

Fashion and Feminism: Role of Clothing in Shaping Feminist Discourses and Identities

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Abstract

Fashion has consistently served as a powerful medium for self-expression, identity formation, and social commentary. This research delves into the intricate relationship between fashion and feminism, investigating how clothing has been both a reflection of feminist ideologies and a catalyst for social change. The study traces feminist movements across history, showing how fashion- from suffragette symbolism to 70's unisex styles to digital-age activism -has expressed and shaped gender politics. The research focuses on the symbolic, practical, and performative dimensions of fashion in feminist movements, exploring how clothing challenges societal norms, asserts individual and collective agency, and fosters solidarity within and across communities. It critically examines the duality of fashion as both a tool for empowerment and a site of potential compromise, where commercialism and patriarchal influences may dilute feminist intentions. By employing a mix method approach—including quantitative and qualitative interviews with activists and designers, content analysis of media representations, and archival studies of feminist artifacts, Results show that fashion plays a significant role in self-expression and it helps individuals express their empowerment and identity. However, concerns for commercialization dilutes feminist messages increasing its susceptibility to commodification. Other influencing factors include social, economic, cultural and other social factors. The study contributes valuable insights to the discourse on fashion and feminism and underscores the need for raising awareness how market forces can exploit feminist ideals that might help individuals make informed choices and push for ethical and purpose-driven fashion.

Keywords: Feminism, Fashion, Social Movements, Self-Expression, Gender Equality, Cultural Identity and Empowerment

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Introduction

Fashion transcends mere clothing; it is a cultural artifact that mirrors and molds the values, ideologies, and identities of individuals and societies. Across history, fashion has served as both a silent and vibrant language—a non-verbal form of expression that articulates identity, challenges norms, and provokes societal reflection. The dynamic interplay between fashion and feminism offers a compelling lens through which to examine the intersections of gender, identity, and power, illuminating how garments can become tools of resistance, empowerment, and collective solidarity.

Feminism represents the pursuit of gender equality, and its influence is increasingly reflected in the designs of modern fashion brands. Clothing is a useful way to reflect personal aesthetics and fashion brands. Additionally, marketing and fashion trends adopt the ideas, and it shows impact on individuals and society. This trend can be traced back in history. Hence, it can be synthesized that feminist discourse influenced the fashion trends and fashion trends were used as an expression for women's rights. Historically, women have wielded fashion as a powerful medium to assert agency and challenge restrictive societal expectations. The suffragette movement of the early 20th century exemplifies this phenomenon. Suffragettes strategically wore white dresses accented with purple and green, symbolizing purity, hope, and dignity, to counter the stereotype of militant feminists and present their political struggle with an air of respectability (Rappaport, 2002). Similarly, the liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s saw countercultural fashion trends—like mini-skirts, bell-bottoms, and unisex clothing—emerge as powerful symbols of rebellion against traditional gender roles and broader societal structures, reflecting a collective yearning for individual freedom (Breward, 2003).

In the contemporary era, fashion and feminism intersect in increasingly complex and visible ways. Fourth-wave feminism, characterized by its embrace of digital activism, has brought fashion into the realm of social media campaigns and viral movements. Cao (2023) explores the influence of feminism in fashion brands clothing like Dior, promoted the concept of feminism when a female creative director joined it in 1026 and the slogans appeared “WE SHOULD ALL BE FEMINITS”. Hashtags like #MeToo and body positivity initiatives often integrate fashion to amplify their messages of inclusivity and empowerment. Slogan-laden T-

shirts, diverse representation in advertisements, and collaborations between brands and activists have blurred the lines between activism and commercialism, enabling fashion to serve as a vehicle for feminist ideals. However, this growing commercialization raises critical questions: does the commodification of feminist fashion dilute its transformative potential, prioritizing marketability over ideological substance (Gill, 2016; Banet-Weiser, 2018).

This study aims to explore the relationship between fashion and feminism, examining its symbolic, practical, and performative dimensions. By exploring key feminist movements across historical and contemporary contexts, it aims to uncover how feminist ideologies shape and are shaped by fashion trends. Additionally, it critically assesses whether fashion functions as a tool of empowerment or inadvertently perpetuates patriarchal structures. Employing qualitative methodologies, this research seeks to offer a nuanced perspective on the dualistic role of fashion as both a battleground and a bridge for feminist expression, shedding light on its transformative power and inherent limitations.

The study is significant because fashion has been a tool of expression and a medium for political and social resistance. It helps understanding the gender norms, body politics and cultural construction femininity and masculinity. Additionally, the debate about whether fashion brands genuinely support feminist values or exploit them for profit. Understanding these concerns can help challenge rigid beauty standards as well as might help people make informed decisions and also adding themes for future research about ethical labor practices in the fashion industry.

Review of the Literature

The intersection of fashion and feminism has long intrigued scholars across disciplines such as sociology, cultural studies, and gender studies. This literature review examines key theoretical frameworks, historical insights, and contemporary critiques to provide a comprehensive understanding of how clothing shapes and reflects feminist movements.

Theoretical Framework

❖ Fashion as a Sociopolitical Tool

Fashion is more than a consumerist phenomenon; it is a sociopolitical tool that enables individuals and groups to communicate identity, ideology, and resistance. The semiotic approach proposed by Barthes (1983) highlights fashion as a system of signs that conveys messages beyond aesthetic appeal. Barthes (1967) applied semiotics to fashion, arguing that fashion is a coded system of communication where clothing items carry socially constructed meanings. Therefore, fashion becomes not limited to just clothing, but it becomes an expression of identity, status and ideology. For instance, wearing a designer brand clothing signifies wealth and status. Feminist scholars have adapted this perspective to explore how clothing becomes a medium of gendered resistance (Crane, 2000).

Entwistle (2015) emphasizes that clothing operates within the “fashion-body nexus,” where societal norms about gender, class, and power are inscribed onto bodies through fashion. This aligns with Butler’s (1990) concept of performance, suggesting that clothing is integral to the performance of gender roles and their subversion. For instance, clothing was used to challenge gender norms such as pink vs. blue, skirts vs. pants etc. Additionally, it also explains the subversive fashion when the binary expectations were disrupted by wearing unisex and gender-fluid fashion styles. Butler’s perspective opens possibilities to understand gender fluidity, resistance and subversion. Fashion, therefore, is not merely a reflection of feminist ideologies but an active participant in their construction. Feminist movements challenged the fashion industry’s standards of femininity and beauty aiming to dismantle patriarchal hierarchies (Jamal & Mohammed, 2023).

Historical Context

❖ Clothing in Feminist Movements

The historical relationship between fashion and feminism provides critical insights into how clothing has been used to challenge gender norms and advocate for social change.

❖ Suffragette Movement

During the early 20th century, suffragettes strategically used fashion to counteract stereotypes of feminists as unruly and unfeminine. The suffragette color scheme—white for purity, purple for dignity, and green for hope—symbolized unity and respectability (Rappaport, 2002). This deliberate use of fashion enabled suffragettes

to present themselves as both modern and respectable women, aligning their political demands with societal expectations.

The “New Woman” concept gained popularity during the late 19th and early 20th century as women actively campaigned for the right to vote. The Library of Congress exhibition, *The Gibson Girl's America* Drawings by Charles Dana Gibson, as an independent, often well-educated young woman who embrace a more public and active role than previous generations.

There were additional influencing factors along with feminist ideology, for instance, the adoption of practical clothing style enabled greater mobility for women as they entered the workforce during World War I. Gradually, trousers became acceptable for women and were no longer regarded as eccentric. Chanel, Christian Dior introduced new fashion concepts based on these ideas as “The New Look” for women.

❖ **Liberation Movements of the 1960s and 70s**

The 1960s and 1970s saw the rise of second-wave feminism, where fashion became a tool to reject traditional gender roles. Some feminists embraced the anti-fashion movement and they adopted ‘hippie’ style cutting their hair short, leaving their legs and underarms unshaved and this self-representation became an important element of second wave of feminism (Hilman, 2013). The adoption of unisex clothing, such as jeans and t-shirts, symbolized the rejection of rigid gender binaries (Breward, 2003). The “bra-burning” myth, while largely exaggerated, became a cultural symbol of feminist resistance against the objectification of women’s bodies (Dow, 2003). This resistance to conventional patriarchal fashion items led to the thought that feminism is ‘anti-fashion’. However, the trends kept on evolving and changing with the time. The strategy reversed in the 1980s by challenging the idea of “dressing like a man” (Hao, 2024).

❖ **Third-Wave Feminism and Riot Grrrl Aesthetic**

In the 1990s, third-wave feminism embraced a more inclusive and intersectional approach. The Riot Grrrl movement used punk fashion—including DIY clothing, heavy makeup, and combat boots—to challenge beauty standards and patriarchal control over women’s bodies (Marcus, 1992). This era demonstrated how feminist fashion could simultaneously critique and reclaim femininity.

Contemporary Perspectives: Fourth-Wave Feminism and Digital Activism

The advent of social media and digital activism in the 21st century has reshaped the relationship between fashion and feminism. Fourth-wave feminism integrates fashion into campaigns for body positivity, inclusivity, and gender equality, often using social media as a platform to amplify messages (Gill, 2016).

❖ Slogan Fashion

Slogan t-shirts have emerged as a popular medium for feminist expression, with phrases like “The Future is Female” and “Nevertheless, She Persisted” becoming ubiquitous. These garments act as wearable declarations of feminist ideals, though critics argue that their commodification risks diluting feminist messages (Banet-Weiser, 2018).

❖ Body Positivity and Inclusivity

The body positivity movement has influenced fashion to prioritize diverse representations of body types, skin tones, and abilities. Brands such as Aerie and Savage X Fenty have challenged traditional beauty standards by featuring models of all shapes and sizes. However, scholars caution that such initiatives can fall into the trap of “performative inclusivity” when diversity becomes a marketing strategy rather than a genuine commitment to change (Taylor, 2020).

❖ Challenges of Commercialization

The commercialization of feminist fashion raises ethical questions about the alignment between feminist principles and capitalist practices. Gill (2016) critiques the “feminist consumer,” arguing that the commodification of feminist ideals often prioritizes profit over genuine advocacy. This tension underscores the need to critically assess the role of fashion within feminist movements.

Critiques and Counterarguments

While fashion has undoubtedly played a significant role in feminist movements, it is not without limitations. Critics argue that fashion’s reliance on consumerism and its ties to exploitative labor practices contradict feminist values (Hoskins, 2014).

Furthermore, the focus on fashion can inadvertently marginalize other forms of activism, privileging visibility over structural change (Trier-Bieniek, 2015).

Additionally, feminist fashion is often criticized for its lack of accessibility. High-fashion brands that adopt feminist rhetoric frequently cater to a narrow demographic, excluding women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. This raises questions about the inclusivity of feminist fashion and its ability to represent diverse voices (McRobbie, 2009).

Emerging Research Directions

Recent studies suggest that future research should explore the intersection of fashion, feminism, and technology, particularly the role of artificial intelligence and virtual reality in shaping feminist narratives. Additionally, there is a growing interest in examining how non-Western feminist movements engage with fashion, offering a more global perspective on the relationship between clothing and gender equality (Ahmed, 2017). In the backdrop of above the study aims:

- To analyze how feminist movements across different historical and cultural contexts have utilized fashion as a tool for challenging societal norms and fostering solidarity.
- To critically evaluate the dual role of fashion as a medium for feminist empowerment and as a site of potential compromise due to commercial and patriarchal influences.

❖ Hypothesis

- Feminist movements have used fashion strategically to challenge norms and foster solidarity, reflecting their socio-political context.
- Fashion empowers feminism but is compromised by commercial and patriarchal influences that dilute its impact.

Methodology

The research used mixed method approach to examine the influence of fashion in the feminist movement. This methodology integrates both open- and closed-ended questions, ensuring a more comprehensive exploration of the research question (Creswell, 2014).

Surveys/Questionnaires: A structured survey with Likert scale questions (e.g., on the influence of fashion, empowerment experience, and commercialization) was used for collecting numerical data. The survey included demographic questions to capture factors like age, education, and occupation. This quantitative data allows for measuring the strength and distribution of attitudes toward feminist fashion, its influence on norms, and its commercialization.

Sampling: This study adopts a convenient sampling method. The researchers approached the alumni members of a business school who were part of a training program. Initially a sample of 150 respondents were expected to reach out online, however, 117 responses were received. Hence a diverse sample of 117 literate, working respondents from Karachi, spanning various age groups, occupations, and cultural backgrounds, was interviewed to ensure the broad applicability of the findings. The ethical procedure was explained, and consent was sought before participating in the study. Data was collected mostly online and some in-person interviews depending on the availability time of the respondents.

Content Analysis: Analyzing fashion symbols (like slogan t-shirts, hijab fashion, etc.) and their cultural significance through qualitative content analysis can offer insights into how different symbols contribute to feminist movements across diverse groups.

❖ Data Analysis

Quantitative Analysis: Descriptive statistics and correlation analysis was used to examine the relationship between variables like age, education, and views on fashion's influence on feminism while thematic analysis was utilized to identify patterns or themes in open-ended responses related to cultural perceptions, commercialization, and empowerment experiences.

❖ Data Interpretation

A total of 117 respondents were interviewed for the study. Data & its interpretation are presented given below.

Category	Subcategory	Percentage	Respondents (n=117)
Age Group and Occupation	18-25 years	35%	41

	26-35 years	30%	35
	36-45 years	20%	23
	46-55 years	15%	18

❖ **Age Group and Occupation**

The sample covers a range of age groups and occupations, with a mix of younger individuals and professionals. Assuming the distribution holds for 117 respondents 35% respondents were from the young age group i.e. 18 to 25. The data is less representative for the 45 plus age group because that represents only 15 percent of the sample.

❖ **Education Level**

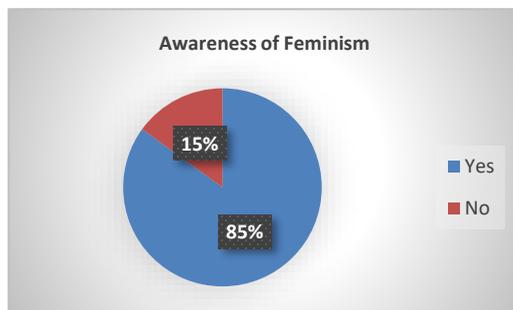
Based on the sample, most respondents have at least an undergraduate degree. Data shows that

Education Level	Undergraduate	40%	47
	Graduate	35%	41
	Postgraduate	15%	18
	High School	10%	11

40% of respondents were undergraduates. As discussed in methodology, all the respondents were engaged with a training program of a business and entrepreneurship program, the sample represents mostly graduate and undergraduate people.

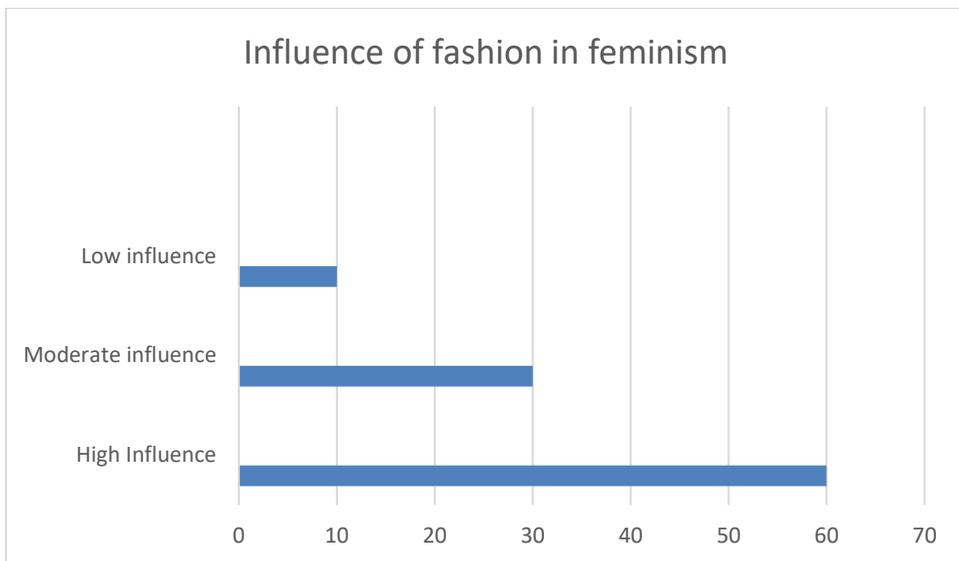
❖ **Awareness of Feminist Movements**

The majority of respondents are aware of feminist movements. The graph shows that most of the respondents were aware of feminism.



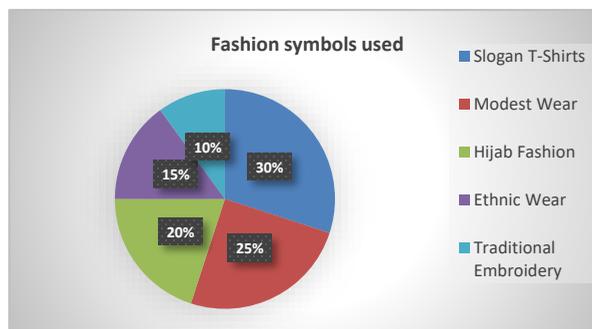
❖ Influence of Fashion in Feminism (1-5)

The respondents were asked about their perception about the influence of fashion on feminism. 60 percent of the respondents agreed that it had a high influence while only ten percent thought it had moderate influence.



❖ Fashion Symbols Used

The most common fashion symbols mentioned are slogan t-shirts, modest wear, hijab fashion, and ethnic wear. Most of them thought wearing slogan T-shirts shows the ideology of people. For instance, 20 percent suggested that hijab shows Muslim woman identity. There are also some ethnic wear examples are Sindhi ajrak, Balochi embroidered dress.



❖ **Perceived Impact on Norms**

The majority of the respondents i.e. 70 percent thought that fashion challenged Gender Norms and presented an empowered Image. Young generations are breaking the traditional norms of wearing traditional attire salwar kameez and dupatta. They are mostly wearing jeans, long shirts, or jeans and T-shirts. These trends are popular not only for boys but also for girls. 10 percent respondents were skeptical and seen limited or no effect related to fashion. In open ended questions respondents were asked how they see empowerment. The choice of words boosted confidence, increased Visibility.

❖ **View on Commercialization**

Respondents showed their concern about commercialization or exploitation of fashion trends. 40 percent thought that fashion is over commercialized and exploited, while the other 30 percent had a view that it had a positive effect but that also dilutes the positive impact. The views on commercialization vary, but concerns about exploitation or dilution are significant. Assuming the pattern holds:

Fashion and feminism are closely tied in the perceptions of this group, with many seeing fashion as a tool for empowering women and challenging traditional norms. On the other hand, commercialization is a double-edged sword. it provides visibility but may also dilute or exploit the feminist message. Cultural representation and the diversity of fashion choices reflect the complex relationship between feminism, identity, and societal norms.

In this research, the findings mostly reflect perspectives of young age group, who are aware of feminism or feminist movement in Pakistan because of Aurat March. Since 2018, the women's movement in Pakistan got a fresh start by organizing Aurat March young feminist, human rights, and women rights activists, mostly students, survivors of gender-based violence, transgenders, artists, lawyers and like-minded men to support gender equality and social justice. The March got instant attention, and the debate started about many slogans but particularly "mera jism meri marzi" which is a literal translation of the slogan "my body my choice" and it faced intense

criticism from the people, including, men and women, who thought that it's against the religious and traditional segments of the society. Some progressive writers highlighted that people are not understanding the meaning of the slogan, my body my choice, it is the right of a woman over her body, saving her from all kinds of violence and discrimination. Interestingly, the heated debate flares when International Women's Day comes closer, and after few heated debates it subsides till the next year. In addition, the Aurat March brought the ideas of sexuality and body autonomy for discussion on public platforms, such as social media, initiating the debate which once was considered a taboo for Pakistani society.

Feminist movements have used fashion strategically to challenge norms and foster solidarity, reflecting their socio-political context.

This study shows that 60% of respondents rated fashion's influence on feminism as 4 or 5 (high impact), indicating that fashion is indeed seen as a powerful tool for self-expression and social change. This shows that fashion can be a medium for communicating feminist ideals and challenging traditional norms. The study confirms the idea that fashion brands have created image of women around 'power' and 'strength' (Chen, 2020). The data supports the idea that fashion plays a significant role in self-expression and social change within feminist movements. 70% of respondents believed that fashion has either "challenged gender norms" or "empowered image," reflecting how fashion can be an effective vehicle for social change. This aligns with the hypothesis that fashion significantly influences social norms and self-expression. 65% of respondents reported a positive empowerment experience through fashion (e.g., boosted confidence, increased visibility). This reinforces the idea that fashion helps individuals express their empowerment and identity.

The question remains here that although the fashion industry is promoting diversity and negating stereotype gender trends, we need to consider the class and social and cultural difference, that who have access to these items and how are they perceived by other marginalized groups. This study has limitations because it shows a perspective of urban, upper middle class educated young people, while we need more studies beyond these perspectives.

Fashion empowers feminism but is compromised by commercial and patriarchal influences that dilute its impact

The analysis validates the hypothesis that fashion used in feminist movements significantly influences self-expression and social change, particularly by challenging gender norms and empowering individuals. However, its effectiveness is moderated by cultural, economic, and societal factors. The results partially validate this hypothesis. While 65% of respondents reported experiencing empowerment through fashion, 40% expressed concerns that commercialization has led to over-exploitation and dilution of feminist messages. Additionally, 30% viewed fashion's role as positive but susceptible to commodification, indicating a nuanced relationship between fashion, feminism, and market forces. Wallenberg (2023) highlights that fashion, and feminism must come together through a critical approach and for that fashion must become a political act, rejecting the economic system that mainstream fashion upholds. One way of doing is to refuse cheap fashion and include the local and handmade.

In conclusion, the significance of fashion and its influence on self-expression and identity cannot be ignored. It was used in earlier women's movement as a tool to challenge patriarchal norms, later feminists rejected the fashion in 70s and in 80s and onwards again new strategies were adopted. Based on the findings of this study it is suggested that brands and activists should focus on creating feminist fashion that maintains its authenticity and alignment with feminist ideals, avoiding over-commercialization. This can help preserve the empowerment message and prevent the dilution of the movement. Furthermore, fashion, used to express feminism should be sensitive to cultural contexts. Recognizing that fashion's impact varies across different cultural backgrounds can enhance its effectiveness in promoting empowerment and self-expression in diverse communities. For further research we need to expand the scope of this research and include an intersectional approach because fashion is not a singular experience; it is shaped by race, class, culture and body politics.

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- The authors agree to take responsibility for every facet of the work, making sure that any concerns about its integrity or veracity are thoroughly examined and addressed

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