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## Insurrectionist chic? Montclair State team studies how fashion feeds extremist movements

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NEWS

# Insurrectionist chic? Montclair State team studies how fashion feeds extremist movements

**Hannan Adely** NorthJersey.com

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That fur-wearing, face-painted, Viking-horned rioter grabbed attention this month for his role in storming the U.S. Capitol with a mob of Trump supporters.

But it was the everyday nature of others in the crowd that may have been more alarming: college students, moms and military veterans who could be neighbors, relatives or even a school therapist.

At Montclair State University, a husband-and-wife team of researchers are examining how average Americans have been drawn into radical movements via hashtags, social causes and even fashion brands. Bond Benton and Daniela Peterka-Benton say extremist groups are using these marketing tools for recruitment, messaging and organizing.

“It is really a chance for them to bring in folks to their message without necessarily advertising what their message is,” said Benton, an associate professor of public relations. “It allows increasing recruitment to extremism, to radicalize people without it being overt.”

From moms drawn to online groups via anti-sex trafficking posts to young men sporting T-shirts with racist slogans, Americans are being pulled in and then exposed to even more radical or dangerous beliefs, they said.

**KELLY:** Like 9/11, America ignored warnings that the Capitol would be attacked. Why?

## White nationalist fashions

In the heyday of street gangs in the 1980s and 90s, the Bloods, Crips and Latin Kings were known by the colors they wore: head-to-toe red, blue or black and gold. Today, white

nationalists are adopting their own fashions and styles as a kind of modern-day extremist uniform, the Bentons said.

Members of the Proud Boys often wear a black polo shirt with yellow stripes on the collar sold by British clothing-maker Fred Perry. Self-described “western chauvinists,” the far-right group is known for celebrating violence. Neo-Nazi website The Daily Stormer, meanwhile, has proclaimed New Balance the “Official Shoes of White People.”

That's continued even though companies behind the products have rejected the connections. Fred Perry announced in September it would stop selling the co-opted polo shirt in the U.S. and Canada "until we're satisfied that its association with the Proud Boys has ended."

Boston-based New Balance was embraced after a company executive said in 2016 that Trump's trade policies were a step in the "right direction." The company said those comments were taken out of context and issued a statement saying it “does not tolerate bigotry or hate in any form.”

German brand Thor Steinar has been accused of using symbols in its clothing similar to those worn by Nazis, leading to a ban on its products in Germany's parliament building and at some soccer stadiums. The apparel has featured what critics call coded messages such as "Save the White Continent: Antarctic Patrol."

"They are now a worldwide enterprise. They sell stuff on Amazon," said Peterka-Benton, an associate professor of justice studies.

Wearing the Nazi swastika is banned in many European countries, but hidden messages "give the opportunity to walk into the world very safely while overtly displaying their ideologies," she added.

**STILE:** Grab a gas mask. And run. One House member's harrowing account from the US Capitol

## **Hatejacking**

The styling of extremist groups is not unprecedented. Neo-Nazi “skinheads” in Europe were once distinguishable by their shaved heads, chunky military boots and bomber jackets.

They later toned down the look because "it was hard if you had an average job or average social contacts," said Peterka-Benton, who has co-authored articles with her husband about “hatejacking” of brands and how companies can respond.

People may wear brands without knowing the hidden meanings, but others are advertising that they are part of the alt-right movement, they said.

“By providing a uniform and a secret code, they provide an identity and a sense that 'I'm in on something,'" Benton said "There's a great deal of power in that."

Benton has first-hand experience in marketing, having worked with local staff at U.S. embassies to improve communications, marketing and storytelling for the American image abroad. Peterka-Benton, a former staffer in the Office of Diplomatic Security at the U.S. Embassy in Vienna, Austria, has written about transnational crimes such as human trafficking and terrorism.

The researchers have also studied messaging used by QAnon, the conspiracy-theory movement that falsely claimed President Donald Trump was fighting a secret cabal of Democratic leaders involved in Satanism and sex trafficking.

QAnon has drawn people in with myths that children are being stolen off playgrounds and that top politicians and influential Jewish figures are involved in trafficking, said Peterka-Benton. They have spread their message with the hashtag "Savethechildren."

Adherents also believe debunked claims of massive voter fraud and a stolen election. The crowd that took over the U.S. Capitol included people carrying flags and wearing T-shirts with the letter Q to represent the movement.

“People who are not radical would support the [Save the Children] message and go down the rabbit hole of Q,” Peterka-Benton said.

## **Fighting back**

Companies shouldn't ignore the co-opting of their products or platforms; rather, they need to take immediate action, Benton said.

When a white supremacist group in Michigan used the logo of hockey's Detroit Red Wings at an event, team owners swiftly disavowed the group and threatened legal action.

“You cannot let hate groups squat on your message,” he said.

Companies that emphasize diversity and inclusiveness may also discourage white nationalists from claiming association, the MSU research suggests.

When it comes to law enforcement, there needs to be more awareness about hate symbols and hashtags and how they connect to extremist groups, added Peterka-Benton.

While it's hard to police hashtags, technology companies can also take action. In October, Facebook restricted the use of the Save the Children campaign and took down QAnon pages. Groups will invent new messages so companies have to stay vigilant, she said.

In another instance, people used the Proud Boys hashtag to flood social media with positive posts showing gay couples and families. The campaign changed the narrative of the hashtag.

“The propensity to pull people from mainstream America” is aided “by how accessible these messages are,” said Benton. “If we can identify what the messages are about and take proactive steps, we can make people aware.”

*Hannan Adely is an education and diversity reporter for NorthJersey.com. To get unlimited access to the latest news, please subscribe or activate your digital account today.*

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