The actor Damon Wayans has been engaged in a 14-month fight to trademark the term "Nigga" for a clothing line and retail store, a search of the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office's online database reveals.

Wayans wants to dress customers in 14 kinds of attire from tops to bottoms, and use the controversial mark on "clothing, books, music and general merchandise," as well as movies, TV and the internet, according to his applications.

But, so far, his applications have been unsuccessful. Trademark examiner Kelly Boulton rejected the registration dated Dec. 22, citing a law that prohibits marks that are "immoral or scandalous." A previous attempt by Wayans was turned down on identical grounds six months earlier.

"While debate exists about in-group uses of the term, ''nigga'' is almost universally understood to be derogatory," Boulton wrote to Wayans'' attorney, William H. Cox, according to the application.

Cox and other representatives of the actor did not respond to interview requests about the registration.

Wayans can appeal the rejection, but experts in trademark law differ on his chances for success.

Lynda Zadra-Symes, a trademark lawyer in California, said Wayans may be successful. She compared "Nigga" to the successful registration of Dykes on Bikes. The San Francisco Women's Motorcycle Contingent fought the Trademark Office for three years to overturn an initial rejection of a Dykes on Bikes trademark. The mark was published Jan. 24.

"Because the application was by a group of lesbians it was eventually allowed to publish," Zadra-Symes said.

"This is a great victory," the group proclaimed on its website. "It affirms our right to determine who we are and how we present ourselves to the world."

However, Tawnya Wojciechowski, another trademark attorney practicing in California, compared Wayans" application to the ongoing legal case where Washington Redskins trademarks have been challenged by seven Native Americans. "They"re going to have a really tough time," Wojciechowski predicted.

The word "nigga" is ubiquitous in hip-hop music, where it provides half of a rhyming couplet radio listeners never get to hear in the Grammy-winning song "Gold Digger" by hip-hop rap artist Kanye West.

Rapper Ol" Dirty Bastard used the term 76 times in the 1999 album Nigga Please, not counting repetitions in a chorus.

In January, an episode of the late-night Cartoon Network series Boondocks was criticized for putting the word in the mouth of a fictionalized Martin Luther King Jr.

The effort to commercialize "nigga" drew a sharp response from a black school official who participated in a forum about the word earlier this month at Arkansas State University in Jonesboro.

"I don"t care for it in any form," said Dr. Lonnie Williams, associate vice chancellor for student affairs. "Either way you pronounce it, spell it, anything associated with it -- I find it offensive."

If Wayans succeeds in persuading the Trademark Office to permit the mark, he may have to deal with Keon Rhodan, a 29-year-old entrepreneur in Charleston, South Carolina, who has been using "Nigga" on a line of T-shirts, hoodies and other attire for six years in a part-time, trunk-of-his-car business.

Rhodan attempted to register "Nigga"Clothing" as a trademark in 2001 and was denied by the Trademark Office.

"They said it was disparaging," he said.

Rhodan, who is black, said that he's sold around 2,000 of the shirts at events. When he began selling the shirts, emblazoned with the term "Nigga," he thought he would take criticism, especially from older people.

"I was in the mall with one of the shirts on, and an old lady said, "Where did you get that shirt from?"" he said, expecting the worst. "She followed me to the car and bought five shirts for her grandchildren."

Rhodan believes that affectionate use of the term within the black community should make it an acceptable mark, but the Trademark Office has thus far has not been persuaded by that argument.

"The very fact that debate is ongoing regarding in-group usage, shows that a substantial composite of African-Americans find the term "nigga" to be offensive," Boulton wrote in rejecting Wayans.

Though attempts to commercialize "Nigga" coincide with a generational shift in how the word is perceived, the clothing is still likely to test some boundaries, as Rhodan demonstrated in a phone interview.

"You couldn"t wear it," he said.

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