

# The Evolution of Feminist Revolutionary Garments Against Patriarchy in the Fourth-wave Feminist Movement

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**Abstract.** During the fourth-wave feminist movement, a great deal of variation is produced in the forms and symbolic systems of feminist revolutionary garments. The relationship between feminism and fashion is complex during the feminist revolt against patriarchy. Some individuals view fashion as an instrument of patriarchal domination through the restraint of the female body. Some arguments believe that fashion, as revolutionary garments, can be borrowed as a method and catalyst for a feminist revolution. Social media has provided a wider digital space for feminist activism, and connections and collaborations between feminists from different classes and cultures have become easy to establish. Hence, easily recognisable logos and simpler symbol systems were the main hallmarks of this phase of feminist revolutionary garments. This paper focuses on the characteristics, advantages, and reasons for the emergence of feminist revolutionary garments in the fourth wave of the feminist movement by comparison with previous feminist revolutionary garments. Disadvantages and potential crises of these garments, such as excessive consumerism, still exist. Overall, the expressive potential of these revolutionary garments remains difficult to ignore.

## 1 Introduction

The relationship between the feminist movement and fashion is controversial. Some research argued that feminists maintained a completely negative attitude towards fashion and rejected it. There are also some views that fashion was the catalyst and method of the feminist revolution [1]. The role of fashion in the feminist movement gradually began to be recognised along with the practices and achievements of feminists in fashion. In the fight against patriarchal oppression, an important goal of the feminist movement, feminist revolutionary garments began to be noticed by the public. At the same time, along with the development of digital media technology, the fourth-wave feminist movement was defined by the technology it used. Social media became the most important venue for the fourth feminist movement [2]. This digital space encourages inclusivity and raises the possibility of collaboration for breaking the monopoly of feminism by upper-class women [3]. In this context, feminist fashion no longer tries to build complex symbolic systems on clothing but favours straightforward and accessible expressions. The goal of this paper is to discuss the evolution of fourth-wave feminist revolutionary garments in the process of opposing patriarchy with the development of digital media, compared to previous feminist fashion. Firstly, the complex relationship between fashion and feminism in a patriarchal society will be addressed. As an important aspect of society,

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fashion has both positive and negative effects on the development of feminism and anti-patriarchy. Secondly, the forms and specific cases of feminist revolutionary garments in the fourth feminist movement will be discussed. Finally, the changes in the fourth feminist revolutionary garments compared to the previous garments and the reasons for their emergence will be analysed from multiple perspectives such as the symbolic system, sisterhood, and so on.

## **2 The relationship between feminism and fashion**

In this part, the relationship between feminism and fashion will be introduced and discussed. During the second feminist movement, women expressed themselves by 'rejecting' the patriarchal style of fashion. For example, the image of the 'Bra Burner' appeared. Fashion has been criticised for its 'asymmetry' in terms of gender as a tool of oppression in a patriarchal society [4]. However, in subsequent feminist movements, the expressive role of fashion has been valued. Elements such as punk and trouser suits were borrowed by feminists.

Resistance to patriarchy is an important goal of the feminist movement. In *Theorizing Patriarchy*, Sylvia Walby provided the framework for a patriarchal society. 'The patriarchal model of productions, patriarchal relations in paid work, patriarchal relations in the state, male violence, the patriarchal relations in sexuality, and patriarchal relations in cultural institutions' [5]. Meanwhile, fashion is defined as 'a reproductive affair' used to 'construct, signal and reproduce' class, identity, sex and gender' [4]. Therefore, as an important part of society and culture, fashion has also been seen and valued by feminists.

Revolutionary fashion and clothing became an important expression of feminism. In *Fashion as Communication*, Barnard defines revolutionary fashion and clothing as 'a term of resistance' to challenge and criticise the dominant class and gender identities. 'Reversal' and 'refusal' are two forms of this resistance [4]. In feminist discourse, the dominant structure that is resisted is patriarchy. The asymmetry between women's and men's clothing stems from gender inequality in patriarchy. Through compulsory dress codes, women wear clothes that do not fit for physical movements. For example, Valerie Steele in *The Corset: A Cultural History* claims that the corset is an 'instrument of torture' and a 'major cause of ill health and even death' [6]. Through these patriarchal fashions, women's bodies were not only trapped in the trap of objectification and aestheticisation but also shaped to be unfit for work and mobility. For example, during the Industrial Revolution, women of the middle and upper class were considered to be excluded from the public sphere. Petticoats are often sarcastically pointed at women due to the influence of the political cartoons of the time [7]. The formation of such nonverbal symbols stems from the restrictions placed on women by patriarchal fashion, which further shaped patriarchal femininity as 'weak, incompetent, not independent and unable to work' by preventing women from participating in the public sphere through productions, and paid work. Further, women's work and range of activities are restricted. Such a phenomenon is indicative of the way fashion is used as a tool to oppress women and exacerbate gender inequality in the patriarchy.

Thus, from the 1960s to the 1970s, feminists adopted the strategy of 'rejecting fashion' to make their point. By rejecting 'the position of narcissism and exhibitionism', they renounced and resisted typical patriarchal fashions such as bras, cosmetics, high heels, jewelry, and so on [4]. Thus, the association of 'anti-fashion' and 'feminist' was created. Further, anti-fashion became a fixed feature of the feminist at the time [8]. During this period, by anti-fashion, feminists rejected the gender identity, social division of labour, and gender roles prescribed by patriarchal society. The image of 'the bra burner' is a typical case. 'The bra burner' was widely considered to be more of a rumour than a historical fact, but the image has been widely discussed until now. This phenomenon is also a reflection of the early American women's liberation movement's flight and rejection of existing fashion structures, which was more inclined to the 'refusal' rather than 'reversal'. The existence of these two forms is not strictly in the sequential order. In fact, the concept of 'beauty corvee' is still popular on Chinese social media platforms today. Maintaining beauty is seen as a uniquely female form of servitude, which is a manifestation of gender asymmetry in the field of fashion [9]. A large number of Chinese feminists maintain their 'natural women' identity by cutting off their long hair

and stopping wearing make-up. This return to 'refusal' is to a certain extent a reproduction and replication of the early women's liberation movement in the United States.

However, feminists and fashion are not completely opposed to each other. As mentioned earlier, fashion is a way of reproducing and shaping social structures. Therefore, some feminists started to use fashion as a way to express their resistance to patriarchy. The strategy of 'reversal' was taken seriously. Some feminists began to challenge patriarchal gender inertia and gender roles by wearing masculine clothing. 'Dressing like a man' was recognised as a 'reversal' strategy in the 1980s. In 1850, the first revolutionary dress was proposed by Mrs. Amelia Bloomer in the United States- a short skirt over a pair of full Turkish trousers. Because it was 'comfortable, convenient, safe and tidy', Bloomer and other feminists chose it and publicised it through magazines. At the time, wearing trousers was not in harmony with femininity formed by patriarchal styles. As a result, many women who wore the costume were subjected to social pressure and harassment, but at the same time gained support from other feminists [7]. The Bloomer Costume facilitated women's daily lives and work and reinforced their independence. In the 20th century, middle and upper-class women were still forbidden to wear trousers in public. On the contrary, working-class women had begun to wear masculine clothing such as trouser uniforms and ties in public and daily life. This phenomenon was a result of women starting to get paid work as well as enter workplaces and public spheres. Along with the development of feminism, in the late 20th century, the tie became 'a symbol of feminine emancipation and willingness to challenge the social status of men'. In popular culture, such as films, advertisements, and fashion magazines, the tie became a symbol of female power and authority [7]. The popularity of the tie had a positive impact on feminist anti-patriarchy, but in reality, it was not taken seriously by the public. Along with commercial marketing, its feminist connotations began to dissolve. Furthermore, it was transformed into everyday wear.

As previously noted, fashion plays dual roles as a form of communication. As patriarchal styles, some garments and aesthetic rules are ways of oppressing women. By restricting women's bodies, patriarchal fashion limits women's physical movements, does harm to women's health, and reinforces the stereotypes that associate vulnerability with femininity. Further, women's lack of independence and subordination is emphasised. On the contrary, some feminists express their self-identity through 'refusal' and 'reversal' to patriarchal fashion, rebelling against patriarchal gender imbalance and gender roles. However, such resistance is risky. There is a risk that these revolts and challenges will be appropriated by the structures they challenge, meaning that his feminist connotations and rebelliousness will gradually dissolve. Along with the development of digital media technology and social media, feminist revolutionary garments have produced many changes. These feminist fashion expressions no longer try to construct complex symbolic systems but tend to be more straightforward.

### **3 The revolutionary garments in forth-wave feminism**

In the fourth wave of feminism, the intervention of digital media has become an important symbol. Several logos and signs became important tools for feminists to express themselves and find companionship. Influenced and inspired by the growing links between feminism and other anti-traditional patriarchal social movements, such as queer movements, and LGBTQ movements, feminists began to see the potential of 'new revolutionary garments' that could be reproduced quickly and spread widely.

The fourth feminism is characterised by the intervention of social media and digital technology, which means 'growing numbers of new feminist organisations, online communities and activist campaigns' [10]. With the influence of social media, the feminist community is expanding. Feminism is no longer a 'luxury' monopolised by intellectuals. In the face of an increasingly broad audience, feminist garments with complex connotations and symbolic systems are mismatched. Monica Titton points out the importance of recognisable signifiers in the spheres of online media. 'Banners, flags, and logos as well as fashion and style are predestined to be used as carriers of meaning and as signifiers of resistance and dissent' [11]. Like Malcolm's proposal of revolutionary fashion and clothing, Titton's revolutionary garments express resistance to patriarchy. However, in the context of the fourth-wave women's liberation movement, these revolutionary garments are no longer obsessed

with creating complex symbolic systems. ‘Pins, badges, hats, baseball caps, and bandanas complement the revolutionary wardrobe offering sufficient printable surfaces for symbols and slogans’ have become typical features of feminist revolutionary garments of the period [11]. Compared with feminist fashions that needed to be deciphered and analysed, these simple, accessible, and easily reproducible revolutionary garments were conducive to the dissemination of feminism in everyday life.

At the same time, such easily reproducible feminist revolutionary garments also make it easier for feminists to recognise each other in real life. For example, the ‘You can get sanitary napkins from me’ pendant has become popular on Chinese social media platforms. The famous pendant consists of a variety of pink shades and slogans that convey both verbal and non-verbal messages. The popularity of the pendant has not only accelerated the dissolution of menstrual shame but also deconstructed the shame culture of female sexuality. On Taobao, the biggest E-commerce platform, the ‘You can get sanitary napkins from me’ pendants are sold by many merchants at a very low price, around 5-15 RMB. The ease of accessibility and low price have led many feminist supporters to choose this pendant hoping to find companions. At the same time, many similar badges, pendants, and shirts have been sold and purchased on online shopping platforms and have garnered high sales and massive public attention.

To summarise, the involvement of digital media has widened the feminist community. Reproducible and comprehensible feminist revolutionary garments have been mainstream. These easily recognisable pins and t-shirts provide ‘display boards’ for feminist slogans and symbols. The widespread popularity of such garments facilitates the widespread dissemination of feminism in everyday life, as well as the identification and connection of feminists with each other. But the pitfall is that the popularity of this feminist commodity may be exploited by capitalism and transformed into a parody, trapping feminism in over-consumption.

#### **4 The reformation of forth-wave feminist revolutionary garments**

With the development of digital media, the forms of collaboration between feminism and fashion have changed. There are differences in the use of fashion in the several feminist movements. Some feminists have become more adept at expressing themselves by borrowing other fashion styles with a rebellious meaning, and have been empowered by reusing fashion for female self-expressions through the reinvention of ‘wearers’ and ‘spectators’. These expressions tend to be more metaphorical. Although these metaphors are still important in the symbolic systems of the Fourth Feminist Expression, such as the association of ‘pink’, ‘Barbie’, and feminism. However, the expression began to become more ‘frank’ and ‘direct’. The popularity of this forth-wave feminist fashion has made it easier for feminists to recognise each other on online platforms as well as in real life. However, the risk of falling into the trap of consumerism and wasting resources should also be recognised. Yet overall, with the added benefit of online platforms, these understandable, short, and quick slogans and badges are still able to gain the widest audience.

The rise of Hashtag Feminism stems from the intervention of digital media. Social media has provided a space for women across the globe to communicate. For example, in the ‘Arab Spring’ and ‘MeToo’ movements. Feminists across the globe shared their practices, experiences, and ideas, engaged in discussions, and provided support to other individuals through social media platforms [12]. On social media platforms, such as Twitter and Instagram, slogans and symbols that spread quickly have become an important carrier for feminist advocacy. As mentioned earlier, fashion, which carries complex and multiple symbolic systems and connotations, no longer takes first place. Activists and creators tend to coalesce a particular event or idea into a short logo or slogan. The process of its formation is complex, but the final form is simple and direct [13].

Sisterhood played a very important role in the fourth wave of feminism. Under patriarchy, it was difficult to create emotional bonds between women who lacked subject consciousness. The development of personal freedom and autonomy is highly correlated with the cultivation of bonds between women. ‘Practicing sisterhood is, one can say, a careful step towards other women, as an expression of empathy understood as a practice of one’s own freedom’ [12]. The development of

digital media has given a wider scope for the establishment of such sisterhood. Firstly, the development of digital media has allowed feminist discourses from different regions to infect each other at a faster rate. This means that slogans or motifs with a certain feminist connotation can also be recognised by feminists from another culture who speak a different language. Secondly, communication between women from different educational backgrounds and different classes is gradually becoming possible. Under the influence of Hashtag Feminism, feminism is no longer the 'privilege' of elite and intellectual women. It has helped to create sisterhoods amongst a wider group of feminists. In the context of global capitalism, female workers exploited by the unfair structure of the fast-fashion industry have been brought to the attention of the participants of fourth-wave feminism. Based on the call for sisterhood, feminist activists began to advocate for awareness of the unfair fashion system on social media platforms [14]. The tag of 'Who Made My Clothes?' brought to light the disadvantaged female workers in the fashion manufacturing chain. They are trapped in toxic, difficult working conditions and inadequate wages [14]. The movement has been criticised for being Eurocentric and ignoring the reality that many women have yet to get paid work. However, above all its huge impact remains strong evidence that social media has a huge potential in the development of the fourth feminism movement. The involvement of social media has made transnational, cross-cultural feminist movements a reality. Secondly, it proves that sustainable fashion and feminist collaborations are noticed by the public. The calls for attention to the conditions of female workers and equal pay have become the goal of feminist fashion during this period.

However, T-shirts produced by fast fashion merchants were also included in the feminist wardrobe of this period. For example, Monki, a sub-brand of H&M, used 'empowering young women to stand up for themselves and others' as a theme in its designs and advertisements [15]. As discussed in Part II, there were many sustainable, repurposed elements in the feminist revolutionary wardrobe of this period. Feminist badges, pendants, and t-shirts with feminist slogans sourced from local, private designer's brands emerge. Interpretations of these garments usually do not need to be placed in a particular scene or setting. The garments are not entirely appropriated from patriarchal style, and with less 'manipulation' of 'wears' and 'spectators', they can fulfil the need to express feminist ideology, even though they are sometimes criticised for being too superficial.

Differing from the 'rejection of fashion' and the 'reversal of patriarchal style', the relationship between fourth-wave feminism and fashion changed. The focus of feminist revolutionary garments in this period shifted from rebellion to expression. However, it does not mean that the rebellion against the existing patriarchal style disappeared, rather means that the protest of revolutionary garments was aimed at a wider range of targets, from the patriarchal disciplining of the female body to the oppression of the whole patriarchy system. By 'printing' simple, direct slogans on badges, pendants, and daily clothing, the messages conveyed by revolutionary garments were less likely to be misinterpreted and misappropriated and received and interpreted more quickly in the meanwhile.

## 5 Conclusion

This paper focuses on the evolution of revolutionary garments within the fourth feminist movement. In resistance to patriarchy, the goals of revolutionary governments are no longer limited to fighting against the oppression of women's bodies by patriarchy but have expanded to include the intersection of women's workplace conditions, environment protection, and many other issues with feminism. Social media provides a space for feminists across the globe to communicate, offering the possibility of sisterhood between women from different cultures, regions, and classes, which is an important element of feminist resistance to various forms of patriarchal oppression. To seek sisterhood, simple, easily recognisable symbols made it easier for feminists from different cultures to identify with each other. Pins, badges, hats, baseball caps, bandanas, t-shirts, pendants, and other clothing and decorative items provided a 'surface' on which to 'print'. These easily reproducible garments have a simpler symbolic system and borrow less from the patriarchal style system than the previous feminist revolutionary garments. As a result, readings of these garments are not dependent on a particular scene, which means that they are less likely to be appropriated and distorted by the patriarchal system. These fourth-wave feminist revolutionary clothing and fashion have been criticised for being

superficial and in danger of being exploited by over-consumerism, but the potential of these garments in feminist propaganda is still hard to ignore.

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