

Pink Washing: Does This Pink Shirt Really Say Enough?

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By Emily Griffiths

Pink Shirt Day is almost upon us. The annual campaign to raise money and “awareness” on the issue of “bullying” takes place on February 25. As this date approaches, I’m sure you’ve noticed an inundation of bright pink. Even at this very moment, I am sipping my tea from a Blenz paper cup, wrapped in a festive Pink Shirt Day cardboard sleeve. Blenz is one of “a bunch of great businesses [that] are holding fundraisers during the month of February with proceeds going to Pink Shirt Day.” Blenz doesn’t actually *give* money; they just provide us consumers with a number to text, so that we can “[have \\$5 added to \[our\] monthly mobile bill, to be donated to support anti-bullying programs.](#)” For their effort, Blenz can piggyback on the all the symbolic glory of philanthropic pink.

The colour pink ties in nicely with the Valentine’s Day displays around the city. This is the season of love and compassion, or at least the symbols of love and compassion. Pink also works well as the spokes-colour for anti-homophobia, which brings us to the Pink Shirt Day origin story: Two high school students in Nova Scotia witnessed a male classmate being harassed by a fellow student for wearing pink, a colour associated with the antithesis of masculinity. The witnesses went to a discount store after school, purchased 50 pink t-shirts, distributed them to their classmates the following day and stood in solidarity with their previously demeaned classmate. This display of empathy, solidarity, and community action was inspiring! The Premier of Nova Scotia declared the day officially and momentum has been growing ever since.

This type of origin story is familiar. Without it, Pink Shirt Day might be read as a superficial government/corporate campaign to boost their image as community-based philanthropic entities, as well

as a gross simplification of the real and complex problem of inter-student violence in schools. The origin story works to root the event in an authentic action, thereby lending perceived authenticity to the entire “movement.”

This tactic is nothing new. The Pink Ribbon Campaign for Breast Cancer “awareness”, introduced in 1992, has an authentic origin story of its own behind all the colour-coded marketing. Charlotte Haley is the “[granddaughter, sister, and mother of women who had battled breast cancer](#).” She made peach-coloured ribbons by hand in her dining room, and distributed them at the local supermarket. This origin story does not have such a happy ending, as Haley rejected Estee Lauder’s request for her ribbon, saying they were “too commercial.” Estee Lauder lawyers suggested changing the colour of the ribbon to avoid a lawsuit and proceed without Haley’s involvement. Voila! The pink ribbon was born!

Both the Breast Cancer and Anti-Bullying campaigns involve the corporate appropriation of authentic political and community action. This can be called “Pink Washing”, and it functions similarly to Green Washing. Just as we are reassured that using reusable shopping bags will save the planet without any real effort or sacrifice on our part, so are we reassured wearing the official pink T-shirt, posting a selfie #pinkshirtday, or participating a dance flash mob will bring an end to inter-student violence, oppression, and harm. I love a good dance flash mob, but is this the type of action that facilitates meaningful discussion and problem solving, or is the effect more so one of surface appearances?

I am not here to claim that Pink Shirt Day offers nothing of value to those who participate. The colour pink itself can help youth question gender norms, and I’m sure some deeper conversations of empathy and community do arise. What I do propose is that Pink Shirt Day serves to simplify a complex issue. One way this is done is through the use of language.

We use the word “bullying” as a catchall. Why do we call a harmful act or series of acts “bullying” rather than homophobia, transphobia, racism, sexism, and classism? These more specific and political words can help us more deeply understand the various forms of power and oppression rampant in our schools and broader communities. An awareness of interlocking systems of oppression can help us work to dismantle these oppressions from an educated and empathetic perspective. Calling homophobia by its real name can help young people make sense of their own felt experiences. This is the first step in talking openly and constructively about the systemic injustices they face, and working towards a place of safety and empowerment. Painting all oppressions with the wide brush of “bullying” undermines the intelligence of children and youth by artificially simplifying complex problems.

One reason I think we are so drawn to Pink Shirt Day and other similar campaigns is that it offers us a feel-good “solution” to a known problem, without us having to give anything up. All we are asked to do is wear pink and donate a little money and we can go about our day believing the problem is solved. If we are forced to abandon the word “bullying” and talk openly about patriarchy, white supremacy, heteronormativity, and the exploitation inherent in capitalism, we will be forced to acknowledge our own relative privileges within these power relations. When Amanda Todd committed suicide in 2012, the community was outraged at the horrific “bullying” she had been subjected to. The use of the word “bully” in this instance works to evade discussion of patriarchy and rape culture. We’re told the solution is to “stop bullying now” rather than work towards dismantling rape culture, problematizing male privilege, and empowering young women.

While we're on the subject of language and how it can be used to obscure the truth, let's consider who exactly a "bully" is. "Bully" is a word we use to call a human being. Naming a person "Bully" allows us to dehumanize that person and ignore the possible reasons behind their violent behaviour. How many times have we heard the tale of a school bully getting abused at home? This child is rendered powerless by his parents, and therefore seizes power in the only place he can – on the playground - and in the only way he has been taught how – through violence. If we really wish to eliminate bullying, we must look closely at the deeper causes.

People don't often fit into distinct categories of "bully" or "victim". Many of us do find ourselves in both of these roles depending on the situation and the specific power dynamics involved. Using language that enforces this binary is overly simplistic.

Pink Shirt Day does give the problem of inter-student violence status in the classroom and in the national consciousness, but I worry that the campaign elevates the *image* of solidarity above actual *acts* of solidarity. Perhaps wearing pink on February 25 is a step in the right direction; or perhaps it is a shallow distraction from considering the complex power relationships that underscore violence. Either way, the question must be asked: Does this pink shirt say enough?