

T-Shirt Therapy: A New Reality?

More and more, people are feeling compelled to express themselves and bond with others through words and graphics on T-shirts.

T-Shirt Statistic:

Each year, an estimated 2 billion T-shirts are sold globally.

DRESSING FOR PANDEMIC AND POLITICS

Since the Covid-19 pandemic entered our world, Americans have had a collective, unprecedented reason to dress down — or more *casually*. The impact of self-quarantines, lockdowns and isolation has made some of us feel akin to caged animals. *We want to get out. We want to be seen.* We desire the quasi-intangible luxuries of people-watching, shopping freely, and giving an unspoken greeting. We miss that iconic, upward head nod — to convey a casual *'what's up'* or *'how you doin''* to passers-by.



When we add the current, frenetic political scene and perceived challenges to our beliefs and tenets, it creates a perfect storm for a *T-Shirt evolution/revolution* that prominently lets others know what is important to us in an observable form. What better or simpler way to show our feelings about hot topics and things that are top-of-mind than to don a T-shirt (or 'tee') with illustrative graphics or words?

FROM MILITARY UNDERWEAR TO CLASSIC TREND TO PERSONAL PROPAGANDIST.

What started out as underwear for the military early in the 19th century, the iconic white T-shirt has morphed into a stand-alone piece of clothing that — with short money and imagination — can be a walking billboard that gets attention by making people want to ***smile, smirk, think, or debate.***

A Bit of T-Shirt History. Soldiers in the Second World War were issued white cotton T-shirts with the logos and names of their branches. This was so notable that Life Magazine had a cover featuring these graphic shirts in 1942. T-shirts quickly went from standard issue for military members to setting a precedent for creating other athletic-style apparel.

In the *1950s*, the T-shirt was adopted by teens to show their rebellion and free-spirited nature. They used these shirts then — as they still do today — to tell the world *who* and *what* they were; and what they stood for.

The *60s* and *70s* ushered in shirts representing souvenirs, protests, hippies, and mass-merchandising.

The *80s* brought oversized shirts and slogans; and technology improvements introduced digital and online printing in the *90s*.

Come forward to the 2020s, and you will see that T-shirts continue to represent moods, movements, causes, and quirks.

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THE PSYCHOLOGY OF TEES

The T-shirt market with graphics and bold lettering has grown exponentially through the years. These days, it seems like this kind of interpretive apparel can make others feel a connection *just as easily* as they can offend. For example, some people may find it funny, disarming, and endearing when they see a shirt depicting a grumpy coffee lover with their middle finger extended – while others find that kind of image *way too graphic*.

Things have certainly gotten more intense relative to T-shirts over time. We have seen fashion go from the silly, sweet innocence of Disney characters to serious and controversial cause-related phrases and graphics over the past sixty years. And you have likely noticed the growing movement of folks publicly sharing their strongly held beliefs. For example, many people choose to flout property aesthetics in favor of promoting their choice of political candidates and affiliations on a slew of yard signs. However, these days, T-shirts allow us to wear a variety of personal convictions, humor, or a sense of outrage *emblazoned* right on our chest, like walking, cotton endorsements.



Needs and Purpose. For some of us, there is an *itch* that comes up when we see a clever-yet-meaningful T-shirt. We simply *need* it to become part of our wardrobe — and maybe even part of our identity for a time. Wearing it can make us feel more confident in our pursuit to be known for what the shirt rightly conveys. It is personal advertising. It's like a mood ring, but in fabric form. *Ah...* a shirt with a *purpose*.

Quote for T-Shirt Wearers

**"Why fit in
when you
were born to
STAND OUT?"**

~ Dr. Seuss

We wear shirts representing teams, bands, TV shows, and organizations to be part of a group or feel a sense of belonging. Although the phrase 'herd immunity' is seen often in the media when discussing a population being free of the coronavirus, it seems that we are far from a state of herd mentality or conformity now. People are valuing individuality and using this time to infuse their personal identity into what they wear.

For some, a good T-shirt does one or more of the following:

- Draws attention
- Makes a statement
- Elicits emotions
- Attracts like-minded people (and may repel others)
- Represents and supports the things we love
- Serves as mementos and souvenirs for events
- Exemplifies a wearable 'Rite of Passage' (e.g., a T-shirt may list all the names of a graduating class)

Graphic tees can certainly elicit positive *and* negative reactions.

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The Positive Tee. T-shirts can help create positive outcomes when worn, including a sense of connection with like-minded people, a show of support for a worthy cause, and a boost of confidence.

- **Kindred Connections.** A T-shirt's message or graphic can emotionally connect with people who share the same opinions. It can be a declaration of a mindset, membership, or principle. When someone wears a similar shirt, we may feel like we already have a new friend.
- **Supporting a Crusade.** Some people wear T-shirts as a sign of support for a worthy cause, music type, or private movement/crusade. While we can't just activate a revolution or rebellion by putting on a shirt and calling it a day, donning an evocative tee may conjure up curiosity, and perhaps a conversation. That may not be enough for a *revolution*, but it focuses energy on our cause.
- **Empowerment.** Identifying our mood, character, or spirit gets us in touch with our inner self. When choosing a shirt or outfit, we may ask ourselves if we want to *fit in* today or *stand out*. The more we learn about what really matters to us, the closer we come to being our authentic self. And that can lead to a real sense of empowerment. Additionally, when a shirt's message or graphic matches up with our personality, identify and mood, it can make us feel more confident.

[*Some unsolicited advice:* For a natural confidence boost, your style and clothing should reflect *the real you*.]

The Controversial Tee. Wearing controversial messages on shirts is nothing new; but there may be consequences. Here are a couple of tidbits about protecting the public against *highly controversial* words and images on apparel:

- **Some Policies Prohibit the Overtly Offensive.** To prevent intended or unintended controversy, some airlines have actually created dress code policies to prohibit offensive clothing being worn on a flight. Also, many schools and professional offices have policies against objectionable or disruptive views on shirts.
- **There are Exceptions to the First Amendment.** Some people may be surprised to learn that the first amendment (which largely protects free speech) does not include obscenity, slander, and pornography, which have been described as 'fighting words.'

Still, there are scads of people who like to wear irreverent T-shirts for some of the following reasons:

- **Activism.** Some folks find that a T-shirt's message or graphic can connect with people who share the same opinions. (Yet they can also perpetuate a controversial event, or give a negative, one-sided view.)

There is nothing wrong with bucking trends and showing individuality most of the time. Positive activism is used to try to make the world a better place.

However, some people enjoy wearing shirts with messages that are so 'out there' that they get noticed and judged for the wrong reasons. To that end, a person can repel others and do damage to their cause by displaying a message or graphic that suggests violence, anarchy, or similarly negative images.

- **Enjoyment of the Offensive and Obscene.** Many offensive, vulgar, and inappropriate shirts are protected under America's free speech (first) amendment, and there are some people who enjoy the attention they receive while wearing them. Some find humor in making others squirm. Having an obscene word or image on their shirt can be a warning to others that the person is intentionally irreverent, a 'badass,' or just plain disrespectful.

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All in all, a poignant T-shirt can add to our confidence because we are putting it out there: our style, purpose, mood, and/or convictions. They express a part of our identity. These are good reasons to keep a few favorites on hand.

THE COTTON PLATFORM FOR SELF-EXPRESSION

The next time you are out shopping or people-watching, take a look at what folks are wearing. T-shirts today are not just cutesy sayings, or sports and fashion logos. Self-expression through iconic cotton shirts seems to have grown dramatically — and has zigged and zagged in the directions of politics, self-awareness, extreme moods and opinions, wisdom, and spirituality. Their messages can be as subtle or loud as you want.

Casual Clothing Matters More. Given these strange times and with fewer people to impress during the coronavirus related lockdowns, clothing has still been playing a large role in how we are perceived. It seems even more important these days to showcase our individuality — portraying what we feel is *interesting* or *important* to our friends, family, colleagues, and even strangers.

Quote for Marketing T-Shirts

**"If you make
MEANING,
you make
MONEY."**

~ Guy Kawasaki

Since masks have been introduced society-wide to protect our health during the pandemic, we have been dealing with an item that *neutralizes* much of our expressions. Hence, graphic tees are being used as 'mood boosters,' as well as for self-expression. Communicating our mood has almost become a *need*. A good T-shirt can be the perfect medium for blending comfort, fashion, and self-expression — and can also influence emotions and summarize what matters to us.

Make Someone Smile Big. Unless you have a strict business dress code, consider wearing an eye-catching graphic tee to make colleagues smile at your next meeting. This could even help to combat 'Zoom fatigue' if the meeting is online. (Apparently, it is a real thing where Zoom and other chat platforms can exhaust its participants because of issues like excessive eye contact on the video screen, and unnatural posture and gesturing.)

Also, if you find a piece that evokes a fun memory or a hot topic, consider gifting someone with a T-shirt that represents the shared experience, sentiment, or idea. You could be responsible for making someone's day or having them laugh out loud because you bought them something that expresses their quirky habits or interests. We can all use more reasons to chuckle and feel like we are in each other's thoughts right now.

Chalk It Up To Self-Care. Next time you find the perfect T-shirt in a retail establishment, consider it a sort of *prescription* when the cashier hands you the receipt. Tell yourself that it's really *T-shirt therapy* and not just a random purchase — and walk out with a smirk and your head held high. ■

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