

## **HOW DOES PROTEST WEAR CONTRIBUTE TO WOMEN'S ACTIVISM**

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### **Abstract**

The following extended essay is a collection of findings on how protest wear contributes to women's activism. To come to a clear conclusion on this topic, qualitative research methods, which are auto-ethnography and focus groups, have been utilised for their ability to produce results that are more personal and intimate because of the nature of the essay question.

Academic reading is also included to support these previously mentioned primary research methods. After the research was concluded, when answering how protest wear contributes to women's activism, the findings were pointing in the direction of further unification among the protesters, enabling a stand against capitalism and patriarchy, and reinforcing the rebellion in the fight against inequality.

## Introduction

“It can be easy to write clothing off as something frivolous or materialistically indulgent. But what about when clothes exist to make a political statement? The clothes worn by protesters are, in many ways, just as significant as the chants and signs that are vital components to political demonstrations. From women’s rights marches, to Black Lives Matter protests, to Occupy Wall Street and anti-Trump takeover rallies, clothes play a pivotal role in sending a message of change.”

Elizabeth King (2016)

With the last minute cancellation of my shift, I hurried down the tube to make my way over to the Women’s March. Although in my work attire, I was still looking forward to joining this act of orderly rebellion on the streets of London, mimicking the ones taking place all around the world simultaneously. Once I arrived at the gathering point I was greeted with endless amounts of colour, primarily pink, in every shade one can think of on signs and hats that participants have made themselves. Which then led me to think: A crowd of people stand gathered, riled up with their cause in mind, they look around. Heaps and heaps of others around them, just like them, believing in the same rights and the same wrongs. So what brings them together to make them into a community and therefore more palpable? Was it this vast sea of pink hats? Often times in history the tactile side of these movements has manifested in the form of a piece of clothing; a piece of physical proof that indicates what that individual believes in and what group they are a part of. From the slogan sashes of the suffragettes to Pussy Riot’s ski masks, this extended essay sets out to investigate the ways clothing and fashion contributes to women’s activism.

## Methodology

KVALE (1983, p.174) defines the qualitative research interview as "an interview, whose purpose is to gather descriptions of the life-world of the interviewee with respect to interpretation of the meaning of the described phenomena" - Raymond Opdenakker (2006)

Qualitative and quantitative data collections are two of the most frequently utilised techniques of information gathering. In the case of this extended essay, the former has been preferred due to its tendency to give out a wider selection of subjective points of view. Under the umbrella that is qualitative research, the main methodology employed was in the form of a focus group. The reasoning behind this method being used was because activism and protests are highly emotionally charged and people based practices therefore interviewing individuals who took part in these events is beneficial to be able to bring across the mind-set of the people involved as opposed to reducing them to data charts and numbers. Furthermore, to convey the sense of community and togetherness, the interviews were conducted in the form of a focus group.

Interviewing and focus groups are advantageous when it comes to interacting with subjects from a more personal point of view and being able to record their opinions. “The data in the focus group are solicited through open ended questions. The focus group presents a more natural environment than that of an individual interview because participants are influencing and

influenced by others –just as they are in life.” Richard A. Krueger (2014) However there are some negatives to this subjective method such as interviewer bias which can alter the outcomes of the session depending on the person recording the participants’ answers.

While conducting the session, it’s crucial for the interviewer to stay as objective as possible while being well informed on the subject they are investigating so they can ask appropriate questions. According to William Foddy (2002); “Interviewers need to know more than simply how to conduct the interview itself. They should have background of the study and why the study is important.” Another necessity when it comes to getting optimal results from focus groups is that the interviewer asks the rights questions and creates an open and judgement- free environment for all the participants. If this is not achieved amongst the group, it may lead to what David L. Morgan mentions in his piece about focus groups: “One unique ethical issue in focus groups is the fact that what participants tell the researcher is inherently shared with other group participants as well. This raises serious invasion of privacy concerns and effectively limits the kinds of topics that the researcher can pursue.” In this case this issue has been handled by making sure all the participants shared similar ideas and beliefs when it came to the topic at hand and were comfortable talking about it within each other’s presence.

Another type of qualitative methodology used in this extended essay is ‘auto-ethnography’. “Auto-ethnography is an intriguing and promising qualitative method. Emerging from postmodern philosophy, in which the dominance of traditional science and research is questioned and many ways of knowing and inquiring are legitimated, auto-ethnography offers a way of giving voice to personal experience to advance sociological understanding” explains Sarah Wall in her 2008 article about her experience in writing an auto-ethnography. Due to the personal and emotional nature of activism and design, this way of researching was suitable in order to convey the density of the subject at hand. With that being said, this method is not without its disadvantages.

When mentioning the advantageous aspects of auto-ethnography, Mariza Mendez (2013) elaborates, “One of the main advantages of personal narratives is that they give us access into learners' private worlds and provide rich data (Pavlenko, 2002, 2007). Another advantage is the ease of access to data since the researcher calls on his or her own experiences as the source from which to investigate a particular phenomenon. It is this advantage that also entails a limitation as, by subscribing analysis to a personal narrative, the research is also limited in its conclusions.” However, Bochner and Ellis (1996) consider that this limitation on the self is not valid, since, "If culture circulates through all of us, how can auto-ethnography be free of connection to a world beyond the self?" (p. 24).”

Similar to the focus group disadvantages, writing an auto-ethnography brings with it the question of bias and objectivity. “The most recurrent criticism of auto-ethnography is of its strong emphasis on self, which is at the core of the resistance to accepting auto-ethnography as a valuable research method. Thus, auto-ethnographies have been criticised for being self-indulgent, narcissistic, introspective and individualised. (Atkinson, 1997; Coffey, 1999)” (Mendez, 2013). To avoid this, it is of utmost importance that the auto-ethnographer refrains from digressing to topics irrelevant to the initial question or delving too deeply into their

personal life which would fall under an auto-biography rather than an effective example for auto-ethnography.

## **Theoretical framework**

### **History of women's protest clothing**

"Fashion is about illusion and escapism sometimes but it's also a platform for the possibility to invite change." claims Kim Jenkins, an assistant fashion professor at Pratt during an interview with Natalie Gontcharova for the Refinery29 website. She mentions this while talking about Gernreich's monokini, a swimsuit that covers mostly the bottom half of the body, explaining how it was revolutionary at the time for women to embrace their sexuality and become self-aware.

She then goes on to suggest that "It was arguably an early predecessor of Instagram's #freethenipple movement – and the changing attitudes (and laws) around toplessness in the latter half of the century."

Because women's rights issues are often tied in with sexuality and having ownership over one's own body, clothing inevitably plays a role during rebellious acts done towards this cause. However there are cases where wearable slogans have been included in causes to do with women's right to vote and get equal pay; such as the Suffragette "Votes for Women" sashes and wearable sandwich board slogans worn by women fighting for equal pay.



Figure 1. Gernreich's Monokini

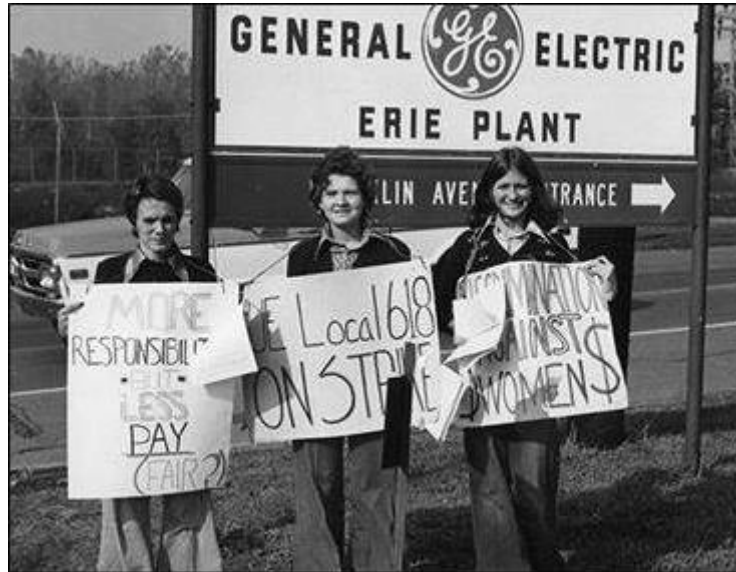


Figure 2. Sandwich boards during equal pay protest

Wearable sandwich boards first started sprouting during 1930's, an early example is when British labour activists decided to wear sandwich board slogans depicting their outrage towards working conditions of the time (Miller, 1979). During the early phases of wearable activism, sandwich boards prevailed for their accessible and do-it-yourself nature. 1975 Timekeepers Strike is an example where women made use of wearable boards to write slogans relevant to their cause which was equal pay in their workplace.

One of the major women's rights movements who benefited from clothing in their actions were the Suffragettes. "Although suffragettes in England and the United States often committed crimes like arson and vandalism in their fight to gain the right to vote, their appearance was of a woman who would never even think of doing such things — and that's no accident.

"They sought to effect change not by challenging contemporary fashion and ideals of femininity, but by conforming to them," the Guardian reported of suffragette fashion." (Lubitz, 2016) This wasn't the only way Suffragettes maneuvered garments for their cause; they also had iconic Sashes with the words Votes for Women written on them which were used to symbolise their allegiance to the cause.

In the 1960s, the item of rebellious clothing was a mini-skirt. After an era of obedient housewife type women being enforced, the young women of the day turned to breaking the rules with the help of clothing that was viewed as indecent by the generation before them. "In just one garment, one could feel the cultural zing of women's rights, feminism and liberation alongside the fight for female birth control. Mostly worn by young women who were taking part in those debates themselves, the skirt encapsulated the movement." (Lubitz, 2016)



Figure 3. Protest by wearing miniskirts in the 60s

### Symbolic importance of Colour

“It is the indirect expression of an individual through his garments, that tell us, for instance, that the person whom we ‘see’ approaching is one whom we know; and it’s the movement imparted to his clothes by the limbs within, and not the motion of the limbs themselves, that enables us to judge at first glance whether this acquaintance of ours is friendly, angry, frightened, curious, hurried, or at ease, In the case of an individual whom we have not previously met, the clothes he is wearing tell us at once something of his sex, occupation, nationality, and social standing, and thus enable us to make a preliminary adjustment of our behaviour towards him, long before the more delicate analysis of feature and of speech can be attempted.” - The Psychology of Clothes J.C. Flugel 1930 pg 15

Using clothing as a form of self-expression is a common practise which has been in use since early civilizations in history. Whether it was to cover up oneself or choose to subtract articles of coverage, clothing more often than not exists to carry across a message from the person wearing the item to the person viewing it. A crucial element in this equation is the utilisation of colour. Similar to how animals have evolved to display their stance towards the world through their colour schemes, for example how a rainforest frog warns its attackers of its toxicity via its bold and bright colours (Beddard, Animal Coloration, An Account of the Principal Facts and Theories Relating to the Colours and Markings of Animals, 1892), humans

have also come to subconsciously reflect their feelings and inner workings through colours; in this case, through protest wear. Some examples of this phenomenon can be seen in the all black garments of the 80s Black Bloc movement, 1989 Tiananmen Square protests where protesters wore all white and, Ukraine's orange revolution where wearing orange meant that person was anti-government and people who wore all blue were pro-government (King, 2016). Because of colour's ability to mean certain things and make a statement, it's been widely utilised as a means of disobedience and rebellion in a reoccurring manner.

## **Craftivism**

The act of crafting through history has usually been linked to women and femininity. "Masculine culture would neither understand nor, more importantly, value, the symbolic and aesthetic role that images such as 'the crinoline lady' played within women's culture. (...) However well made such artefacts may have been, they could never have entered the masculine canon of 'good design' objects." As Penny Sparke mentions in *As Long As It's Pink* (1995 pg152). Because of this perceived inferiority, crafting became an element that reoccurred often in women's rights activism, showing that feminine can be powerful and make a difference. "Robins said she was inspired by how craft is seen as a benign, passive activity. She asked herself, 'How would it be if it were actually a dangerous activity, if it was something we actually weren't allowed to do, if it was banned?'" asks Kerry Willis in *The Close Knit Circle* (pg 61). This point of view stems from the societal norms and how they favour masculine as something to be taken more seriously and therefore fuels the fight against patriarchy by allowing women to use craft and show that feminine is just as powerful.

"Some argue that public knitters are engaging in subversion. 'I think you could say that knitting is a radical practise in a culture that is so compulsive about buying things,' Cat Mazza, creator of microRevolt, in an interview with reporter Beth Rosenberg." Debates Willis, showing another aspect of how craft contributes to activism. Especially with fast fashion being at an all-time high, creating things for oneself and minimising one's expenses can be seen as a 'radical practise' because of its defiant nature against capitalism which is a system dependent on the fact that people involved spend as much money as possible. In *Disobedient Objects* (by Catherine Flood & Gavin Grindon), a book which showcases different items used in activist protests in history, it's proposed that "Disobedience can involve DIY hacking and alteration, and also the design of whole new ways of disobeying. The re-use of easily accessible objects, like the shipping barrels composing nineteenth- century barricades, implicate these objects in unfinished dialectics of social struggle and make them one means of the global circulation of struggles (pg 15)." Which further expands on the scale of how ubiquitous craft and DIY has been not only in women's battle for equality but also in a more universal sense of activism and rebellion.

## Case Study:

### Women's March and the Pussy Hats Introduction

#### Introduction



Figure 4. Women's March

Recently the world of politics has welcomed a new face, Donald Trump. With his strongly worded opinions and claims he has gotten negative attention from many groups who find his statements to be 'offensive and demeaning'. This collective feeling among individuals has led to a protest march campaigned by women for gender equality. While it predominantly took place in United States, the march was also spread across the globe. One of the elements that stood out during the Women's March was the pink knit beanies called Pussy Hats. Social media and media feminist theory.

#### History

"Change means growth, and growth can be painful. But we sharpen self-definition by exposing the self in the work and struggle together with those whom we define as different from ourselves, although sharing the same goals. For Black and white, old and young, lesbian and heterosexual women alike, this can mean new paths to our survival." – Sister Outsider – Age, Race, Class and Sex, Audre Lorde, pg 123



Whilst at the march, my observations were clear; this event was a part of history that dated back to first wave feminism. Similar to and enabled by the protests of the Suffragette movement, the event flourished into a link between the past and the present, aiming to break the barriers that stood in the way of gender equality. People from every skin tone, gender, sexuality and income levels were all in harmony in one big group of insubordination, singing the same tunes of liberation. "Oh yeah for sure, the march had an overwhelming positive energy and it gave more of an atmosphere of hope. I felt like this march really brought everyone together from all walks of life and all over London. There was a mix of women and men and even lots of small children" chimes in Akshy Marayen, a participant in the focus group. This march wasn't just away to support one group of people but instead lift up all those who know oppression by being as inclusive as possible. There were sightings of celebrities in the United States marches as well as the London one. Some inspiring examples are from Angela Davis who spoke at the rally saying, "We recognize that we are collective agents of history and that history cannot be deleted like web pages." Maryum Ali also spoke up, saying, "Don't get frustrated, get involved. Don't complain, organize." Another quote which stood out was by Alicia Keys who announced, "We are mothers. We are caregivers."

We are artists. We are activists. We are entrepreneurs, doctors, leaders of industry and technology. Our potential is unlimited. We rise." (McKenzie, 2017)

The protest was initially planned in Washington D.C. by Teresa Shook, following Donald Trump's inauguration day. "It was organized as a grassroots movement to 'send a bold message to our new administration on their first day in office, and to the world that women's rights are human rights'" (Tatum, 2017). After the Women's March on Washington gained momentum when it rallied around 500,000 people and spread to a total of 673 marches worldwide, London, as a major capital of the world, also joined this sisterhood of rebellion. Akshy Marayen from the focus group conducted explains, "I didn't expect the turn out to be as massive as it was, we started the march at the US embassy and it took a long time to walk to Trafalgar square as there was so many people and even as we marched more people were joining from different points!" Experiencing such a powerful togetherness by joining the march that took place in London was in a way portraying to me how strong women can be when facing injustice which in itself is an empowering feeling while you exist within the accepting embrace of women who are fighting in unison. A primary contributor to the feeling of unity, especially in Washington, was the pink hats. Although there weren't that many in the London march, they still stood out in their pink glory, referencing their American counterparts. Similar to the miniskirt of the 60's and Gernreich's monokini, this object symbolised uniformity and defiance against the patriarchal systems and oppression.

## Symbolism

"To disobey is order to take action is the byword of all creative spirits. The history of human progress amounts to a series of Promethean acts. But autonomy is also attained in the daily workings of individual lives by means of many small Promethean disobediences, at once clever, well thought out, and patiently pursued, so subtle at times as to avoid punishment

entirely... I would say that there is good reason to study the dynamics of disobedience, the spark behind all knowledge” – Gaston Bachelard, ‘Prometheus’, *Fragments of a Poetics of Fire*, 1961 – *Disobedient Objects* pg. 7

Once the history of protest and disobedience is investigated, it becomes evident that there’s often an item or symbol associated with the protest it signifies, most commonly seen in the recent history in the form of t-shirts (i.e. Black Lives Matter, Occupy Wall Street). In this case it was the pink hand-crafted hats with cat ears on them called “Pussy Hats”. The name comes in the form of a play on both the words ‘pussycat’ and the term used to describe female genitalia. “We love the clever wordplay of ‘pussyhat’ and ‘pussycat,’ but yes; pussy is also a derogatory term for female genitalia. We chose this loaded word for our project because we want to reclaim the term as a means of empowerment” explains Jayna Zweiman. This trend among the activists was initiated by Krista Suh, an architect, and Zweiman, a screenwriter, when they got together to brew an idea that would represent the spirit of the march while empowering its participants. Umut Turkucu, from the focus group, as a male at the march has commented “I can say that because of how people expect you to behave when you’re male or female it felt like I was breaking some stereotypes by wearing a bright pink hat and that was like weirdly liberating. Like I was making a stand within a march that’s for making a stand?” His explanation on how the hats affected his overall experience goes to show that colour and specific items of clothing can have a strong symbolic importance. Especially in this case where pink is a colour that’s associated with femininity as well as inferiority when looked at it from a patriarchal point of view. The fact that these hats are pink symbolises here how the creators of the hat intend to reclaim pink as a colour of insubordination by using it in an activist context. Another participant in the focus group session, Sally Somerville-Woodiwis expands on how the crafting side of the hats influenced her, “I’ve got to say; making the hats was kind of like gearing up before a paintball match in the way that preparing something beforehand made it feel more... powerful in a way. It was like ‘Yeah we’re a part of this too now!’”



Figure 5. Krista Suh and Jayna Zweiman

## **Craftivism**

“Recent debate within feminist history and theory has highlighted the dependent relationship between patriarchy and capitalism and the ability of both to reshape and reformulate society in order to overcome potentially transforming processes” (Buckley, 1986 pg. 4)

Some aspects to consider when analysing why this item, the pink knit hat, was chosen is accessibility, distribution, and influence. When selecting an item that’s aimed at the public to use in large groups of people, it’s important to look at whether the intended group will be able to own it for its intended purpose. This aspect can be likened to the posters at the Victoria & Albert Museum as mentioned in *Disobedient Objects* “The V&A, for example, has mostly collected commodity-objects of elite production and consumption – also primarily objects of private consumption. An exception is collections of prints and posters. The multiple, cheap and distributed nature of the poster means that even in its most finely designed form it has been integrated into everyday public life.” Based on this definition of posters, it could be said that the hats created for the sake of the Women’s March would also fall under the category of objects one can integrate into daily life and get a hold of with ease. The way this was established was through the use of media and crafts, two mediums which have been commonly present in activism.

Instead of selling these hats through their website, Suh and Zweiman came up with a way that utilised the influence of craft within activism; by uploading the patterns for making these hats online so that everyone who had interest in their cause had the chance make their own and contribute to the protest by creating. This way they also enabled people who couldn’t attend the rally and therefore making them feel like they are a part of the movement by possessing a symbolic item representative of the march. Sally Somerville-Woodiwis points out that the hats were also “pretty straightforward to make” Which she then says was something that she found to be “a positive because it literally takes like such little time to make them” and therefore contributing to their accessibility. The act of creation here is not only effective in its attainability but also in how craft is a form of activism in itself through its defiance of capitalism and commodity culture. According to an article by Leanna Garfield and Melia Robinson on *Business Insider*, “Since it launched in late November, the project has garnered thousands of social media followers, and Zweiman estimates nearly 100,000 people have downloaded the hat’s pattern. Amy Schumer, Patti Smith, Rosanne Cash, and Krysten Ritter have posted photos of themselves wearing the hats, too.” The fact that this project has reached so many people from a variety of backgrounds, means that the forerunners of the Pussy Hats have succeeded in creating an object that is accessible and influential, and took advantage of how media can help spread awareness.

## **Conclusion**

When it was over, I stood looking around at the diffusing crowd. People were saying goodbye to their friends, old and new, exchanging numbers and Instagram accounts, telling each other to say hello to someone or other. Prior to my arrival, I had the assumption that this event would be an exhausting one due to large crowds and lengthy marching. I was pleasantly surprised

when I found, at the end of this rally, that instead of being tired I instead felt refreshed by all the positivity and high levels of energy that stayed potent through the whole of the day. This group of people who were there for each other, people they've only just met or have never even seen. Thrilled by this I started making my way back home, clutching a piece of someone's bandanna I had ended up in the possession of somehow, so I could have something to remember this day by and therefore have this feeling of pride and unity linger. People who had made the pink hats of defiance didn't have the problem of having to find a memento to grab from amongst the heaps of people because they already had an item in their possession which held within their hard work, knowledge of sharing this item with many others in unison and the pride of knowing that this item symbolised their fight against the patriarchy alongside their sisters who had also put in the time and effort to create something that showed that crafting is strength. So in the end, my journey in researching how these hats— and other items of disobedience in history— have contributed to the Women's March 2017, and women's protests in the past, I find that the physicality of it adds to the empowerment and rebellion; the act of creation fuels a stand against capitalism and patriarchy while knowing you're donned in the same garb as another who shares your values gives you a sense of community spirit. The fact that it's also a souvenir helps the momentum gained by the protest last longer as it becomes more integrated in everyday life. Therefore, as Faythe Levine has said in the spirit of craftivism, "I can remember how important it felt to wear a shirt from a thrift store to school with a feminist slogan stencilled on in it in spray paint. Being able to use my clothing as a way to engage people about fashion ideals, politics, and sexism was incredibly exciting." (F. Levine, *Craftivism*, pg. 56)

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