In ELLEgirl's laid-back, fashion-forward offices, staff members have shown up in shirts that say Green Peace or NAACP, Holley said. Others tout the merits of education.

"My beauty director wears a T-shirt that says, 'Don't worry America, the Republicans are coming,'" Holley said. "Someone else has a U.N. shirt that says 'Got Allies?'"

"I think wearing a T-shirt is a great way to show the world that you're smart and that you care," she said. "And it actually might cause someone to come up and talk to you about PETA or the environment, rather than 'Diva,' or 'Princess.'"

Still, like most clothing trends, observers say the socially conscious T-shirt will more than likely soon go the way of the peace sign.

"The younger voters ... will wear the political fashion statement once their favorite entertainment figure does, and especially if their peer group starts sporting it. It means little, however, because they can't even tell you who their governor is, or how a bill becomes law," said **Amy Showalter**, a grassroots/ PAC consultant, who is hired by organizations to galvanize their members and employees to support their political causes.

"It's fashion," she said, "not activism."

1. Avril Lavigne sends her nonpartisan message out to her fans wearing a "Vote" T-shirt at a May performance in Toronto.
2. P. Diddy encourages young people to vote.
3. A partisan T-shirt mocks presidential candidate John Kerry.
4. A resident of Lancaster, Wis., rallies at a Kerry campaign stop.