

## The 2017 Women's March on Washington: An Analysis of Protest-Sign Messages

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To identify movement member-generated action frames, 695 protest-sign messages from the January 21, 2017, Women's March on Washington were analyzed thematically. The analysis revealed that personalized action frames were evident in the organizational framing of the protest on Womensmarch.com through the diverse and broadly defined "unity principles," and in five additional action frames that emerged spontaneously at the march: (1) unity, (2) women as powerful agents of resistance, (3) reappropriating *pussy* and words for the vagina, (4) criticisms of Trump, and (5) defining and critiquing feminism. Implications for social movement research and for the study of collective and personalized action frames are discussed.

*Keywords:* *feminism, social movement, protest, Women's March on Washington, action frames, communication*

On January 21, 2017, an estimated 5 million people worldwide took part in the Women's March on Washington (henceforth, "Women's March"; Waddell, 2017). The roughly 500,000 individuals marching in Washington, DC, were joined by sister marches in more than 400 cities in the United States (Women's March, 2017), in more than 80 countries around the globe (Schmidt & Almukhtar, 2017), and on all seven continents (Bowerman, 2017), making it the largest single-day demonstration in U.S. history (Broomfield, 2017; Easley, 2017). The sheer scale and persistence of the social movement (more than a million protested on the one-year anniversary in Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York alone; Tiefenthäler, 2018) in a political age of cynicism, slacktivism, and apathy merits scholarly attention. Often, there is an initiating event that serves as the catalyst for a social movement (Smelser, 2011), which for the Women's March occurred on November 9, 2016, when Trump was elected president (Novick, 2017). However, as the march formalized into the Women's March, so too did its focus. Ultimately, proactively fighting for

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<sup>1</sup> We would like to acknowledge those who participated in any of the Women's Marches globally. This article is dedicated to those who are standing up for women's rights in whatever form it may take.

women's rights became the unifying principle underlying the movement (*Jamieson, 2016*). Although the main objective of the march was ostensibly to disseminate the message "that women's rights are human rights" (Women's March, 2017, para. 3), many protesters arrived bearing signs that suggested personalized interpretations of the protest march and their opposition to recently inaugurated President Donald Trump.

During Trump's campaign for the presidency, his policy prescriptions and vulgar rhetoric precipitated widespread opposition. In particular, a growing number of individuals perceived his statements as communicating misogyny, racism, ableism, and other forms of discrimination. Throughout his campaign, Trump publicly called women debasing names, including dogs, fat pigs, and disgusting animals (Lusher, 2016); degradingly referred to Republican Primary debate moderator Megyn Kelly by saying, "You could see there was blood coming out of her eyes, blood coming out of her wherever" (Lusher, 2016, para. 8); and, in a 2005 Access Hollywood video released during the fall 2017 campaign season, was captured saying, "When you're a star they, let you do it. You can do anything . . . Grab them by the p\*\*\*y . . . You can do anything" (Lusher, 2016, para. 25). In addition, he physically mocked *The New York Times* reporter Serge Kovaleski, who has a congenital condition that affects his joints (Carmon, 2016), and referred to immigrants from Mexico as "people that have lots of problems . . . They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists" ("Donald Trump Speech," 2016, para. 3). These examples of bigotry were repeated often during Trump's campaign.

The unprecedented and highly personal nature of the campaign in turn inspired a highly personalized response. In this article, we analyze the form and content of 695 digital images of signs displayed at the Women's March. These signs demonstrate the ways that social movement participants are signifying agents who actively engage in the production and maintenance of the meaning of the movement (Snow & Benford, 1988). Specifically, we argue that the Women's March is an example of the "rise of personalized forms of political participation," (Bennett, 2012, p. 37) due to the way these signs emphasize "individualized collective action" (Bennett, 2012) in their interpretation of protest and contemporary popular feminism. In our analysis, we look at both the extent to which signs at the march demonstrate a move toward personalized collective action frames and how the dominant personalized collective action frames from the march build on and stem from popular feminism. Ultimately, we argue that there is potential for popular feminist coalition building within this landscape of digital, personalized politics, and that this landscape is the basis for the individualized action frames. We conclude with a speculative discussion of how personalized action frames in social movements derived from popular culture may shape politics.

## Literature Review

### ***From Collective to Connective Action***

Social movements reflect dissatisfaction with sociopolitical environments and are a platform for communicating dissent. Although social movements provide an opportunity for people to participate in politics (Tilly, 2004), what distinguishes social movements from other forms of political unrest is that they reflect the mobilization of persons who share an identity in common, for the purposes of change (Diani &

Bison, 2004; Snow, Soule, & Kriesi, 2004; Tarrow, 1998). In other words, by mobilizing large numbers of people, collective action can be taken to address discontent. Typically, the collective action is oriented toward some form of authority or entity that has power (Tilly, 2004), and often the call to action focuses on political or social change (Diani, 1992).

Social movements emerge when many people realize they desire the same change, provided there is an organizational structure in place to voice the desires of the people (Blumer, 1969; Mauss, 1975; McCarthy & Zald, 1977; Tilly, 1978). Central to understanding the course of social movements is recognizing the role that framing plays in meaning making (Benford & Snow, 2000). Frames are "mental structures consisting of organized knowledge" (Dillard, Solomon, & Samp, 1996, p. 706) and are used to mobilize individuals within a social movement when a situation is framed as problematic (Gamson & Meyer, 1996). Benford and Snow (2000) use the term "collective action frames" to discuss how frames can be used by social movement organizers to create shared meaning for participants, defining them as "action-oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimize the activities" (p. 614) that are used within social movements (a) to define the problem and identify who is to blame for the problem, (b) to identify possible solutions, and (c) to motivate people to take action (Benford & Snow, 2000).

Historically, collective action frames are considered to emerge from formal advocacy organizations, which provide resources and offer logistical support for social movements (Benford & Snow, 2000). Formal advocacy organizations also communicate the collective action frames that create meanings about the social movement (Benford & Snow, 2000; Gamson, 1975; McCarthy & Zald, 1977; Morris, 1984; Morris & Herring, 1987; Zald & Ash, 1966). However, Bennett (2012) argues that the neoliberal, digital age has led to a shift from collective action to personalized politics, which is characterized by

the rise of large-scale, rapidly forming political participation aimed at a variety of targets . . . The more diverse the mobilization, the more personalized the expressions often become, typically involving communication technologies that allow individuals to activate their loosely tied social networks. (p. 21)

This era of personalized politics yields "crowd-sourced, inclusive *personal action frame* [sic] . . . that lower the barriers to identification" (Bennett, 2012, p. 22, emphasis in original).

### ***Connective Action and Protest Movements***

Building on the premise that digital media have heralded the rise of personalized politics, Bennett and Segerberg (2011) analyze the 2011 protest movements Occupy Wall Street in the United States and Los Indignados in Spain to argue that contemporary protest movements are driven by the logics of connective action, which "uses broadly inclusive, easily personalized action frames as a basis for technology-assisted networking (p. 771). With this move from the collective to personal, Gordon and Mihailidis (2016) argue that "individualized [action frame] orientations result in engagement with politics as an expression of personal hopes, lifestyles, and grievances" (p. 82) in place of the institutional affiliations that have historically shaped political life, including unions, social class, and parties. Other studies of the personalization of politics and connective action have focused on boycotts and "buycotts"

(i.e., reverse boycotts) in response to Chick-fil-A's chief executive officer voicing opposition to gay marriage (Copeland, Hasell, & Bimber, 2016), the use of hashtags in Occupy Wall Street protests (Wang, Lui, & Gao, 2016), the motivations of participants in Australian climate change protests (McLean & Fuller, 2016), social media usage in the Umbrella movement in Hong Kong (Lee, So & Leung, 2015), and grassroots mobilization through social media in Quebec's Maple Spring student protests (Raynauld, Lalancette, & Tourigny-Koné, 2016).

We argue that the Women's March is another example of connective action, specifically, the form that Bennett and Segerberg (2013) categorize as "*organizationally enabled* connective action" in which "loosely tied networks of organizations sponsoring multiple actions and causes around a general set of issues in which followers are invited to personalize their engagement (more or less) on their own terms" (p. 13). This form aptly describes the evolution of the Women's March, which was "initiated by a White grandmother in Hawaii who posted a call to action on Facebook on the day after the 2016 election" (Fisher, Dow, & Ray, 2017, p. 1) but was swiftly formalized by a group of activists until, by "the day of the event, the Women's March's website listed more than 400 organizational partners" (Fisher et al., 2017, p. 1).

Bennett and Segerberg (2013) articulate connective action as a phenomenon that is crucially facilitated by digital media platforms and affordances, writing that "most large-scale connective mobilizations are based on a variety of personal communication technologies that make it possible to share these inclusive themes" (p. 37). It is clear that digital media platforms played a central role in mobilizing march participants—for instance, it is estimated that 70% of protesters heard about the march from Facebook, and an additional 13% heard about the march through Twitter (Larsen, 2017). In addition, we argue that protest signs operated as a form of user-generated "spreadable media," which Jenkins, Ford, and Green (2013) define as "the potential—both technical and cultural—for audiences to share content for their own purposes" (p. 3), a function that neatly aligns with Bennett and Segerberg's (2013) conception of personal action frames as the result of individualized political content. While Bennett and Segerberg (2013) focus primarily on digital content forms such as "texts, tweets, social network sharing, or posting YouTube mashups" (p. 37), we argue that the protest signs studied here also contain the digital properties relevant to these discussions of personalized action frames. The protest signs in our sample have been digitally archived and disseminated on social media platforms, making clear the seamless flow of the messages and meanings from the physical protest to networked and customizable digital platforms. Additionally, our analysis demonstrates a recursive link between digitally circulated content—such as memes and practices of digital culture such as hashtag activism—and the messages appearing on signs.

### ***Popular Feminism and the Women's March***

Having traced the theoretical shift from collective to individualized action frames based on a politics of expression, we now turn to the question of the meaning of the march within contemporary culture and politics. To understand the personal action frames of Women's March protesters, it is relevant to contextualize these messages within contemporary popular feminist culture. The turn to popular feminism—which is defined as a "moment when feminism has undeniably *become* popular culture" (Banet-Weiser & Portwood-Stacer, 2017, p. 884)—began in 2014, which was described as "a watershed" ("The Guardian View," 2014) year for feminism. Popular feminism manifests in the way "a particular feminist

subjectivity and its political commitments [are] both hyper-visible and normative within popular media" (Banet-Weiser & Portwood-Stacer, 2017, p. 884). This feminist awakening within mainstream culture is characterized by key mediated moments including the launch of the United Nations campaign #HeForShe by actress Emma Watson; the award of the 2014 Nobel Peace Prize to Pakistani education activist Malala Yousafzai; the advent of the Celebrity Feminist of the Year award by *Cosmopolitan* and *Ms.* magazines; and the widespread circulation of feminist quotations and merchandise on digital platforms such as Tumblr and Etsy (Banet-Weiser, 2015). Although none of these examples alone represent popular feminism, taken together they connote a consistent visible presence of feminist values within the mainstream media, and demonstrate popular feminism's fusion of a feminist ethos within theoretical, activist, political, commercial, and celebrity structures (Banet-Weiser, 2015).

Popular feminism has been critiqued for the ways its structural mechanisms yield an equal but oppositional popular misogyny that "opens up spaces and opportunities for a more systematic attack on women and women's rights" (Banet-Weiser, 2015, para. 11). Popular feminism has also been criticized for its treatment of feminism as a commodity (Banet-Weiser, 2015), and for its emphasis on vague, individualized definitions of feminism (Valenti, 2014; Zeisler, 2016). However, other scholars argue that—in line with the logics of connective action—popular feminism has prompted an important feminist cultural awakening that is connected to the dissemination and expression of feminist ideas through digital technologies (Baer, 2016; Keller, 2016).

What emerges from these different sets of literatures is that to properly understand the Women's March, individual action frames and contemporary feminist cultural politics should be read in the context of one another. In this project, we set out to answer (a) the extent to which the frames in the Women's March are a form of personalized politics and (b) how individual action frames stem from and build on popular feminism.

## **Method**

To understand the personal action frames generated by movement members, we analyzed 695 protest-sign messages. Analyzing these signs is consistent with Benford and Snow's (2000) theory that movement members create meaning in their written communications. By analyzing sign messages, we were able to document personal action frames used by movement members to convey the meanings they assigned to the Women's March.

### ***Identification of Signs***

The signs analyzed in this article represent protest-sign messages displayed at the January 21, 2017, Women's March either in Washington, DC, or at sister city marches in the United States. Although cities in countries around the globe participated in the January 21 protest, those signs were not included, given the culturally specific nature of women's issues and the relationship between the march and Trump's election as president of the United States.

Using the terms *Women's March on Washington*, *Women's March, January 21*, *signs*, and *posters* in combination with one another, we searched Facebook, Twitter, and Google every day for two weeks beginning on January 21, 2017, to identify pictures of protest signs used at the march. Photographs of signs taken by movement members and photographs taken by professional news sources were included in the analysis, which is consistent with protest event-analysis research that states using multiple sources is preferable (Koopmans & Rucht, 2002). Following guidelines outlined by Koopmans and Rucht, we used individual protest signs as our unit of analysis. Signs were excluded from the analysis (a) if the message on the sign was not visible or not clear enough to decipher or (b) if an image but no message was present on the sign. Signs that had the same words but were created by different movement members were analyzed as two separate units. If more than one sign appeared in a photograph, then the signs were analyzed separately. In total, 695 sign messages were included in the study. Of course, the sampled signs may not be representative of the proportion of different categories of signs at all events, but because our research concerns the visibility of signs across platforms, no systematic distortions by the algorithms of social media platforms would change our analysis, because this is the nature of our inquiry.

#### ***Analytic Procedures***

To analyze the protest-sign messages, we followed Glaser and Strauss's (1967) and Strauss and Corbin's (1998) grounded theory approach. The aim of grounded theory is to inductively develop and refine categories (Charmaz, 2000), which is consistent with inductive approaches for analyzing frames outlined by de Vreese (2005). Moreover, using an emergent qualitative analytic approach allowed for theoretical frameworks and sensitizing concepts to guide the study (Daly, 2007). Specifically, we focused the analysis on identifying personalized action frames communicated by protest-sign messages. Moreover, the qualitative techniques used herein allowed us to more fully probe the sign messages for personalized action frames (Johnson, 1995).

To begin the analysis, we used the constant comparative method to compare sign messages with other sign messages, cluster similar sign messages together, and label the clusters with conceptual codes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). To establish thematic salience, we focused on sign messages that were salient because of their recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness (Owen, 1984). Once the conceptual codes were assigned to the messages, the codes were collapsed into more abstract, higher order categories that recognized specific features that unified a given category (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Finally, categories were developed and refined by comparing and contrasting properties and dimensions within and between categories. Overlapping categories were combined. Per the procedures outlined by Strauss and Corbin, our analysis was conducted continuously, beginning when data collection commenced, which allowed us to engage in an active, responsive, and flexible analysis.

### Findings

Our analysis revealed that personalized action frames were evident in the organizational framing of the protest on Womensmarch.com (Women's March, 2017) through the diverse and broadly defined "unity principles," and in five additional action frames that emerged spontaneously at the march: (1) unity, (2) women as powerful agents of resistance, (3) reappropriating *pussy* and words for the vagina, (4) criticisms of Trump, and (5) defining and critiquing feminism (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Sample signs reflecting the Women's March (2017) unity principle regarding ending violence.

### The Unity Principles of the Women's March

Bennett (2012) writes that mobilizations in an era of personalized politics "often include a multitude of issues brought into the same protests through a widely shared late modern ethos of diversity and inclusiveness" (p. 21). This is evident in the multiple unity principles nominated by march organizers as the action themes underpinning the march. These principles included equality, ending violence against women and dismantling gender and racial inequalities within the judicial system, promoting reproductive freedom, protecting LGBTQIA rights, insisting on the protection of civil rights for all citizens, and fighting for labor rights, disability rights, immigrant rights, and environmental justice.

The multitude of issues and problems formalized by the movement were personalized through signs such as "Gun violence is a women's issue" and "Keep your policies off my body" (Figure 2).

Another unity principle found in the signs included, "Love is love is love is love"—a statement Lin-Manuel Miranda made in solidarity with the (LGBTQIA) Orlando nightclub shooting victims during his 2016 Tony award acceptance speech (Melas, 2016), and "The future is queer" (Figure 3).



**Figure 2.** Sample signs reflecting the Women's March (2017) unity principle regarding reproductive rights.



**Figure 3.** Sample signs reflecting the Women's March (2017) unity principle regarding LGBTQIA Rights.

Additional signs from the march reflecting the unity principles included, "We want an equal pay! Equal work! Revelation!"; "Remember the 19th Amendment," referencing the amendment that granted women the right to vote; and "I march for my daughter—Children with disabilities" (Figures 4 and 5).



**Figure 4.** Sample signs reflecting the Women's March (2017) unity principle regarding civil rights.



**Figure 5.** Sample signs reflecting the Women's March (2017) unity principle regarding disability rights.

Signs addressing the remaining unity principles included, "This is our wall [referring to a line of children holding hands]. Don't deport me or my friends. We are the future," and, "You will die of old age. Our children will die from climate change" (Figures 6 and 7).

These issues reflected findings by Fisher et al. (2017) that found that participants were "not just motivated by issues related to women but were actually motivated by a diverse set of issues connected to intersectional concerns" (p. 2).



**Figure 6.** Sample signs reflecting the Women's March (2017) unity principle regarding immigrant rights.



**Figure 7.** Sample signs reflecting the Women's March (2017) unity principle regarding environmental justice.

#### ***Spontaneous Personal Action Frames***

In addition to this already broad range of issues nominated by Women's March (2017), five additional personal action frames emerged in our analysis of protest signs.

### *Unity*

These signs communicated unity among participants of the march, as well as focusing on the coalition of marginal identities (Figure 8). For instance, many sign messages offered iterations of "stronger together" (the official campaign slogan of Hillary Clinton's campaign), some of which emphasized the "her" in "together" using bold or underlining. These signs focused on gender-based coalitions while other sign messages emphasized unity across race, sexual orientation, and religion. Given that social movements only exist to the extent that people realize they seek a common change (Blumer, 1969; Mauss, 1975; Tilly, 1978), a frame emphasizing togetherness implicitly supports the role of the social movement to address a common need and recursively justifies the broad-based movements of personalized politics.



**Figure 8. Sample signs reflecting the spontaneous personal action frame regarding unity.**

### *Women as Powerful Agents of Resistance*

The messages within this theme described women as strong change agents, often through equating womanhood with qualities and roles that are antithetical to the passive subjectivity prescribed by hegemonic femininity (Figure 9). For instance, one sign that read "I'm a girl. What's your superpower?" juxtaposes the socially diminished position of girlhood with the hypermasculinity of superheroes. Similarly, many signs stated that a "A woman's place is in the resistance," using the radical and disruptive connotations of "resistance" to subvert the traditional link between femininity and domesticity.



**Figure 9.** Sample signs reflecting the spontaneous personal action frame positioning women as powerful agents of resistance.

#### Reappropriating Pussy

This theme documents the reclamation words that have, in the past, been used to denigrate women (Figure 10). The deliberate and strategic use of these terms is intended as a feminist strategy for, as third-wave feminist Inga Muscio (2002) argues in reference to the word "cunt," "the context in which 'cunt' is presently perceived does not serve women, and should therefore be thoroughly re-examined. . . Seizing . . . language and manipulating it to serve your community is a very powerful thing to do" (p. xxv). Moreover, the widespread use of the word *pussy* at the march relates to Trump's use of this word throughout his campaign to sexualize and objectify women. This word was reclaimed by protesters by playing on the ambiguity of the word—which also innocuously refers to a cat—to prominently use and display the word in mainstream discourse, for instance, through the slogan, "This pussy bites back"—a sign that also featured an image of "grumpy cat," the meme. Knitted pink "pussy hats" also served as the unofficial visual brand of the movement. This general trend of reclaiming pejorative terms used to refer to women and vaginas was also indicated in signs such as "Cunt touch this" and "Labia majority."



**Figure 10.** Sample signs reflecting the spontaneous personal action frame reappropriating pussy and other terms relating to the vagina.

#### Criticizing Trump

Given that the original impetus for the Women's March was in reaction to comments made by Trump during the presidential campaign, it is not surprising that many signs offered direct anti-Trump commentary (Figure 11). These included personal attacks regarding his intelligence, his inappropriate use of Twitter, his appearance, his hand size (which he referenced during one of the primary debates), his use of words such as "huge," "sad," and "wrong," and his hair. There were also references to scandals raised during the campaign, including alleged Russian interference in the election as well as the Christopher Steele memo alleging the Russian government had blackmail material on Trump, including evidence he hired prostitutes at a Moscow hotel to perform sex acts involving urine. One sign read, "Tinkle tinkle little czar [referring to Trump] Putin put you where you are [referring to the presidency]." Finally, multiple signs criticized Trump's racism, sexism, and political incompetence. These very specific and timely references indicate the ways in which personalized politics allows individuals to "appropriate, shape and share" (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013, p. 39) political messages.



**Figure 11.** Sample signs reflecting the spontaneous personal action frame criticizing Trump.

#### Defining and Critiquing Feminism

This protest used the broad identity marker of *woman* as its organizing logic, rather than the more politically charged word *feminist*. However, many signs nevertheless explicitly included the word "feminism" and used their signs to offer commentary on the meaning of feminism (Figure 12). For instance, numerous signs included the following quote from Marie Shear, "Feminism is the radical notion that women are people," which is a definition of feminism that has been widely circulated on social network platforms. Other signs bore the quote from feminist Flavia Dzodan, "My feminism will be intersectional or it will be bulls\*\*t!"



**Figure 12.** Sample signs reflecting the spontaneous personal action frame defining feminism.

These diverse personal action frames offer insight into the logics of connective action and the potential—as typified by the Women’s March—for protest formations in this era

- to scale up more quickly;
- to produce large and sometimes record-breaking mobilizations; and
- to display unusual flexibility in tracking moving political targets and bridging different issues (e.g., economy and environment; Bennett & Segerberg, 2013, p. 25).

#### ***Personalized Politics and the Potential of Popular Feminism***

Specific to the potential of popular feminism as a connective action movement, we see the march as an expression of protest that supports coalition building within the feminist movement and acknowledges the dissent that has historically divided feminists.

The loose connections and low barriers to entry of connective action movements may foster a social movement structure that is broadly conducive to coalition building. The Women’s March was a strong expression of intersectionality, as Fisher et al. (2017) found from their survey of protesters:

Members . . . participated together in one large-scale protest event while still coalescing around a suite of intersectional interests that sometimes overlapped . . . the large turnout at the Women’s March . . . is the direct result of the effective mobilization of various individuals and organizational constituencies that were motivated by intersectional issues. (p. 5)

Additionally, many signs referenced intersectionality; for example, one sign read, "In my house we believe: Black lives matter, women's rights are human rights, no human is illegal, science is real, love is love, kindness is everything!" Another read, "I support my Black trans immigrant gay Muslim disabled indigenous sisters."

The potential for feminist coalition building through connective action is also evident in the ways that messages reflect and consolidate diverse feminist ideas. The merging and appropriation of ideas from the spheres of popular/consumer culture, feminist theory/history/activism, politics, and current events is a feature of popular feminism and the personalization of politics. This neoliberal, individualizing imperative of personalized politics has been critiqued by some feminist scholars, with Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2013) asking, "What happens to the key feminist construct of 'the personal is political' when the political (the collective public domain of politics) is reduced to the personal?" (p. 971), and feminist writer Jessica Valenti (2014) asking, "If everyone is a feminist, is anyone?" (para. 3). In response, we argue that the connective action of the Women's March made visible the productive interconnections between the spheres of politics, culture, and activism, and supported a visible and inclusive protest platform.

Protest signs drew feminist themes from multiple spheres, including politics, activism, and popular culture (Figure 13). Hillary Clinton's historic candidacy and her overtly feminist platform was a key moment in the rise of popular feminism and established a clear connection between popular feminism and politics. Clinton's campaign slogans, "Stronger Together" and "I'm With Her" were adopted by many protesters. Additionally, several derogatory terms used against women during the campaign—such as "pussy" and "nasty," the descriptor used by Trump to slander Clinton during the third presidential debate—were also reclaimed by protesters with the intention of using them to connote female empowerment, for instance, through the sign "Ninety, Nasty, and Not Giving Up," which subverted the intended insult of the term "nasty" by pairing it with the idea of longevity and strength.

Other signs were inspired by feminist theory, history, and activism. Many signs revived quotations from important moments in feminist history, such as "Women's place is in the house and the senate," which originated from Bella Abzug's use of the slogan "This woman's place is in the House—the House of Representatives" in her successful 1970 campaign (Maloney, 1995, para. 14). Other signs read "Women, their rights, and nothing less," a famous quote from Susan B. Anthony, and "The future is female," which references feminist rhetoric from the 1970s that calls for a future in which women and women's issues are not marginalized (Meltzer, 2015). Frequently, this frame was represented with the phrase "Women's rights are human rights" that Clinton famously coined in a landmark women's rights speech at the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (Chozick, 2015, para. 4).



**Figure 13. Sample signs merging and appropriating feminist messages from politics, activism, and popular culture.**

Finally, feminist messages originating from popular culture and the corporate sphere were repeated as activist slogans, with signs bearing the words "fight like a girl" in reference to the popular 2014 #LikeAGirl campaign by feminine hygiene company Always, which aimed to change the perception of the term "like a girl" from an insult to one of empowerment (Always, n.d.). As another example, many signs bore the message "girls just want to have fun-damental rights," referencing the hit 1983 pop song by Cyndi Lauper and redirecting the message toward more explicit feminist aims. However, the potential for recursion and bottom-up flows in personalized political signs is evident in the fact that Cyndi Lauper, "inspired by the menagerie of protest signs using this empowering slogan" (Seip, 2017, para. 2) has since released an "official" Girls Just Want to Have Fundamental Rights clothing line, with profits going to support nonprofit organizations True Colors and Planned Parenthood.

Popular feminism's investment in popular and corporate culture has been widely critiqued (Banet-Weiser, 2015; Kenny, 2017). For instance, Banet-Weiser (2018) writes that the popularization of feminist activist movements such as #MeToo "easily lend themselves to commodification and simplification and remain obsessed with those industries—entertainment, media—that provide spectacular visibility." However, Banet-Weiser (2018, para. 5) also argues that "the most important [feminist] work is being done *outside* the frame of media visibility" (para. 7). In this sense, we argue that the diverse personal action frames emerging from the Women's March elide the reductive framing of mainstream media. We believe this to be the case due to the ways that, in addition to supporting coalition building within a social movement, the framework of connective action allows for the dissent within contemporary feminist movements to be voiced without disrupting the overall logic of protest against sexism, racism, homophobia, and xenophobia.

As previously mentioned, intersectionality was explicitly referenced in many signs, while other signs addressed a need to include women beyond those that are "cis-ters," in reference to cisgender individuals whose gender identity corresponds with their birth sex (Figure 14). Such signs acknowledge longstanding critiques that Western second-wave feminism has tended to myopically focus on middle-class, heterosexual White women's experiences and problems. Indeed, many of the criticisms leveled against contemporary feminism target the persistent foregrounding of Whiteness within the movement. This tension was highlighted in several signs that referenced voting patterns among Black and White women, with exit polls suggesting that 52% of White women voted for Mr. Trump while only 4% of Black women voted for him. For example, one sign read, "Black women tried to save y'all! #94%." Another read, "Don't forget: White women voted for Trump." Some signs were more inflammatory, such as one that read, "Put an avocado on racism so White people notice," and another that stated, "I'll see you nice White ladies at the next #BlackLivesMatter march, right?," referencing the Black Lives Matter movement started in 2012 in response to the widespread killing of innocent young Black men by law enforcement (Cullors, Tometi, & Garza, 2012). The protester who wielded the sign, "Don't forget: White women voted for Trump," wrote an op-ed in *The New York Times* explaining her message:

My message stood in stark contrast to the theme of togetherness that dominated the Women's March . . . This was exactly the point. I made the sign to communicate that in a world where 53 percent of White women voters chose a racist, elitist sexual predator for president, the idea that we all want the same thing is a myth . . . The point wasn't to antagonize the Women's March participants. (Peoples, 2017, paras. 1-2)

This necessary critique of feminist activism, and the movement as a whole, is indicative of the potential for personalized politics to generate popular feminist movements that incorporate and acknowledge productive dissent and criticism from within, without delegitimizing the movement as a whole.

These popular feminist protest signs were examples of personalized politics, as they were created spontaneously and contextualized within a sea of protesters and a large collection of visible signs that bore diverse themes and messages, suggesting that popular feminism cannot be dismissed as a trivial fad, but rather exists concurrently within the interstices of the cultural, consumerist, theoretical, activist, historical, and political spheres. None of these personalized action frames were designed to individually encapsulate the purpose or ethos of the movement—their meaning was contextual not only to the current political/cultural moment but also to the ways in which they were read as signs within a collection of signs with diverse messages and meanings. As such, these signs offered a model for coalition building as they wove together messages of personal, political, and commercial feminism in a moment of visible unity that nevertheless provided space for productive dissent and criticism within the movement.



**Figure 14.** Sample signs critiquing feminism.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, one of our contributions was simply to bring two different sets of literatures together to help make sense of the immensely successful and lasting social movement. Certainly, more research will be forthcoming, illuminating various fascinating aspects of the Women's March—its electoral consequences, how it affects voter turnout by women, and the propensity for women to run for office. However, we believe that the way the Women's March was given meaning by participants informed by an emergent form of popular feminism is essential to understanding its deep and pervasive social influence.

Moreover, our research lends support to Bennett's research concerning the rise of a personalized politics with many entry points into social movements in place of hierarchically organized social movements governed by collective action frames. The success of the Women's March is an encouraging sign that, in spite of a lack of universally shared meaning, social movements can maintain cohesion in purpose and be politically relevant. Moreover, we believe the relationship between the role of physical signs, the digital origin of their contents, and their subsequent digital circulation becomes an avenue in

which further study can consider the role of digital connective activism. Furthermore, this research makes the case for thinking about the cultural basis for individual action frames.

The specific forms of politics surrounding the Women's March enabled the personalized politics to build on feminism by creating scale, visibility, and thus a form of blunt political power while still allowing for multiple openings, dissent, and even mutually exclusive personalized action frames without undermining the coherence of the movement. In this sense, the members of the movement signifying the meanings of a new massive political moment for feminism did so by reinterpreting existing forms of popular feminism made possible by personalized politics.

Finally, although close to 700 protest-sign messages were reviewed during the analyses for this article, we were limited by our interpretation of the messages. In many cases, the messages appeared to be straightforward. For example, a sign message that said "Dump Trump" could be interpreted as an expression of disapproval for Mr. Trump with relative confidence. However, sign messages that contained only pictures were not included in the analysis because of the interpretive nature of them. Although personalized actions may be culled from visual communication, for this analysis we chose not to include them. Future research may consider exploring the visual rhetoric employed in those signs.

Relatedly, although protest-sign messages offered some insight into the personalized action frames relevant to the January 21 Women's March, the analysis did not include messages from subsequent marches. Therefore, the action frames herein offer a limited understanding of the unfolding of the broader social movement. Research in the future might consider if and how action frames observed in the January 21 march influenced the direction the movement took more generally or how robust each of the action frames were throughout the movement.

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