

Fashion as Political Communication: Protest Aesthetics and Identity Signaling

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ABSTRACT

Fashion has emerged as a powerful medium of political communication, functioning as a visual and material language through which protest aesthetics and identity signaling are articulated. This study examines how clothing, accessories, and stylistic choices operate as communicative tools within protest movements, conveying political meanings, social affiliations, and collective identities. Drawing on theoretical perspectives from symbolic interactionism, signaling theory, and visual rhetoric, the paper explores how protest fashion encodes and transmits messages through elements such as color, silhouette, materiality, and graphic design. It traces historical trajectories from civil rights and labor movements to contemporary digital activism, highlighting how protest aesthetics have evolved alongside socio-political and technological transformations. The analysis further investigates the dual role of fashion in expressing both personal and collective identities, emphasizing how attire mediates belonging, moral alignment, and audience interpretation. The rise of social media has amplified the visibility and diffusion of protest fashion, transforming localized expressions into global visual repertoires while also introducing challenges related to authenticity, commodification, and algorithmic mediation. Through case studies of global protest movements, the study demonstrates how fashion contributes to the construction of political narratives and the mobilization of public sentiment. Ultimately, the paper argues that fashion is not merely decorative but constitutes a critical site of political meaning-making, shaping how protests are perceived, communicated, and remembered in contemporary society.

Keywords: Protest Fashion, Political Communication, Identity Signaling, Visual Rhetoric and Social Movements

INTRODUCTION

Fashion constitutes a vital medium for political communication, with garments and accessories conveying meanings about protest aesthetics and identity signaling [1]. Fashion circulates information about participants, social groups, and movements, while simultaneously expressing beliefs about the nature and impact of political action. Today, distinctive styles and ensembles govern quasi-spectacular modes of participation, with activism itself frequently reframed as performative art [1]. Protests rarely occur twice in the same place or the same form: social movements become visible yet ephemeral events preserved digitally on social media platforms. Consequently, visuals, clothing, and other artifacts take on heightened significance not only during protests and marches but before and after, governing how activism is publicly presented, viewed, and suitably narrated [2]. The emergence of this quasi-spectacular political aesthetics prompted a review of past academic scholarship on the visual aspects of politics. Four distinct historical trajectories of protest fashion emerged, spanning civil rights and labor movements, countercultures, and platform effects [2]. The investigation subsequently shifted toward aesthetic characteristics, examining how color, silhouette, materials, uniformity, and graphic design articulate political messages. Finally, the focus turned to the circulation and reception of such ensembles, considering the relationship between differentials of personal and collective identity, legibility, emotions, and media coverage [1].

Fashion constrains how participants aesthetically signal their adherence to collective or individual political identities, yet attire constitutes only one aspect of collective expression. Distinctive domains exist for artistic, social, and political stylization, and such configurations vary within national, regional, and geographical contexts. Even in Mozambique, social influence remains paramount, albeit operating within church, domestic, or school settings rather than politically configured audiences [3]. The fashion text in each instance incorporates different implicit norms derived from a mesh of underlying collective identities and constituent pressure [1,2].

Theoretical Framework

Fashion constitutes a communicative system of social interaction and political expression articulating messages about attitudes, preferences, and beliefs [1]. The meaning of fashion derives not only from the shapes and colors of garments but also from the identities of the participants, their social interactions, and the context in which the communication occurs [2]. The shapes, colors, materials, accessories, and combinations of garments constitute explicit messages; the identity and status of the audience, together with the specific social context, lead to readings and interpretations more or less aligned with the designers' intentions. Protests become occasions for visible, often elaborate, signalling of political solidarity and partisan affiliation [2]. For example, during mass protests following the murder of George Floyd in the United States, individuals in many cities wore either black attire, the symbolism of which was readily understood, or the 'I can't breathe' slogan in large lettering to communicate the urgency of the moment [1]. The feminist 'Me Too' movement employed a very different but equally recognizable strategy, encouraging women to wear black garments to express solidarity with those speaking out against abuse, and with their ability to do so [3].

Fashion as Communicative Practice

Fashion constitutes a communicative activity alongside its economic exchanges [4]. Constructing a message necessitates a shared code between senders and receivers, and attire is laden with meanings derived from individuals' experiences and exposure. Decisions of selection and arrangement, the elements featured and the particular way they are combined, remain open to interpretation through processes of encoding and decoding. Generalized propositions assert that the significance of political activism shifts when the communicative channel alters, and that aesthetic aspects influence the political connotation assigned to particular attire [5]. Fashionable outfits provide a medium for identity signaling on both individual and collective levels. Choices regarding clothing transmit pointers towards social positioning and group affiliation [6]. The emergence of a distinctive style marks entry into a different community and a shift in self-identity. Although signals and cues are related, signaling theory emphasizes the underlying motivations and processes that inform how individuals communicate and which contents they transmit. Attire functions as a medium through which identity is both referenced and created [7].

Symbolic Interaction and Identity Signaling

Fashion conveys meaningful information, facilitates expression and interpretation of identity, and serves as an active medium to create political knowledge [1]. Influenced by socio-political contexts, protesters have devised significant ways to communicate politically through clothing and the presence of different aesthetics in protest fashion assembles an influential form of political discourse [2]. Social and political environments, technological developments, cultural shifts, and new ideas affect the nature of social and political movements [3]. Yet clothing remains as an important visual medium for these movements, serving different social, political, and cultural functions through distinct protests. How protest is expressed through attire is a vital inquiry in contemporary protest aesthetics, still an underexplored area within the political communication field [4]. Movements express political causes using different styles and approaches, some focusing on individual aspects and others concentrating on collective identity. These interactions between the individual and the collective still constitute a central concern in protest fashion [5].

Political Communication and Visual Rhetoric

Protest fashion intersects with political communication through visual rhetoric, highlighting how graphic design and aesthetics influence political messages [5]. Visual design pertains to how visual elements are arranged, while aesthetics encompass broader qualities such as color, texture, shape, and pattern. Although political discourse often hinges on text, image-oriented fashion emphasizes non-verbal, visual components often underexplored in political communication [6]. Within political communication, visual rhetoric explores how visual form shapes meaning and persuasion. Aesthetics further guide message construction, informing what aspects of political representation are emphasized, delegitimizing certain discourses, or undermining calculative reasoning [6,7]. In addition to the choice of medium, political communication theory considers other factors influencing political message shaping, encoding, interpretation, and reception [3]. Fashion's visual and material qualities facilitate expressive forms of political communication that shape political meaning and political arrangements. Rhetorical perspectives on clothing investigate its role in establishing, contesting, or transforming political identities [2, 8].

Historical Trajectories of Protest Fashion

The landmark commemorative marches held in Washington D.C. on 25 April 1993, and 22 April 2000, not only shaped the political landscape vis-à-vis the position of LGBTQ persons in USA society, but also crafted a visual

lexicon that, during the intervening years, crossed borders and began to exert influence on global civil rights movements that addressed the question of sexual orientation that were historically subdued [5]. Neither of the first two marches lacked fashion statements, but the 1993 March on Washington occasion exhibited such historic significance that the architectural practice of staging parades and marches together with fashion acknowledgments could, thereon, be termed neo-parade architecture; the mid-permanent nature of the neo-parade imagery still resonates strongly across the world today [5]. Queer persons in China, at least in PR China, have sensed a shift in the public gaze towards amending laws and regulations regarding sexual orientation and gender identity. The kink and fetish subculture has emerged prominently as an extravagant avenue for artistic exploration, complementing that public candor and acknowledgement [6]. Eye-catching avant-garde garments, costumes, and paraphernalia characterise the Kink Party scene, contemporary alternative exhibitions, fashion shows inside large-scale lifestyle showcase exhibitions, etc. Kinky Street Interviews signify another rebellion against conformity paralleled by an enhanced practice of the founding principle. Queer-reading attire honouring those in the past who selflessly sacrificed in the continuous poetic battle and adornment—efforts constitute an even older yet still alluring and provoking expression for all generations [7]. Historical perspectives frequently shed light upon present conditions, however, fashion studies still habitually neglect documenting the corporeal garments supporting visual communication [8]. It is conventional to interpret and analyse the semiotic advancement of clothing as merely symbolic and to examine only pace nudity, hence historicising moments within the began-born circumstances make any current deployment of the neo-parade legitimate [9]. Memoirs of past-inspired, pragmatically situational events associated with the human form have the potential to enrich an understanding of clothing as a semiotic artefact that affects, and is affected by, a current and continual language of dress all across China [7].

Precedents in Civil Rights and Labor Movements

The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party adopted an unusual strategy for the 1964 Democratic National Convention: instead of demanding to be seated as full delegates, the party requested that a white delegation be sent in their stead [4]. To support the request, the party's convention delegates donned colorful clothing that subverted prevailing norms of businesslike attire for political meetings. Intended to signal the party's separatist and nonviolent goals, their sartorial choices were misinterpreted by many journalists as a desire to "put on (or at least show off) a kind of popular theatre," an ironic commentary on circumstances that nevertheless culminated in assassination and violent repression [3]. Still later, as "the Black Power movement began to herald an era of ever-increasing graphic influence upon protest commentary; the civil-rights movement (and its previously stylized representational strategies) were perceived as excessively restrained" [2]. The National Organization for Women's 1968 protest against the Miss America pageant in Atlantic City likewise employed a theme of separation, not dressing in elaborate costumes but precisely the opposite: participants wore ordinary clothes, their protest deliberately nondecorative and "unnoticed" [4].

Countercultures and Stylistic Innovations

Fashion carries profound social and political significance. It expresses identities and offers insights into people's social worlds and chosen affiliations [5]. It shapes, informs, and verifies culture through a mechanism of symbolic interaction. Fashion constitutes a communicative medium used to construct, encode, and distribute messages about identity, social connections, and lived experiences [6, 7]. In line with semiotics, messages are multilayered in nature and several interconnected codes may be at play [8]. Fashion is also linked to collective identity based on group formation and cultural belonging [9]. At the same time, systematic divergence characterizes the fashion choices of various groups, with stylings acting as badges of difference defining distinct identities, social positions, and cultural capital. Clothing may serve as an indicator of class and ethnicity [2]. Fashion is an important part of political communication. When politically charged issues or events arise, new styles emerge to signal political attitudes. In some cases, protests kick off with a specific set of fashion items that together convey the movement's message [10]. Some elections or referendums are preceded by an outbreak of politically marked garments. Fashion messages linked to political expression are encoded and interpreted in a way that typically differs from personal aesthetic considerations (for example, adoption of a style closely associated with a competitor may foster a negative signal rather than a neutral or positive one) [10].

Digital Platforms and Rapid Diffusion

Fashion's communicative functions have been amplified by social media [10]. Posts that pair textual messages with images of protest attire circulate rapidly via memes or motivational quotes, embedding images in frames that convey affirmation or support [11]. Algorithmic amplification or validation patterns increase visibility, while additive hashtags extend audiences beyond select circles. The temporality of such sharing shapes political engagement, with rising and waning moments of activism. Sharing visual material remains important; bodies are subject to surveillance and censorship while physical participation may be impossible [1].

Aesthetics of Protest

Visual regimes afford avenues to articulate the political valence of social protest. The Los Angeles Rebellion of 1992 showcased a surprising resilience to destruction, yet the physical transformations were stark [1]. A

conspiracy of silence accompanied the outbreak an exhibition of rage against racial and economic injustice erupting into violence prompted little worded sustenance. Instead, a visual medium became the vehicle of choice [2]. Social movements, then as now, appropriated the symbolic, framed against backdrop canvases of colour, text, and texture, yet strategically comparable across comparative dislocation as configuration and material dress, hair, skin remain the most powerful form-sign of the social [3]. How protest manifests obligates transdoubling across redoubts, and the myriad of configurations across gestures, recast in neighbourhood and county, blends to an address not yet found and a modality not yet worked out [4]. Remnants the scattered remains of their once corporeal existence, cry out for acknowledgement. Shoulder to shoulder, disparate utterances of trauma interleave [5]. Conventionally associated with religious rite colourful garments adorned by congregants within liberating jazz-infused congregations encircle the silhouettes of spiritual exaltation 10. But the events straddling Saint-Catherine, continued, fall outside the Protestant tradition. The sheer exuberance of attire gives testimony to deep emotion and transcends mere spectacle [5]. Theatre invokes a pivotal register. The sartorial is inundated with ritual; performative trace tests the limits of worded communication [5]. Garments, set within the theatrical frame constitute a language of their own pursued at the level of surface and topology; embodiment and text interplay to exploit the limits of both nevertheless. Dress play an explicit role in the Seattle 1999 protests. Heated discussions pitched against the WTO fell short of circular politics or dismantling of structures underwritten by a mission of salvation [6]. The hastily assembled PlayStation 2, circular, yet without uttering the word, signaled the appetite for fair trade and condemned the push toward cash economy as unabashed rolling back of the Weberian rationalization of the economy [6]. Colour silhouette texture material, when enacted and exalted across body-surface and image-in-surface, furthers the deconstructive envelope that couch political questions not only liberation but liberation itself [6].

Color, Silhouette, and Materiality as Symbolic Resources

Symbolic resources shape the aesthetics of protest attire across stages of stylistic innovation and digital dissemination [4]. Color, silhouette, and materiality serve a range of expressive purposes, associating garments with issue-specific meanings, evoking distinct emotional responses in viewers, and facilitating inter- and intragroup identification [2]. Attire embraces palettes from muted to vibrant; combines fitted, layered, and flowing forms; and incorporates textures from smooth to rough [1].

Uniforms, Costumes, and Performative Identity

Debates about contemporary fashion-and-attire speak to the tumult of modern culture, sharply polarised political climates, and a growing urgency around climate change [5]. Far from a frivolous concern, clothing profoundly shapes social positioning in public life, delimiting inclusion and exclusion from significant conversations. Alongside dress, costume, behaviour, performance, and performativity face increasing attention within contemporary scholarship [6]. Uniforms, standardised forms, collective identities, costume, regulation, clash, and theatricality feature strongly in political communication. Formalist, Platonic accounts of clothing reduce dress to mere function, obscuring the communicative impact the interaction of design, body and positioning of items has on discourse. Clothing communicates identity, positioning, and belonging, performance sets clothes in motion, costuming accentuates endeavour and purpose whilst theatricality denotes stylised, often elaborative efforts [7].

Language of Logos, Slogans, and Graphic Design

Fashion operates through an elaborate system of forms, silhouettes, textures, colors, ornaments, that communicate social and political meanings [3]. Within the canon of fashion-articulation, logo, slogan, and graphic design figure as critical resources oriented toward communicating identification and ideation. Consider the social-expressive purposes served by black colors. Framing the uniform-concept as a reference point clarifies the character of the protest-issue without demanding the public commitment of a specific demand [4]. More generally, the textual modulation of fashion contributes decisively to the specification of identification and the ongoing effort generalizing socio-analytic, techno-social, situational, community-agenda, and global perspectives [4]. Fashion simultaneously signals individual engagement in a collective ethos; addresses one's location on the community-planetary calling continuum; and identifies, with accompaniment, the appropriate fitted-modification to personalize-community-resonance. Strong abstraction marks social media, fashion-concepts, tags, and texts arrive through this route, exploiting typographic variations, alignment, and additional content to tailor destination and inquire changes at social-order levels [5]. The slogan-trio stand; silence is violence, sisterhood is powerful, solidarity is more than a hashtag; fitted onto a figure evoking both dreadlock and Amélie Poulain. Individualization of community-wide specifications typifies second-generation responses to epidemic-frame and fashion-appropriation addresses [5]. Smearred mascara enacts a makeshift mask addressing intimate fractioning, individual injury, and microscopic violation. Wellspring keying locks down and mutates yet further, whole-group-animate de-animated to signify disablement or abduction. Both work audience-routing leans community-polarization whereas the simultaneous stills wider framing. Fashion linguistic-patterning ordinarily combines name, status, marker, and action; modulation on, in this case, affixes intimate-exact particulars [6].

Identity Signaling and Audience Effects

Fashion expresses personal identities and collective belonging, but the communicative significance of attire diverges at protest events. Collective identities and social movements occupy a prominent role in public discourse, and attire can both amplify personal identity signals and convey group narratives [7]. Attire constitutes a central mechanism for signaling intentions when clothing choices are read as group memberships and thereby incur normative expectations [8]. Protest fashion invokes multiple protests, yet shared characteristics linked by aesthetic similarity foster the perception of a global movement [8]. Interest in protest fashion, amplified by numerous high-profile protests and the pandemic, has surged across social media and scholarly platforms, prompting timely investigation. Individual attire must thus align with broader norms to contribute effectively to protests [9]. Certain groups constitute both fresh and historic catalysts for fashion-focused protest movements, while styling distinct from dominant aesthetics fosters exchanges across disparate topics, activist agendas, and national precursors [10, 11]. Protest movements globally operate within socio-political frameworks that vary markedly from one context to another, which in turn shapes the attire chosen by demonstrators. Nevertheless, parallels in movement origins permit the discernment of both convergences and divergences among protest styles worldwide [12]. Global protests of a diverse array of socio-political propel the examination of the global interrelationship of fashion within protest movements [13]. Celebrity and influencer engagement with protest fashion, coupled with a cultural environment saturated by their presence, enhances the amplification of associated aesthetics, a phenomenon acutely visible in the numerous recent protests that have erupted globally. Simultaneously, the extent of transnational solidarity, construed in both conceptual and formal terms, remains a salient theme within the nation-state framework increasingly interrogated by scholars [2].

Personal and Collective Identities in Protest Fashion

Fashion attire shapes personal identity narratives and collective group stories in protest contexts, providing compelling distinctions between “who I am” and “who we are” based on signaled group affiliations, according to a visual-content analysis of protest occasions in various global contexts [11]. In individualistic cultures, attire influences personal signals reflecting an activist’s biography and motivations for joining a movement [11]. For example, one might consume black garments to identify with Black Lives Matter because of an enduring history of racial oppression, while simultaneously exhibiting other attire communicating participation in climate or gender-focused activism [12]. Each ensemble represents different membership categories and encapsulates diverse issues concurrently addressed. Protest apparel thus accommodates personal and collective identity signalling simultaneously, and interpreters examine group affiliations via individual attire selections [5]. By contrast, collectivistic cultures emphasize coordinated group communication and attire endorsing collective narratives over biographical attributes, reflecting preferences for harmonious collective belonging [12].

Readability, Affect, and Moral Alignment

Protest-related attire serves multiple purposes, including a visible signal of support, collective identity reinforcement, and individual narrative articulation. Protest fits often evoke personal, collective, or both identity cues [12]. The connection between protest fashion and identity reinforcement at both levels has drawn increasing interest [12], yet the interplay between individual and collective identity work remains underexplored. Attire choices convey identity signals linked to political beliefs and stances [13] and evoke moral alignment through their aesthetic qualities [14]. A signal’s readability affects means of meaning construction and degree of interpretive uncertainty. Aesthetic features shape emotional resonance, influencing perceived legitimacy by engaging with affective rather than rational cognition [13]. Policing and censorship may prompt actors to adopt legalistic framing in attire; the framing can facilitate media dissemination and shape civic space negotiation [14].

Reception by Media, Publics, and Policymakers

Public discourse surrounding protests increasingly engages with the relationship between protest attire and protest contexts. Protest fashions confer political meaning and reflect on collective identity, mediating internal group connections and external encounters [1]. Fashion symbols alone cannot predict movements’ broad reception; signification emerges through interplay between varied audiences and organizations [2]. Fashions circulated through social media connections receive particular emphasis, demanding an examination of audience characteristics individual, collective, institutional and the alignment sought between them. Protest oversight and support prompt attention to governmental interpretation alongside manipulation of public opinion and policy discourse [3]. Civil rights campaigns in the United States, labor organization efforts, countercultural movements, and contemporary advocacy for climate and social justice underscore fashion proliferation through social media channels [4]. Fashion ingredients, their colors, silhouettes, materials, and other aspects represent historical evolution, constituency shifts, and interpretive dynamics across diverse broadcast platforms and feedback loops. Global engagement with these elements underlies protest movements and reveals distinct typologies of diffusion. Multiplicity of cues as a group differentiator similarly concerns political figures, when agnostic audiences characterize one or more recipients [5]. Analytical foci include the clarifying capacity of a fashion choice on

stakeholder understanding and alignment with denomination ethos; communication conveys much regarding protest definition and gravitas [13, 4, 1].

Case Studies

Fashion translates urgent political messages and signals collective identity during protests through specific aesthetics [6]. To explore its role as political communication, the historical trajectories of three representative protest movements illustrate connections between protest aesthetics and widely-studied aspects of identity signaling [7]. The environmental movement features a retro-futuristic aesthetic that conveys intergenerational responsibility. Black Lives Matter employs monochrome palettes and pervasive logos to encode collective grief, while pro-choice advocacy draws on DIY craft values to affirm bodily autonomy [8]. As protests spread globally, certain aesthetic elements converge across national borders, highlighting common political concerns. Within activist networks, celebrity participation amplifies visual messages but raises authenticity questions, whereas the emergence of corporate counter-signaling threatens the integrity of activist visual communication [9].

Many movements disseminate fashion repertoires across numerous protests. Regardless of the movement's specific demands, attire collectively signaled political urgency [10]. These diverse yet recognizable repertoires extend to feminist activism, the anti-globalization movement, and the anti-Trump Resistance, among others. Well-known visual content, ranging from striking signs to elaborate costumes, complements pre-existing activist aesthetics [11].

Global Protest Movements and Fashion Repertoires

Global protest movements since 2011 evidence a remarkable diffusion of protest aesthetics across national and cultural contexts. Countries as diverse as Canada, Egypt, France, and South Africa display the same or similar visual elements on placards, clothing, and accessories during mass mobilization campaigns, yet these features often retain distinct meanings rooted in local histories, circumstances, and grievances [12]. The Arabic #Cairo fashion hashtag depicts the same items in simultaneous reference to the 2011 uprisings and to 2020 protest movements that challenge authoritarianism and advocate for broader freedoms [13]. Concurrently, protest attire draws on diverse sources and styles. Multiple social movements operating within a given country and timelines of action add complexity [14]. The regime of former president Jacob Zuma catalyzed a variety of interventions, while the subsequent coalition expanded the lexicon of protest. Prior to nationwide unrest in July 2021, movement-affiliated hashtags highlighted the search for dignity for Black South Africans, underscoring the tension between such aspirations and the actions of figures like Zuma and his successor, Cyril Ramaphosa [14].

Celebrity and Influencer Influence on Protest Aesthetics

In a media ecosystem where self-representation dominates, designers feel pressure to dress celebrities and influencers actively engaged in political or social issues, galvanizing reflection on the motivations behind these celebrity-driven aesthetic shifts [13]. Emerging from this context are hybrid forms of protest fashion that strategically blend and juxtapose aesthetic registers associated with commercial branding, political engagement, and/or personal self-definition [14]. Today, designers tasked with dressing the politically engaged elite find themselves at a creative impasse: they must grapple with sustained demand for a commercial, luxury aesthetic while navigating the aesthetic demands of a protest discourse often hostile to mass consumption [15].

Methodological Considerations

Fashion is a communicative medium that conveys information about social identities, political positions, and group membership. In contemporary youth culture, clothing communicates the social status and taste of individuals and subgroups [2], while Meyer studies the interrelations between dress, social movement formation, and identity [11]. Contemporary political discourse is saturated with visual material [12]. Increasingly, such materials circulate on digital platforms where rhetorical questions, memes, and snapshots are ubiquitous. When protest movements emerge, the visual dimension becomes especially salient [12]. Visual representations become the primary referents of public attention, media coverage, and political influence; even verbal materials often circulate within visual formats [12].

Data Sources and Analytical Approaches

Fashion-related data originate from diverse sources, depending on the focus of each case study. Archival methods, including the collection of visual documentation and printed materials, inform analyses of timing, materials, and dissemination [13]. Ethnographic approaches, encompassing observations, interviews, and social media monitoring, identify social contexts, usage patterns, and communicative aims [13]. Visual content analyses manual and computational, examine color, form, imagery, and their rhetorical implications across various platforms. Triangulation of these techniques cultivates a nuanced understanding of protest aesthetics, reaching beyond surface, aesthetic, or individual analyses toward the relational dynamic through which attire acquires meaning within struggles for social change [10, 13, 1].

Ethical Considerations in Studying Protest Attire

Effectively researching signifiers of protest attire entails ethical considerations of consent, representation, and sensitivity to the movements involved [2]. Certain movements rely on anonymity to protect activists from reprisals, complicating the question of how or whether to showcase outfits by any individual wearer [6]. When documenting a movement, careful attention to its political context is essential in order to avoid inadvertently undermining it. Assuming a focus on an activist movement, it is crucial to signal support without misrepresenting the researcher's own relationship to the issue or resulting agenda. An activist movement, even one that dramatically shifts public opinion in the intended direction, may not succeed politically within the preferred time-frame, or even at all [6].

Implications for Theory and Practice

Framing observations concerning fashion's significance in political communication, an increasing number of scholars have moved beyond its Eurocentric roots and examined its wider role in contemporary protests and civic engagement [7]. While certain subfields remain little explored and several gaps persist within an evolving coverage, broad patterns nevertheless emerge that underscore fashion's unique capacity to convey public sentiments linking the personal, the collective, the in-group, and the world beyond [7]. As political communication and the visual turn gain renewed focus across the social sciences, understanding the coverage of clothing in widely publicized protests can enrich conceptual debates within theoretical frameworks detailed earlier [8]. Political communication theory encompasses the strategic, mediated nature of fashion as a signalling system and documents distinct variations marking protests: diffuse, top-down, and hybrid. Attention to visual rhetoric highlights how aesthetics shape the pages and contexts in which those clothes are worn and thus influence their political reception within and beyond the movements themselves. Broadly defined, the protest continuum ranges from environmentally specific components sought in diverse global contexts to more universal elements adopted through practices of cultural appropriation [9].

Implications for Political Communication Theory

Fashion is a communicative practice that influences political awareness, impact, and participation. As an audience-centered medium, its messages depend on coded and decoded meaning and its connection with individual identities [2]. Protest fashion is therefore situated at the intersection of visual rhetoric, signaling theory, and collective and personal identity construction [9]. Protest fashion reflects global movements while adapting to local contexts. Considerable differentiation across countries has been observed, yet notable convergences exist, particularly in styles favoring baggy silhouettes paired with bright hues and bold textures. Such attire conveys messages of resistance and advocates for dignified living via collective sustenance and protection [10].

Implications for Activist Practice and Policy Discourse

While the analysis foregrounds protest aesthetic communication and broadly addresses identity signaling, two conduits have primary bearing on social-movement policy [11, 12]. Protest aesthetics convey signals of public-community membership that articulate collective action claims [13]. Furthermore, signify shared grievances and advocate for policy-changes to wider audiences, including media, policymakers, and the general public. Protest remnants circulate in various formats products; promoting responsive action remains the vestige call [14]. Activists, apparel designers, and policymakers can support fashion-based protest strategy through specific recommendations concerning protest wear. Signal a preference for collective communities by material-graphics and performative constellations [15]. Thematic choices should emphasize urgent, widely recognizable concerns. Pursue signalling nevertheless that retains legible self-determination. Text incorporate layered-diminishing, adaptable content postpone dissemination reception. Select attire and graphical elements regarding purpose; similar iconography governing creation expectation quarterly longevity and retention long-form, policy-altering articulation [15].

CONCLUSION

Fashion plays a central and increasingly influential role in political communication, particularly within the context of protest movements. As a visual and symbolic medium, it enables individuals and groups to articulate political positions, construct identities, and foster solidarity in ways that transcend linguistic and cultural barriers. From historical civil rights struggles to contemporary digitally mediated activism, protest fashion has consistently functioned as a tool for both resistance and representation. The analysis demonstrates that protest aesthetics, through color, form, materiality, and graphic elements serve as powerful mechanisms for encoding political messages and shaping public perception. At the same time, fashion mediates the dynamic interplay between personal expression and collective identity, allowing participants to navigate the tension between individuality and group belonging. The communicative effectiveness of protest attire, however, depends on its readability, emotional resonance, and alignment with broader socio-political contexts. In the streaming and social media age, the rapid circulation of images has amplified the reach and impact of protest fashion, transforming it into a global language of activism. Yet this visibility also introduces new challenges, including the risk of commodification, misinterpretation, and co-optation by commercial or political actors. These tensions highlight the need for critical

engagement with the ethical, cultural, and political implications of fashion as a communicative practice. Ultimately, recognizing fashion as a legitimate and impactful form of political communication expands the analytical scope of political discourse. It underscores the importance of visual and material culture in shaping political realities and calls for continued interdisciplinary research. For activists, designers, and policymakers alike, a nuanced understanding of protest fashion can enhance strategies for advocacy, strengthen collective action, and contribute to more inclusive and resonant forms of political expression.

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