STYLED FOR DISSENT

FASHION AS EMBODIED RESISTANCE IN CONTEMPORARY PROTESTS

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Abstract

This paper explores fashion's function as a multidimensional form of protest that transcends symbolic expression, positioning clothing as an affective, spatial, and political infrastructure of dissent. Grounded in theories of affect, performativity, and consumer culture, it examines how garments act as embodied agents that generate emotion, mediate presence, and navigate power. Through three case studies, Pussy Riot's neon pink balaclavas, the "Protect the Dolls" T-shirt campaign, and the Pikachu protester in Türkiye, the paper suggests that protest fashion creates emotional collectivity, reshapes public space, and negotiates visibility within global media. It ultimately proposes a context-sensitive understanding of protest fashion as both a powerful and fragile form of aesthetic resistance, shaped by tensions between activism, consumerism, and commodification.

Keywords: *Protest Fashion; Emotional Collectivity; Aesthetic Resistance; Commodification; Symbolic Dissent.*

INTRODUCTION

Fashion has long served as more than a tool of self-expression; in protest contexts, it becomes a powerful form of embodied dissent. Whether through rebellious balaclavas, slogan T-shirts, or humorous costumes, clothing becomes a material form of resistance; this paper argues that protest fashion operates beyond symbolic communication. These garments do not just represent resistance; they perform it.

To fully explore the multidimensional nature of protest fashion[1], this study analyses three distinct case studies: Pussy Riot's neon balaclavas, the "Protect the Dolls" T-shirt, and the Turkish Pikachu costumed protester. By examining these diverse cases, rooted in different geographies, media dynamics, and political contexts, the paper aims to offer a comprehensive understanding of how protest fashion functions across affective, spatial, and ideological terrains. Through this triangulated approach, the paper builds towards a nuanced conclusion about the power and contradictions

1 Protest fashion uses clothing and accessories as a visual and symbolic means of communicating ideologies, affiliations, and resistance. Specific colors, symbols, slogans, and styles are employed to express political, social, and environmental beliefs, conveying messages of dissent, solidarity, or a call for change (Amani, 2025)

of aesthetic resistance in contemporary protest cultures.

METHODOLOGY

This article adopts a qualitative, comparative case study approach to investigate how fashion operates as a multidimensional form of protest. Drawing on foundational works in visual culture studies (Darts, 2004; Hebdige, 1979), affect theory (Ahmed, 2014), consumer culture theory (Arnould & Thompson, 2005) and performativity (Taylor, 2003; Butler, 2015), the analysis combines visual analysis, discourse analysis, and contextual interpretation to explore the affective, material, and political functions of clothing within protest contexts.

The three cases: Pussy Riot's neon balaclavas, "Protect the Dolls" T-shirt, and the Pikachu protester in Türkiye, were purposefully selected for their diversity in geography, media circulation, and political scope. Each represents a distinct mode of sartorial resistance: collective anonymity and feminist performance, slogan activism within celebrity culture, and humorous spectacle within protests. Together, they allow comparative insight into how protest fashion functions across local, mediated, and global contexts, highlighting both convergence and contrast in affective strategies and risks of commodification.

The research process involved collecting and analyzing a range of primary and secondary materials, including photographic documentation, media reports, social media content, and published interviews. Visual analysis focused on aesthetic strategies, performative practices, and spatial interventions, while discourse analysis examined the narratives, symbolic meanings, and language attributed to these sartorial acts by activists, media, and audiences.

To ensure methodological rigor, thematic coding was applied to identify recurring patterns across cases and enable systematic comparison of affective impact, materiality, and visibility. The framework also considers audience reception and cultural interpretation, acknowledging that the meaning and perceived authenticity of protest fashion are context-dependent. By examining how symbols are mediated, circulated, and potentially commodified, the study captures the tensions between empowerment, visibility, and co-option in both local and global contexts.

The methodology recognizes its limitations, including reliance on mediated sources rather than direct ethnography and the interpretive nature of visual and textual analysis. Nonetheless, by foregrounding different operational logics rather than imposing a universal model, this approach offers a critical, context-sensitive understanding of protest fashion as both an infrastructure of dissent and a site of ongoing negotiation between activism, consumerism, and commodification.

FASHIONING DISSENT: THEORISING THE MATERIAL POLITICS OF CLOTHING

To understand the political function of clothing in protest, it is essential to move beyond a semiotic framework and explore how fashion operates materially, spatially, and emotionally. According to Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), consumption is a social and cultural practice of actively creating meaning. CCT suggests that consumers use commercial products to build their identities and lifestyles (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Protest contexts amplify this dynamic, as clothing transforms from commercial objects into political agents.

Protest fashion has long drawn on earlier repertoires of dissent. The suffragettes used white and violet dresses to signal purity and unity, while the Black Panther Party's uniform of leather jackets and berets projected militant solidarity. During the AIDS crisis, ACT UP's "Silence = Death" shirts turned the body into a billboard (Crimp & Rolston, 1990; Gould, 2009). Feminist art-activists such as the Guerrilla Girls[2] adopted gorilla masks in the 1980s to anonymize themselves and focus attention on their critique of patriarchal institutions (Simmons, 2013). These precedents demonstrate how clothing has historically operated as a medium that fuses collectivity, visibility, and critique. They form what Diana Taylor (2003) terms the repertoire: embodied acts that preserve and transmit social and cultural memory. Butler (2015) argues that public assemblies are a "performative" exercise of the "right to appear", where the presence of bodies constitutes a political claim, separate from spoken words.

Drawing on affect theory, one can understand garments in protest settings as agents that generate

2 The Guerrilla Girls are anonymous artist activists who empturnloy provocative headlines, striking visuals, and compelling statistics to shed light on gender and ethnic bias, corruptions, and discrimination within the art, film, political, and popular culture spheres (https://www.guerrillagirls.com/, n.d.).

emotional collectivity (Kuryel & Fırat, 2015; Aydınoğlu, 2025) through embodied experience. This aligns with Sara Ahmed's (2014) argument that emotions are not private but a social phenomenon that produces collectives. Protest fashion produces sensations and cultivates atmospheres of urgency, solidarity, and provocation (Yuksel, 2025). Through CCT, we can see how consumer agency reveals the affective power of these garments, as the practices of wearing and sharing turn them into carriers of collective political emotion (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). These emotional charges circulate through fabric, movement, and contact, allowing protest fashion to function as what Bruce (2014) calls an "affect generator".

CASE STUDIES

TEXTILES AS EMBODIED PROTEST: PUSSY RIOT'S BALACLAVA

Pussy Riot's[3] 2012 performance in Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Savior was a pivotal moment in protest art and visual resistance. This unauthorized act transformed a sacred space into a platform for radical dissent and drew global attention. Central to its impact was the group's brightly colored balaclavas, which became enduring emblems of feminist rebellion. These garments were not incidental; they were deliberately crafted tools of subversion, disrupting visual norms, erasing individual identity, and confronting entrenched structures of religious and political authority.

The group established a collective identity prioritizing resistance over individual fame (Chambers, 2020; Bruce, 2014), drawing inspiration from feminist predecessors like the Guerrilla Girls (Myzelev, 2021). Pussy Riot used garish color schemes, including shocking pinks, acidic greens, and electric blues, to disrupt the solemn decorum of religious institutions, enacting a form of aesthetic sabotage (The Moscow Times, 2012).

By staging a protest inside an Orthodox cathedral in kaleidoscopic attire and performing a "punk prayer", the group enacted what cultural criminologists describe as the carnivalesque, a subversive inversion of order through satire and spectacle (Presdee, 2000). The legal and societal backlash they faced intensified the protests' symbolic power, with authorities inadvertently affirming its visual effectiveness (Chambers, 2020). The state's reaction, provoking emotions such as fear and disgust, demonstrates Ahmed's (2014) argument that such feelings are used to police social boundaries, marking certain bodies as others to justify their exclusion.

International audiences rapidly seized on the group's aesthetic. The masked, colorfully clad protester became a symbol of anti-authoritarian defiance, catapulting Pussy Riot to global activist iconography (Myzelev, 2021). However, this visibility is shaped by existing privileges: international media attention, Western interest, and the symbolic resonance of Pussy Riot's protest amplify their recognition in ways that may not extend equally to less visible or marginalized activists, highlighting how protest fashion can produce both empowerment and selective recognition.

The group's visual identity democratized activism. The balaclavas served as an open-source template for global protest, adaptable across diverse contexts, from reproduction rights in South America to anti-police brutality demonstrations in North America (Bruce, 2014).

Furthermore, Pussy Riot's conscious engagement with visual politics expanded the grammar of feminist resistance. Their attire was not just a costume, but a visual theory of protest rooted in play, disruption, and visibility. A Pussy Riot member referred to their approach as a "feminine punk game", a notion that collapses binaries between seriousness and playfulness, the artistic and the political, individuality and collectivity (Seal, 2013). This framing challenged traditional expectations that protest must be grave, solemn, and masculine in tone. Pussy Riot's performance wielded color, anonymity, and performativity to assert a bold, unruly femininity that refused containment (Chambers, 2020).

This emphasis on collective anonymity subverted patriarchal norms equating visibility with power. By covering their faces, Pussy Riot not only protected themselves from state surveillance but also resisted the commodification of protest through celebrity (Chambers, 2020). The balaclavas thus became more than a disguise; it evolved into a wearable manifesto (Bruce, 2014).

Even in the courtroom, their attire retained political weight. Prosecutors fixated on their appearance as civic and moral deviance, exposing anxieties around non-conformist femininity. By rejecting sartorial norms of respectability, Pussy

3 Pussy Riot, a Russian Feminist band based in Moscow, is known for their provocative punk rock music and performance art. Their subjects of concern include LGBTQ rights, feminism, and opposition to Russian President Vladimir Putin (https://pussyriot.love, n.d.).

Riot challenged not only the legal framework but also broader regimes of gendered discipline and national respectability (Myzelev, 2021). Pussy Riot's use of the balaclavas follows a longer history of feminist masking, most notably the Guerrilla Girls' gorilla masks in the 1980s, which combined anonymity with critique of patriarchal institutions. As Simmons (2013) notes, "the Guerrilla Girls adopted gorilla masks to conceal their identities, ensuring that attention was focused on the critique rather than the critic" (p. 52). This exemplifies what Taylor (2003) calls the repertoire's power to transmit history through embodied, non-archival means. Each performance, from the Guerrilla Girls' masks to Pussy Riot's balaclavas, is an "act of transfer" that sustains feminist resistance as living, confrontational practice.

SLOGANS AS WEARABLE PROTEST LANGUAGE: 'PROTECT THE DOLLS' T-SHIRT

In early 2025, a white T-shirt with the phrase "Protect the Dolls" became a viral cultural phenomenon. Created by London-based designer Conner Ives, the shirt aimed to demonstrate solidarity with trans women. "Dolls", a term rooted in queer and trans vernacular, symbolized affection and community for the wearer (Denny, 2025). Initially intended as a fashion item, the shirt gained international recognition when actor Pedro Pascal wore it on the red carpet, catapulting the phrase into public and political discourse (Chang, 2025). Unlike Pussy Riot's balaclavas, where anonymity was key, the shirt's virality was largely attributed to celebrity endorsements. Pedro Pascal's public appearance in the shirt was interpreted as both a personal and political gesture, given his open support for his transgender sister, Lux Pascal (Gupta, 2025). Celebrities like Troye Sivan and Charli XCX followed suit, further amplifying the shirt's message across the music and fashion industries (Manzella et al, 2025).

The T-shirt as a vehicle of dissent has deep roots in protest culture, from anti-war slogans of the 1960s to ACT UP's "Silence = Death" shirts during the AIDS crisis, which transformed clothing into a mobile billboard of resistance (Crimp & Rolston, 1990). As Gould (2009) observes, ACT UP's shirts functioned as 'wearable calls to action' (p. 175), collapsing the boundary between private body and public protest. Similar to Pussy Riot's case and its "act of transfer" within feminist resistance, each sloganed T-shirt is an "act of transfer" that draws on this inherited repertoire of dissent, carrying its historical power while applying it to contemporary struggles (Taylor, 2003). What distinguishes "Protect the Dolls" is its circulation within celebrity and consumer culture, where high-profile figures transformed a grassroots slogan into a global fashion trend, blending activism with viral marketing (Chang, 2025; Gupta, 2025). These celebrity endorsements sparked a surge in purchases, raising over $70,000 for trans advocacy organizations (Sim, 2025).

From a sociological perspective, the "Protect the Dolls" shirt exemplifies symbolic interactionism, how individuals use symbols, such as clothing, to communicate their identity and values (Blumer, 1969). The term "dolls", once confined to trans subcultures, entered mainstream discourse, highlighting the diffusion of subcultural codes into mass culture (Hebdige, 1979). The T-shirt serves as aesthetic resistance, protesting through visual and cultural expression (Darts, 2004). It emerged during a period of unprecedented anti-trans legislation in the U.S and Europe, with over 500 bills targeting LGBTQ+ rights in 2023–2024 (ACLU, 2024). Against this backdrop, the shirt becomes a public response to pain; a collective "interpretation that this pain is wrong ... and something must be done about it" (Ahmed, 2014, p. 174). It functions as soft power, using cultural influence to counter legal and ideological attacks (Nye, 2004).

Celebrities who wear the shirt function as cultural legislators, shaping public sentiment without engaging in formal politics (West, 2005). This symbolic alignment with trans rights carries weight precisely because it leverages fame as a political amplifier, demonstrating the role of celebrity activism in postmodern politics (Street, 2012). Furthermore, this T-shirt offers identity affirmation for both trans individuals and allies. This demonstrates what Ahmed (2014) calls "affective alignment", where an ally's feeling of solidarity and a trans person's feeling of being seen differ yet orient around the same affective object, creating a powerful collective bond.

Beyond a mere trend, the "Protect the Dolls" shirt is a multifaceted cultural object that intersects fashion, activism, and identity. Its impact extends beyond the donations raised or the celebrities who wore it. Instead, it serves as a symbol of resistance and solidarity during a tumultuous period for trans rights. This case illustrates how symbolic

expressions, when aligned with collective struggle, can both mobilize awareness and provoke critical dialogue about the nature of allyship, visibility, and authenticity.

COSTUMES AND CREATIVE INTERVENTIONS: PIKACHU PROTESTER

In March 2025, Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu was wrongfully arrested just before announcing his presidential candidacy against the incumbent president, Erdoğan. His arrest sparked nationwide protests (Reyes, 2025). Amid widespread police violence, the global media focused on a protester dressed in an inflated Pikachu[4] costume, adding an element of humor and absurdity to the protest. This surreal image resonated beyond Türkiye, appearing in anti-Trump protests in the U.S. and Georgia during pro-European demonstrations (Dhodapkar, 2025; Yuksel, 2025). The costume used humor and absurdity to resist state oppression, embodying what is termed "soft resistance" (Aydınoğlu, 2025). This dynamic reflects Ahmed's (2014) notion of "stickiness", where emotions attach to objects and shape collective politics.

Costumes and carnivalesque disguises have long been part of protest repertoires, from medieval "feasts of misrule", where peasants mocked authority through parody and inversion, to the inflatable dinosaur suits and clown brigades of the early 2000s alter-globalization movement (Presdee, 2000; Velocci, 2018). As Bogad (2016) argues, clowning and absurd disguises disrupt the seriousness of police power, creating "tactical frivolity" that unsettles hierarchies (p. 32). The Pikachu protester continues this lineage of absurdist resistance, but its novelty lies in mobilizing a globally recognizable pop-culture character whose cuteness and meme-ability amplified the protest globally (Lin, 2025; Yuksel, 2025). In Taylor's (2003) terms, the Pikachu protester created a transportable scenario, a repeatable action that can be adapted in other political contexts and demonstrated the repertoire's power to circulate cultural memory and tactics globally.

The Pikachu protester exemplifies how full-body, pop-culture-based costumes have become emotional communication tools in protests. Rather than mere uniformity, protest fashion now operates as performance art (Velocci, 2018). Pikachu's playfulness and cuteness visually opposed the militarized appearance of riot police (Lin, 2025). Its soft texture, bright color, and round form evoked empathy and childlike innocence, further reinforcing its symbolic power (Yuksel, 2025). Shared humor helped unite protesters, mixing laughter with anger into a collective emotional experience (Kuryel & Fırat, 2015).

Mascots and internet memes facilitate global engagement and soften the authority's perceived power. By evoking innocence, such creative interventions undermine state narratives. Pikachu moved from a meme to a cultural moment, forging emotional resonance and challenging authority through playfulness rather than confrontation (Aydınoğlu, 2025; Yuksel, 2025).

The rapid online spread of the Pikachu protester carries risks. Overemphasis on spectacle can dilute a protest's seriousness, reducing it to a fleeting online moment and overshadowing the underlying issues. The original Pikachu protester claimed his goal was simply to uplift spirits, not to make a political statement. (Özkök, 2025). After going viral, the Pikachu protester began appearing at festivals and cultural events, creating a social media persona (@hasanntaskan, n.d.). While this may be a strategic way to remain visible via pop culture, it also risks trivializing the original political message. Pikachu thus represents both the potential and contradiction of creative protest in the digital age. Ultimately, the materiality of protest fashion, its emotional impact, and visual spectacle can mobilize support but also risk undermining the gravity of protest if not grounded in political intent. While emotions are politically powerful, their "stickiness" (Ahmed, 2014) is not guaranteed; the connection between an affective object and its political cause must actively be maintained to prevent it from turning into solely a spectacle.

CIRCULATING PROTEST FASHION GLOBALLY: DEPOLITICIZATION, COLLECTIVE UNITY, AND RISKS OF BACKLASH

GLOBAL CIRCULATION OF PROTEST FASHION

An important discussion in modern fashion studies and social activism is the global circulation of protest-originated fashion through viral images and commodified products. Protest fashion simultaneously unifies and destabilizes politics, identity, and media. As it can produce a strong feeling of

4 Pikachu is a globally recognizable Japanese cartoon character. With its recognizable yellow color and bubbly personality, it is associated with playfulness in popular culture.

unity, it can also dilute the original message and risk exclusion or backlash. In this process, the global market often creates an illusion of resistance: garments or slogans that once carried embodied risk become purchasable symbols of "authentic" dissent, where wearing or sharing a protest look can feel like activism without demanding real political engagement (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Tufekci, 2017). Protest fashion's reach has always extended beyond its original sites, but digital media has accelerated this process, often shifting meaning in the transition. What begins as a locally situated act of dissent may, once circulated as an image, meme, or commodity, lose the political grounding that gave it force (Gaugele & Titton, 2019; Niessen, 2020). This shift reveals that the political message is not fixed upon circulation but is actively reinterpreted by global audiences, whose differing social positions determine the ultimate meaning received (Hall, 1980). As Tufekci (2017) notes, digital platforms enable rapid visibility but also favor spectacle over substance, often amplifying effect while detaching action from its original context.

Pussy Riot's balaclavas exemplify this duality. Locally, they disrupted Orthodox sacred space and directly confronted state authority; internationally, they were taken up as fashionable symbols of feminist resistance, sometimes sold as edgy accessories devoid of their political stakes (Chambers, 2020; Myzelev, 2021). Similarly, the "Protect the Dolls" T-shirt carried different meanings depending on context: within queer and trans communities, it served as affirmation and solidarity, while globally it circulated through celebrity culture as a branded commodity, vulnerable to what Banet-Weiser (2012) calls the "politics of ambivalence" in brand culture, where authenticity is marketed even as it is destabilized. The Pikachu protester reveals this tension most vividly. During protests, the costume offered comic relief and resilience against police violence; online, it circulated as memes and AI-generated images, becoming a viral spectacle, easily shareable but detached from the risks and stakes of the local protests (Lin, 2025; Yuksel, 2025).

DEPOLITICIZATION THROUGH MEME-IFICATION AND COMMODIFICATION

The commodification and meme-ification of protest fashion can result in significant depoliticization, stripping it of its power and context. Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) defines this as a dynamic where consumers' resistance against marketplace ideologies is often commodified by the market itself (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Criticisms of capitalist exploitation are consistent with this phenomenon when resistance becomes marketable as conformity. According to Hebdige (1979), the diffusion of subcultural codes into the mainstream frequently leads to the commodification of authenticity and dilution of symbolism. This is a process where the "repertoire" of subcultural performance is captured, flattened, and sold as a commodified "archive"[5]. This is exemplified by the "Protect the Dolls" T-shirts, which transitioned from a celebrity-endorsed tool for trans solidarity to a viral fashion trend and commodified mass production item, risking the loss of activist intent and material impact. This reflects a core concept in CCT: Protest fashion functions as a resource for consumer identity projects, enabling individuals to signal solidarity, while its commodification undermines this political force by integrating it into the marketplace it critiques (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Similarly, the Pikachu protester shows how humor, visual effects, and absurdity can overshadow political context by meme-ification, shifting focus from state violence to trivialization. As Ahmed (2014) notes, emotions not only "stick" to objects but can also "slide". When a symbol of protest fashion circulates globally, the connection can slide away from its political origins. This "sliding" is what happens when an act of repertoire is converted into a decontextualized archival object. The archive, as Taylor (2003) explains, cannot hold the embodied knowledge of the original performance.

CREATING UNITY AND EMOTIONAL COLLECTIVITY THROUGH FASHION

Despite the risks, the global circulation of protest fashion creates unity and collective identity. Its performative nature displays dissent, bringing like-minded individuals together and publicly displaying solidarity. Applying Butler's (2015) concept of "right to appear", garments are not just symbols but an essential infrastructure of dissent. They are the materials that enable individual bodies to appear as a unified political force. Whether it be shared slogan T-shirts, color codes, or distinctive costumes, fashion serves as a solidarity badge and a tool to create emotional collectivity (Kuryel &

5 Archive is a term Taylor (2003) uses for the material records and media believed to preserve cultural history.

Fırat, 2015; Aydınoğlu, 2025). When feelings of dissent and solidarity "stick" (Ahmed, 2014) to a garment, it becomes a powerful tool for bringing individuals into a collective, making their shared political positions visible. Kuryel and Fırat's (2015) argument on emotional collectivity is evident in both historical examples, like the suffragette colors, and in contemporary symbols like Pussy Riot's neon balaclavas, which provide a bridge between cultural, national, and linguistic divides. Additionally, the emotional effects of protest fashion can be used to create empathy and moral awareness between participants and observers. The rapid spread of slogans, symbols, and visual motifs via social media amplifies these effects, increasing global engagement (Geise et al, 2025; Yuksel, 2025).

EXCLUSION, CRITICISM, AND RISKS OF BACKLASH

Forming a collective identity through clothing also risks exclusion. Tajfel and Turner's (1986) Social Identity Theory suggests that identifications like shared clothing can both unify an in-group while creating distinct boundaries with out-groups. Dress codes may marginalize those with differing religious, gendered, or cultural identities. Gender and sexuality usually become sensitive points as queer, trans, or feminist fashion causes concerns about "respectability", increasing both internal movement debates and external backlash, from state repression to right-wing criticism (Chambers, 2020). Ahmed (2014) argues that collective bodies are often formed through "othering", in which emotions like hate, fear, and disgust are directed at those who do not fit into social norms. Yet visibility itself is uneven: celebrities wearing slogan T-shirts are celebrated and amplified, while anonymous or non-Western protesters are often silenced or criminalized. Visibility can empower, but it can also privilege those with cultural capital while excluding those whose dissent does not fit dominant media narratives (Banet-Weiser, 2012). This is evident in how Pussy Riot's appearance defied gender norms during their prosecution, in "virtue signaling" accusations against "Protect the Dolls" T-shirt wearers, and in media claims that the Turkish Pikachu protester was part of a foreign conspiracy (Chambers, 2020; Cumhuriyet, 2025; Dejung, 2025). Moreover, the global circulation of protest fashion is shaped by postcolonial power structures. Western audiences may celebrate certain protest aesthetics as "brave" while dismissing others as "chaotic", reflecting cultural and racial biases (Gaugele & Titton, 2019). This struggle is rooted in how dominant power structures systematically define which interpretations are valid, often dismissing others as "misunderstandings" of the intended message (Hall, 1980). As Rovine (2009) notes, "who has, and who does not have fashion is politically determined, a function of power relations" (p. 46). This process shows how dominant cultures use their archives to determine which performances from the global repertoire count as meaningful acts of resistance and which are dismissed (Taylor, 2003). In one context, a form of authentic resistance may be celebrated, while in another, it may be criminalized or trivialized. These biases are aligned with the critique within decolonial fashion studies (Jansen, 2020; Slade & Jansen, 2020).

CONFLICTS OF PROTEST FASHION IN GLOBAL CIRCULATION

Protest fashion is inherently conflicted within global circulation. Shared visual identity can create solidarity and emotional collectivity (Aydınoğlu, 2025; Kuryel & Fırat, 2015), but it also becomes open to dilution, exclusion, commodification, and backlash. As a form of "aesthetic resistance", protest fashion holds communicative power but risks depoliticization and unintended consequences (Bruce, 2014; Aydınoğlu, 2025). Gaugele & Titton (2019) call for an approach that considers the "multi-sided and various nature of design practices" (p. 12), the global circulation of meanings and materials, and the limitations of symbolic acts in shifting power dynamics (Blumer, 1969). Protest fashion intersects art, commerce, politics, and identity. It is evidence of both the power and the fragility of visual resistance in the modern day (Maynard, 2004; Velocci, 2018). Moments like the balaclavas of Pussy Riots, the memes of the Pikachu protester, and the virality of "Protect the Dolls" T-shirts can be inspiring and uniting, but these impacts are conditional. The same visual and emotional power that unites and inspires can also lead to appropriation, backlash, or misinterpretation. This duality highlights the need for a critical, context-sensitive understanding of aesthetic resistance.

In sum, protest fashion is a compelling but unstable expression of dissent: worn, felt, and circulated, it possesses emotional force but remains politically fragile. Its effectiveness ultimately depends on its

positioning within broader social dynamics and the constant negotiation between the repertoire and its enduring, often distorted, representations as the archive (Taylor, 2003).

CONCLUSION

Protest fashion, as seen in the cases of Pussy Riot's balaclavas, the "Protect the Dolls" T-shirt, and the Pikachu protester, emerges as a complex and dynamic tool of resistance. Drawing from the material politics of clothing, this analysis demonstrates that garments in protest settings do much more than communicate messages; they shape atmosphere, mediate presence, and use performance and sensory cues to inspire dissent. As these symbols circulate globally, their meanings risk being commodified and misinterpreted, yet their affective power continues to create unity and collective identity. Clothing thus becomes an infrastructure that both enables embodied resistance and exposes the fragility of aesthetic dissent within global circulation.

Critically, these case studies reveal that protest fashion operates according to distinct logics rather than a single, universal framework. Pussy Riot's balaclavas enact a logic of collective anonymity and visual subversion, offering a performative feminist critique that resonates on local and global levels. The "Protect the Dolls" T-shirt follows a different logic, utilizing celebrity culture and irony to translate activism into mediated visibility. The Pikachu protester, meanwhile, demonstrates how humor and visual spectacle create a logic in which visibility can rapidly generate viral attention, highlighting tensions between resistance and trivialisation.

By proposing these different logics, this analysis shows that protest fashion's meanings, reach, and political effects are shaped by context, audience, and strategy. This comparative approach illuminates both the empowering potential of protest fashion and its vulnerability to being co-opted, emphasizing that each case operates within its own distinct dynamic.

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