



Fashion as a form of Political Expression

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ABSTRACT

Fashion has long been a powerful medium for political expression, serving as a visual and symbolic means of communicating ideologies, affiliations, and resistance. This paper examines the intersection of fashion and politics, highlighting how clothing has been used as a tool for activism, solidarity, and dissent. Through historical analysis and contemporary case studies, the research examines how various subcultures—such as punks, nuns, and skinheads—have used dress to make political statements. Additionally, the study delves into the semiotics of political fashion, illustrating how colors, symbols, and styles convey complex messages. The paper also considers the impact of digital media in amplifying political fashion trends, shaping public discourse, and influencing consumer behavior. Finally, the discussion extends to the future of political fashion, emphasizing its evolving role in activism, identity politics, and social movements. As fashion continues to reflect and challenge political ideologies, it remains an essential aspect of cultural discourse and societal transformation.

Keywords: Political fashion, Fashion activism, Symbolism in dress, Subcultures and politics, Semiotics of fashion, Social movements, Digital media and fashion.

INTRODUCTION

This paper investigates the role of fashion as a political expression. Because fashion and personal image are something that is presented to the world daily, clothing becomes a quick and effective way of registering in the minds of others the political ideas and ideologies of the person donning said clothing. For some, clothing can be a large way of symbolizing resistance. For others, attire can be a way of declaring solidarity with a specific ideology or political party. In this paper, the review examines the overarching theme of fashion as a form of political expression and aims to further explore how particular subcultures and minorities use clothing and image to express affinity with or distance themselves from certain ideologies. By taking a deeper look at punks, nuns, and skinheads in contemporary culture, the research argues that fashion has become a site of radical political expression. The tensions that arise when one touches a more politicized mode of dress, such as worn by nuns or punks, are discussed in the vignettes below. These vignettes underscore that clothing has become an inevitable component of political expression. However, fashion in itself is inherently a double-edged sword, as any look will be subject to both intentional and unintentional readings and appropriations, which may involve harmful, violent, or dangerous consequences. At their core, clothing represents an external image of being, a mural of the self fashioned by individual materials extrinsic to the physical body or personality inside that body [1, 2, 3]. Before addressing clothing's broader implications, it's necessary to recognize fashion's development and its place as a political tool in contemporary culture. Clothing is nothing new. The species has entirely fathomed some form of dress for over seventy-thousand years. For the last hundred years, fashion has been an established, dynamic industry governed by seasons and the fashion week runway cycle. As the 21st century develops, and as the forms of dress available increase and multiply, fashion has entered an unprecedented position of ubiquity and saturation in its influence over the individual. Everyone wears clothes, and what those clothes look like can convey an entire politics. In fashion's extended role as a political implement, all clothing comes under additional scrutiny—to the

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innumerable possible understandings of a style, form, or look. In the contemporary moment, wherein political tensions are ever-emerging and reactionary ideologies have resurged, the reading of a political image of someone can have dire consequences [4, 5, 6].

Historical Perspectives on Fashion and Politics

Fashion and style have always been integral to political expression. Whether through legislation like sumptuary laws that restrict the wearing of certain clothing or textiles to particular groups, cultural standards that tend to align with the status quo, or revolutionary movements that challenge the dominating political powers, style subtly and overtly underscores and enacts power dynamics in society. Innumerable historical examples underscore this point, from figures like Napoleon to Huey P. Newton; fashion, style, and uniforms have always operated in intimate conjunction with politics [7, 8, 9]. From the attritors of Robespierre and their “in resemblance” clothing that served to unify the rebellion, and turn the tides to the revolution’s favor, to the resound of the Drapeau Tricolore, red-white and blue that brought hope and associated loyalty to the French regime. From monarchs to individual resistance fighters, examples are endless of dress as a tool for the reinforcement of political ability, and as a target of the same. Instances of both governmental repression that seek to undermine and disempower movements; notice the repression of black styles in the 1960s and 1970s and continued subaltern weariness and violence towards expressions of Queer identity in public space [10, 11, 12]. Fashion also serves more peaceful ends in collective and unified political expression. Civil rights protesters had embraced the uniform suit as a means of respecting, and thereby demanding, respectability from a society conditioned to accept it. It is this association that capitalizes on shifting social attitudes towards appearance of the time, the lying of sartorial symbolic meaning to vastly congealing material results of political and social power [13, 14, 15]. Although nowhere near comprehensive, this brief list of historical milestones is critical for understanding the breadth of style in the expression of political sentiment and selfhood, as such expressions and aesthetic movements have transcended the Western world. From the fascinating contradictions between Western notions of authority (uniformity, sleekness) and Chinese garments’ connotations with scholarly learning or bureaucratic dispossession, imperialism has always exerted an immense impact on the cultural exchange of expressive materials [16, 17, 18].

Symbolism and Semiotics in Political Fashion

Politics and fashion have long been engaged in a mutually influential relationship, yet the visual aspects of this interaction have yet to be established in scholarly discourse. However, a comprehensive visual exploration of political fashion implicates the need to understand the language and medium of fashion, the messages it conveys, and the way the public decodes those messages. This article examines the language of fashion; how articles of clothing, colors, and accessories can symbolize something far beyond their aesthetic purposes. This leads to an analysis of semiotic theories and how they relate to fashion, unveiling an array of ideological as well as identitarian communicative possibilities of fashion. Fashion becomes a system of symbols that communicates ideologies, values, and collective identities. From the pattern of Melania Trump’s pussy bow blouses, to the pink hats worn by Women’s March participants, to the Mandarin collar dress worn by Ivanka Trump to meet the Chinese president, fashion in politics communicates a specific set of messages about values, solidarity, and resistance. How couturiers can speak up, express their viewpoint, formulate the world via the clothing: From Alexander McQueen to Raf Simons, designer fashion has always been politically articulated. The unexpected obnoxious slogan, the unconscious choice of color, the accurate selection of accessories: Everyone in fashion has always had a love-hate relationship with politics besides being in constant conversation with it. The language of fashion in politics is an interplay of symbols, far more intricate than one may think. The clothing that we daily wear as well as the accessory we adorn are loaded with connotations, wording something that goes far beyond mere aesthetics. They are intimately connected with the plethora of social determinants to be found in the era in which we live in. They feed off, react to and bolster the system they are part of. As much as they want to, they do not belong to the personal sphere. So, how come they manage to speak about their public persona, unveil their ideology, define their existent affiliation? Here comes the importance of semiotic analysis in decoding the social and political discourse encapsulated in the superficial appearance of fashion items. The current culture of political fashion has been dramatically enhanced by the advent of digital broadcasting, social media and the Internet having fostered this visual rhetoric. In a society where we are constantly connected to artificial devices which make of culture a vulgar product, political fashion can be disclosed as a subtle mean of mass indoctrination. At the same time, social media is hailed as a micro-utopia, promising a life in which citizens are equally active, share their ideas, feelings and visions and equally participate in their polity. This is minute politics, an edifying

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account of a carefully and purposefully constructed democratic façade, which reads the social-political realm like it is universally understood. People favour their own personal media news outlets, and become progressively isolated from anything that might challenge their beliefs. On one hand, in this culture of post-truth, fake-news and alternative facts, digitally uninformed opinions eventually preclude concerted actions against the attempted erosion of democratic rights. Political fashion effectively illustrates this discourse, showing that its ability to shape and mould societal anxiety, fear or unrest is firmly established. On the other hand, this analysis argues that to understand the inherent potency of political fashion in the digital age, this culture in which digitally conveyed images have changed political communication and public opinion formation, there is a compelling need to appreciate its transformation from a simple fashion item to a sophisticated form of visual rhetoric. It would be foolish not to present some reliable cases that would prove the tenacity of fashion as skillful instrument of visual rhetoric, the outfits that proved political war can be fought in a war room with a silk scarf [19, 20, 21].

Fashion Activism and Social Movements

Numerous social movements past and present have demonstrated how fashion can be a form of political expression and a powerful tool to make change. Clothing can elicit certain norms, but it can also challenge them, leading to changes in beliefs and behaviors. Those who stand out for intentional dressing can be deemed likely to harbor certain beliefs and, as research shows, can strongly influence what others think. Thus, social movements are often characterized by aspects of contentious clothing worn as a form of protest. The unstaged, embodied nature of these protests can act as stronger evidence of commitment to a cause than written texts and broadcasts [22, 23, 24]. Fashionably speaking, dressing in a way that identifies one as an “advocate” is a powerful method of raising awareness, and the production and sale of products promoting a cause has long played a large role in raising funds. In a consumer-driven society, one significant way to wholeheartedly back a cause is to wear it. Successes like the fight against AIDS in the early 1980s, the feminist slogan tees in the '90s, or the safety pin initiative in the wake of the 2016 U.S. elections all stemmed from a group of like-minded individuals intentionally adopting a collective form of dressing. These instances are all evidence of fashion’s power to foster identity and, hence, solidarity. Recent events have shown the continued potential for fashion activism to foster dialogue around critical issues. Given collective dressing’s significant role in fashion tribe identity, political consciousness, and activism, agitation often emanates from such grassroots movements opposed to the mainstream. Mobilizing marginalized identities often involves unique or anti-fashion systems of dress, such as subcultural and artisanal modes. In turn, mainstream fashion has helped such political movements reach broader audiences [25, 26, 27].

The Future of Fashion as Political Expression

Over the past decade, fashion has emerged as an increasingly visible vehicle for political expression and critique. Garments, accessories, and styles have a unique capacity to signal messages, and in recent years, they have been harnessed to signify steadfast resistance or irreverent protest. Runway shows and fashion presentations have increasingly taken on political themes and messages, turning models into activists clad in clothing and accessories that comment on urgent political issues of the moment. As a site of both creative production and consumption, fashion offers a unique lens for viewing political trends. The fashion ecosystem includes everyone from luxury conglomerates to fast-fashion giants to designers who sew garments in their living rooms. With the democratization of style and the popularity of streetwear, both among luxury brands and consumers, there is an increased awareness of fashion’s political dimensions. Hypebeasts, fashionistas, and casual wearers select clothing and accessories that represent aesthetic but also political views, affiliations, critiques, and prejudices. The rise of conscious consumerism is evident across industries, including a rise in the number of customers shopping at thrift stores, choosing sustainable alternatives, and avoiding brands with unethical practices. Genderqueer and nonbinary models now walk runways, hijabs have graced the covers of magazines, and the popularity of “Black Cool” is evident in streetwear trends flattering black celebrities. There is no question that fashion plays a role in shaping trends and discourses. Recent months saw viral articles espousing the power, intelligence, and elegance of various figures. Right-wing media continues to demonize residents of certain areas for significant political contributions, such as wearing sneakers. Whether viewed as art or commerce, fashion has the power to shape and reflect moments in time. And as we stumble through the early months of a new administration, it would be an error to dismiss the role fashion is, and will, undoubtedly come to play. Just as movies impacted cultural perceptions during the nuclear age, film is likely to dictate how this era is viewed for years to come. It should be considered how fashion, too, with all its complexity, fragments, and contradictions, is sure to leave its mark on history [28, 29, 30].

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CONCLUSION

Fashion is far more than a mere aesthetic or commercial industry; it is a dynamic and potent form of political expression. From historical revolutions to contemporary social movements, clothing has been used to symbolize resistance, foster solidarity, and challenge power structures. The semiotics of fashion reveal that every choice of fabric, color, and style carries ideological weight, whether intentional or unintentional. As digital media continues to expand the reach of political fashion, the ability of garments to communicate messages and influence public perception has only intensified. With the growing emphasis on ethical consumerism, identity politics, and global activism, fashion's political role will continue to evolve. Whether as a form of protest, a tool of propaganda, or a means of empowerment, fashion remains an essential and inescapable element of the political landscape.

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