

Political Expressions in Fashion

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Abstract

Through color, material, form, accessory, print, surface design and the way they are worn, clothes can become a means of protest against social events or political symbols beyond the usual need for covering and adornment. Sensitivity to economic, political, cultural, and social issues such as human rights, children's rights, women's rights, equality, environment, animal rights, anti-war, religious and faith-based movements has been shown for many years. In the attitude towards these events, clothing has been an auxiliary tool in the form of expression.

In this study, it is aimed to draw attention to the issues that clothing has touched upon as a visual tool in expression and how it reflects these issues in the historical process. In this context, while emphasizing the social issues that fashion is sensitive to, its reflections in the historical process and the symbolic power of fashion on these issues, in order to compare with Katharine Hamnett t-shirts that consistently use political expressions on clothing surfaces through phrases, the 2024 women's t-shirt and sweatshirt collection catalogs of two ready-to-wear manufacturers, one national and one international, were scanned and all slogan printed products offered for sale on the online channel were examined.

As a result of the evaluation, it has been determined that slogan t-shirts have become a part of popular culture by moving away from their social, political, and cultural identities and becoming a part of fast consumption. In addition, the "WE SHOULD ALL BE FEMINISTS" t-shirt, which was selected as the outfit of the year at the Fashion Museum, is thought to remind the starting point of this movement pioneered by Hamnett.

Keywords: Political Clothing, Symbolism in Clothing, Slogan T-shirt

1. Introduction

When people make their clothing choices, they consider differentiating and revealing their profession, religious affiliation, social status, or lifestyle [1]. Clothing, the most visible material element of fashion symbolism, is the carrier of multiple and diverse meanings. This fashion symbolism cannot be considered on its own. It gains its dimension from its relational context, and it acquires this dimension when the garment is included in society [2]. Fashion reflects society and designers often include political changes in their collections. The messages we send through the clothes we wear can be subversive or a powerful statement to elicit a reaction [3]. "Clothing, one of the most obvious indicators of social status and gender and therefore effective in maintaining or breaking down symbolic boundaries, shows how positions within social structures are perceived in different eras and how status consciousness is determined" [4]. In this respect, fashion has always made its sensitivity to social events felt.

We buy clothes and wear various combinations of them, either intentionally or through our subconscious thoughts, in order to give others, the right or wrong impression of us. Some of the personal characteristics we want to display, or hide are age, sexual preference, size, occupation, profession,

religious beliefs, self-esteem, behavior, and dignity [1]. Some people dress only to surprise and attract attention, some people dress out of the ordinary to denounce a phenomenon they do not like in the social order, some people dress out of the ordinary to relieve boredom [5]. The meaning of fashion is the images, thoughts, emotions, and sensitivities conveyed by new or old fashions and the symbolic means that provide all these [6]. Fashion is a symbol presented through clothing [7]. Clothes, which are the supporters of nonverbal communication through the way they are worn, assume the responsibility of conveying symbolic expressions. There are those who believe that style is protest itself and can be used to generate a political consciousness about their own or others' unpleasant situations [5]. Color, material, form, accessories, accessories, prints, surface designs, and ways of wearing clothes take on various meanings and transform the symbolic responsibility into a perceptible one.

2. T-shirt in Historical Process

In the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the first known use of the t-shirt was in 1920 [8]. It is thought that the t-shirt, which was previously used in underwear and military uniforms during the second world war, has maintained its popularity until today due to factors such as its simplicity, low cost, easy wearing and comfort, accessibility, adaptability, and easy cleaning.

Table 1: Historical Development Process of T-shirts, [9]

Period	Usage
Late 19th Century	In the U.S. Navy, the cotton V-neck is worn as a uniform. It is used by wrestlers and gymnasts as practical sportswear in the form of underwear.
1900-1920	It was used as underwear in men's suits and shown in commercial advertisements.
1930-1940	It is seen in commercial advertisements under the name T-shirt. During World War II, it was called 'T-type' among soldiers and symbolized victory.
1950-1970	It has been used as outerwear since the 1950s. In the 1960s, it was used by Hollywood actors and actresses as anti-work clothes for young people, with various images of resistance, youth and eroticism. In the 1970s it was used as a means of self-expression or a sense of solidarity among many artists and fashion designers.
1980 and after	Since 1980, it has been used as a fashion element to produce a distinct personality through various designs; functional materials, graphics and communication tools.

According to Kim's research, the frequency of graphic t-shirts according to print subjects is as follows: text (27.5%), illustration and animation characters (16.4%), objects in daily life and nature photographs (4.7%), personal figures and body parts (11.1%), animals and plants (8.5%), geometry (7.4%) and a mixture of all these (24.3%)." [9]. The subject of the study is limited to phrases containing typefaces, i.e. slogans.

3. Slogans as Clothing and Accessory Elements

In the world of the Renaissance, where emblems, iconography and allegory had taken center stage, people were quite happy to use these symbolic elements in their clothing. Almost any animal, plant, God object or color could be used as a way of expressing something metaphorically. Especially at a time

when most people were illiterate, these visual expressions were very important [10]. Today, despite the dominance of the digital age, written forms of expression are still considered to remain popular. Writings have been given many connotations such as carrying messages, meaningful transfer, irony. Slogan is defined in the Turkish Language Dictionary as "a phrase or saying that succinctly describes the aims and means of an identity, community, organization, institution or organization" [11], while in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary it is defined as "a word or phrase used to express a characteristic position or a stance or goal to be achieved" [8]. "Slogan t-shirts", one of the tools commonly used to convey political expressions, constituted the subject of the study.

There is no one who did not write his/her name, favorite music band, pithy sayings, and feelings on his/her desk as a child. Human beings use writing as a tool for expression. Today, slogans can be seen almost everywhere, from warning phrases on cigarette packs, mugs, clothing items, stickers with messages on the back of cars, and even in places with the graffiti movement. Figure 1 shows the various uses of slogans.



Figure 1. Various uses of slogans [12], [13], [14], [15]

4. T-shirt as a Means of Expression

Costume is defined as a type of clothing identified with a certain period, class, community or region. Before fashion trends were followed and widespread around the world, people could guess where they came from and what they were doing by the clothes they wore [16].

In past centuries, clothing has been the primary means of expressing identity in the public sphere. In Europe and the USA, many different dimensions of identity such as occupation, region, religion and social class were expressed through clothing in accordance with the conditions of the period. Some commonly used items of clothing, such as hats, were particularly important in that they instantly revealed one's acquired or desired social status. The diversity of clothing choices are subtle indicators of how different societies and different positions within those societies are experienced [4]. From the times when fashion moved slowly from the upper class to the lower class, it is now possible to see an ordinary t-shirt paired with an expensive pair of jeans.

Fashion responds to culture, although the ways in which this happens are impossible to predict. When the 19th Amendment to the US Constitution gave women the right to vote, women's hair became shorter and hemlines rose above the knee. But while conservatism was expected during the Great Depression, fashion became incredibly glamorous, represented by actresses of Hollywood's golden age, such as Marlene Dietrich, Ginger Rogers and Jean Harlow. In the 1980s, when women first began to appear in numerous professional positions, shoulder pads were developed to showcase a strong physical presence. Soon men's fashion also began to show its own extravagant shoulder pads. The fashion designer has to grasp the broader cultural developments, but should design more naturally, without overly literal responses [17]. Fashion has not only fulfilled our need to cover or adorn ourselves, it has also helped us

to express ourselves and sometimes allowed us to make our voices heard in social movements and to take sides or take opposition.

Protest clothing often influences mainstream fashion. The Afro hairstyle, once a sign of pride in being black, was worn proudly by activists Stokely Carmichael and Angela Davis and became fashionable thanks to singer James Brown. The Afro hairstyle of the "Black Panthers", with their egg-heeled shoes and black leather uniforms, was popular from 1968, when they made their mark as activists. Similarly, not wearing a bra became a feminist stance in the 1960s when Germaine Greer declared that "bras are a stupid invention", a movement that quickly lost its political value when it became generally acceptable for women to go braless in the 1960s and 70s. Although the hippie movement started as an anti-Vietnam War movement, others quickly adopted their baggy, over-the-top style of dress to look fashionable [18]. Slogans on clothing have emerged as a visual means of political communication to show support for or opposition to a particular point of view. Slogans accepted by the fashion industry became permanent after designer Katherine Hamnett met with then British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in 1984 wearing an anti-nuclear t-shirt, seen in Figure 2 [16].



Figure 2: Katherine Hamnett, pioneer of the slogan T-shirt, [16]

Dressing for protest is not just the domain of single-politics activists. The punk movement challenged many of society's rules of anarchy and anti-authoritarianism. Their safety pin accessories and outlandish outfits spoke volumes about their rebellious nature. In contrast, sometimes it's the clothes we don't wear that make the biggest impact. In the early 1990s, the animal rights group PETA caused a scandal with its infamous advertising campaign featuring nude photos of celebrities with the slogan "I'd rather go naked than wear fur". To reinforce the message, PETA protesters stripped naked and strutted down the runway during Paris Fashion Week in 2007, carrying the same slogan. (See Figure 3.) Whether through excessive dress or nudity, fashion has become an acceptable vehicle for protest. Clothes can be used not only to make the female body look good, but also for shocking effect [16].



Figure 3: PETA Protesters, [19]

Another issue that fashion is sensitive to is the environment. At the same time, recycling rules support designs that emphasize environmental awareness and sustainability in an era of eco-conscious fashion, overconsumption. British designer Gary Harvey designed the dress (shown in Figure 4) in 1998 using recyclable materials (Hamnett's slogan printed t-shirts) [10]. By combining 20 organic Hamnett t-shirts, the garment was given a dress form to draw attention to environmental issues.



Figure 4. Gary Harvey's dress created through Hamnett's slogan t-shirts, [10]

Although the slogan t-shirt trend, which started under the leadership of Katharine Hamnett, has become an element of popular culture today, as a reminder of its original purpose; Dior's "WE SHOULD ALL BE FEMINISTS" t-shirt, presented in the Spring-Summer 2017 collection, was named 'Dress of the Year' by Sarah Bailey. On Dior's 70th anniversary, this T-shirt by designer Maria Grazia Chiuri became one of the most talked about products of 2017. The Dress of the Year 2017 was on display at the Fashion Museum until January 1, 2019. It is also the 100th in the '100 Objects in Fashion History Exhibition' [20].



Figure 5: Outfit of the year, 2017, [20]

When Katherine Hamnett invented the slogan t-shirt in the 1980s, she did it perfectly. Sociopolitical messages, such as anti-war statements in big, bold, black letters, were printed on these now iconic basic white T-shirts. Hamnett intended his slogans to be copied and read by people all over the world. Today, he is interested in the global problem of ethics in the fashion production process and continues to be one of the designers who aim to introduce organic cotton to the masses [3].

5. Method

As a discipline, fashion design is in constant interaction with many design disciplines such as textile design, industrial design, interior architecture, communication design and graphic design. In this study, graphic design, one of the disciplines with which it interacts, is discussed. "In its simplest form, graphic design is defined as "the art of giving a message". Sometimes the message is conveyed to the target audience using only typography, sometimes with a photo frame or illustration [21]. In the study, which is handled at the intersection of graphic design and fashion design, it was limited to women's t-shirts and sweatshirts released in 2024 by two ready-to-wear companies selected by random sampling. The results were interpreted by comparing them with the products of Hanett, the pioneer of the slogan t-shirt. Descriptive method was used to collect and analyze the data.

A survey is a research model that aims to determine a past or present situation as it exists. The event, individual or object that is the subject of the research is tried to be defined within its own conditions and as it is [22].

In this context, the data in the study were obtained through the survey model. The data obtained are summarized and interpreted according to predetermined themes. In descriptive analysis, the data can be organized according to the themes revealed by the research questions, or they can be presented by considering the questions or dimensions used in the interview and observation processes. In descriptive analysis, direct quotations are often used in order to reflect the views of the interviewed or observed individuals in a striking way. The aim of this type of analysis is to present the findings to the reader in an organized and interpreted form. For this purpose, the data obtained are first described systematically and clearly. Then, these descriptions are explained and interpreted, cause-effect relationships are analyzed, and some conclusions are reached [23]. The collected data were presented in tables and interpreted.

6. Findings

The subject of the study is slogan t-shirts that pioneer the expression of the political trend in fashion. In this context, the t-shirts and sweatshirts offered for online sale by two ready-to-wear companies, one domestic and one foreign, which have a high market share, were scanned, and visually analyzed. In this context, the universe of the domestic ready-to-wear company consists of 877 pieces of clothing, while the universe of the foreign ready-to-wear company consists of 224 pieces of clothing. The usage of slogan t-shirts at the point of origin and their current usage were compared.

In this study, which firstly focused on the local company's upper clothing group, 877 pieces of clothing constitute the universe. As a result of the analysis, it was determined that slogan t-shirts were used in 85 products, approximately 10% of the collection (See Figure 6) When these t-shirts were examined, it was observed that they touched upon everyday topics such as love, motivation, music, place, and humor. The prints are on the front, back and partially on the sides of the products. They do not contain socio-political messages, which was the starting point of Hamnett t-shirts. In addition, the multicolored use of the t-shirts and the decorative use of the writings suggest that there is no concern for reading. In this context, it is concluded that the slogan t-shirts used in the local firm are used as popular culture items in daily use.

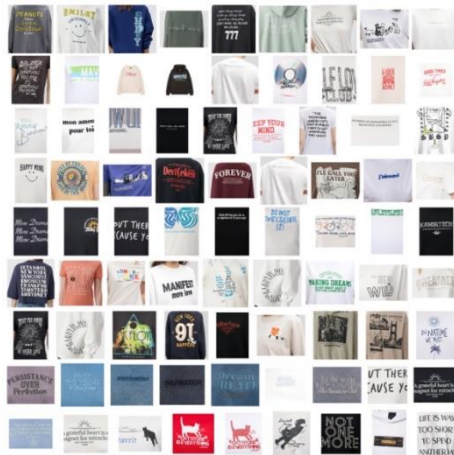


Figure 6: Sample section of products with slogans used in the collection of the local brand

When the collection of the international company, which is the second focus group of the study, is analyzed, 224 pieces of clothing constitute the universe. As a result of the analysis, it was determined that slogan t-shirts were used in 28 products in the collection, i.e. approximately 12.5% (See Figure 7) When these t-shirts were examined; it was observed that they touched upon everyday topics such as friendship, motivation, movies, music, and place. The prints are only on the front of the products. They do not contain socio-political messages, which was the initial starting point of Hamnett t-shirts. In addition, the small size of the messages on the t-shirts made us think that there was no concern about being read. In this context, it is concluded that the slogan t-shirts used in the local firm are used as popular culture items in daily use.

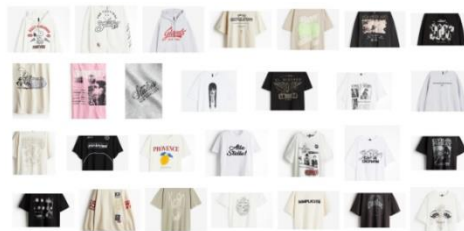


Figure 7: Sample section of products with slogans used in the collection of a global brand

Katherine Hamnett, known as the pioneer of the slogan t-shirts that constitute the starting point of the study, started to be known with t-shirts carrying social, cultural, and political messages. These t-shirts were in basic form, using large and simple typography in black on white, and aimed to express the message clearly rather than creating a decorative perception. It is seen that Hamnett has maintained its initial purpose and style since its 34-year history of slogan t-shirts. (See Figure 8.)



Figure 8: Katherine Hamnett slogan t-shirts for the 2018 season, [24]

T-shirts still feature political messages in large fonts and simple typography. Neutral colors prove that it is far from decorative concerns. Unlike the initial point of departure, the detailed, small-point fonts on the back of the t-shirts are noteworthy.

7. Conclusion

Through various forms of presentation, clothes have become a means of protest against social events or political symbols beyond the usual need for covering and adornment. Nonverbal communication and expression on economic, political, cultural, and social issues have been achieved through clothing. In this study, attention has been drawn to the issues that clothing has touched upon as a visual tool of expression in the historical process and how it reflects these issues. In this context, fashion has proved that it is not insensitive to issues such as human rights, children's rights, women's rights, equality, environment, animal rights, anti-war, religion and faith-based movements.

T-shirts, which are auxiliary elements of the symbolic power of fashion; low cost, easily accessible, comfortable, compatible, easy to clean, have acquired a new mission since 1984. Katharine Hamnett, who boldly and consistently uses political phrases on t-shirts, was the starting point of the work. In addition to her collection for more than thirty years, it has been observed that her sensitivity to political t-shirts has never changed. In the study, in order to compare the current situation of slogan t-shirts with the current situation of slogan t-shirts, visual evaluations were made for the t-shirts with slogan content in the women's collections of two ready-to-wear manufacturers in 2024.

As a result of the evaluation made in this context, it has been determined that slogan t-shirts have become a part of popular culture by moving away from their initial social, political and cultural identities and becoming a part of fast consumption.

As a result of the analysis, no radical change was observed in terms of the majority of the slogans being in the front chest area. In contrast to Hamnett, who preferred neutral colors, today's t-shirts have shown that they are popular fashion items with their decorative use rather than carrying a message concern in terms of their colorful use and ornamentation styles. While Hamnett wrote his t-shirts with a simple typography in a large and legible way, the fluctuating sizes of today's t-shirts were evaluated as another expression of the lack of concern for reading.

While the rate of slogan t-shirt use in the local company remained at about 10%, this rate reached 12.5% in the international clothing company. In the local company, the prints were alternatively placed on the front, back and side, whereas in the international company, the prints were monotonously used only on the front. Slogan themes include similar everyday topics in both companies.

The study focuses on two popular national and international companies. In future studies, the population can be expanded, and comparative analyses can be conducted on the use of slogans by different brands.

Finally, despite Hamnett's slogan t-shirts on almost every subject such as anti-war, environmental issues, women-themed issues, a large percentage of today's t-shirts consist of expressions related to daily life. The "WE SHOULD ALL BE FEMINISTS" t-shirt, which was selected as the outfit of the year at the fashion museum, reminds us of the starting point of this movement pioneered by Hamnett, but when its use in daily wear is considered, it is seen that it moves away from this point.

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