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Feminist t-shirts: communicating politics through an intertextual approach

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Mestrado em Comunicação, Cultura e Tecnologias da Informação

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SOCIOLOGIA
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Departamento de Sociologia, Escola de Sociologia e Políticas Públicas

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Resumo

O movimento feminista tem um extenso histórico, inserido na agenda política de diferentes formas, através de vagas associadas às prioridades e reivindicações do movimento na forma como atua. Testemunhando a quarta vaga do movimento feminista, torna-se relevante compreender as semelhanças e mudanças na maneira como feministas se organizam e comunicam numa sociedade conetiva. Nesta sociedade, onde um movimento internacional como o feminismo opera, é essencial pensar criticamente sobre a relação do movimento social e as suas características de visibilidade e vocabulário online. Esta dissertação visa refletir criticamente sobre o aparecimento de objetos na cultura popular relacionados ao movimento feminista, mais especificamente t-shirts com mensagens feministas, no sentido de compreender quais fatores validam esses objetos enquanto meios de comunicação política.

Palavras-chave: feminismo, visibilidade, vocabulário feminista, ativismo, comunicação política, intertextualidade.

Abstract

The feminist movement is one with an extensive historical background, brought into the political agenda in different forms, through waves associated with the priorities and claims of the movement in its actuation. Experiencing the fourth wave of the feminist movement, it becomes of relevance to understand the resemblances and changes in the way feminists organise and communicate in a connective society. In this society, where an international movement such as feminism operates, it is essential to think critically on the relationship between the social movement and its online characteristics with visibility and vocabulary. This dissertation aims to reflect critically on the appearance of feminist related popular culture objects, specifically t-shirts with feminist messages, to understand which factors validate those objects as a way of political communication.

Keywords: feminism, visibility, feminist vocabulary, activism, political communication, intertextuality.

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1. Introduction

The reappearance of the feminist movement in the political agenda and the ways the social movement has reached out for visibility, have been of interest for many scholars, that explain the formation of a fourth wave feminism, emphasising how the internet “has facilitated the creation of a global community of feminists who use the internet both for discussion and activism” (Munro, 2013, p. 23). Significantly, this community of feminist activists engage in online spheres with specific vocabularies, being also exposed to neoliberal economies of visibility, which commodifies trends into consumer-oriented products.

With the popularisation of certain aspects within the feminist movement, such as having “feminism” inserted in cultural events - Hollywood galas, Beyoncé concerts and certain social media pages - feminism started to be represented in fashion pieces and displayed by brands such as Dior in fashion weeks across the globe, later, commercialised as “feminist t-shirts” by fast fashion brands and local producers.

The following dissertation explores the connections established between these feminist t-shirts and the feminist movement, as the research question enquires if in the current context of feminism, a t-shirt can be a vehicle of political communication.

Subsequently one expects to explore the criteria and different variants determining if a t-shirt is a political object of communication, and how people engaged in the feminist movement (in Portugal) perceive the usage of t-shirts with feminist messages. Furthermore, it is expected to achieve clarity on the conditions in which acts of communication can be considered political actions, to explore the diversity and potential of objects/vehicles used to communicate political ideals. As a result of this exploration, one expects to reflect on methods used by fourth wave feminists to reach visibility, diving in the concepts of activism and feminism.

The study of this theme involves an analysis on the current forms of feminism and how text circulates in what is called popular culture, available and learned by engaged feminists, which also implies an ideological economic reflection, inserted in the academic fields of political communication and cultural studies.

In order to put the presented objectives to practice, this dissertation’s body is structurally divided into the introduction, literature review, the methodological choices, results and analysis, and the conclusion of the findings. Following the literature review, chapters two to five explore: 2) activism and how social movements are organised within a connective society; 3) feminism and its interactions with social media, as well as some examples of economic approaches to feminism; 4) the influence of text and vocabulary within the movement; 5) readings on previous studies on the appearance of t-shirts with feminist messages. In chapter six, the methodological approaches are presented, and chapter seven is where the results and discussion are explored. The last chapter regards the conclusions from the dissertation.

2. Activism and social movements

In democracy and governance, there is a certain status quo and harmony a government aims at protecting, known as its core democratic values. Alongside with governance, there are protests, and marches that aim at letting the citizens express democratically their concerns and beliefs on what needs to be changed in the way people rule for the many.

This act of protest is activism – a public display of discontent with ones’ government and its ways of following the process of policy making, combined with shared motivations between citizens of what is discussed in the public arena “(...)public deliberation and problem solving determines how they see themselves as members of their political community” (Habermas, 2006, p. 412).

Activism aims at public life, and sometimes it can be considered as counter hegemonical as it is part of a citizens’ movement aimed at improving political decisions that have been instituted by government, or to contest some of these decisions (Harlow & Guo, 2014, p. 465).

People have always found their way of organising into multitudes that agree into some change that needs to be made towards their rights, and that is the beginning of the creation of a social movement – in other words, the group of people that are protesting or in favour of a certain right/ law/belief: “Social movements are characterized by a group’s long-term contestation of authority and challengers’ interactions with power holders as they try to incite social change” (Harlow & Guo, 2014, p. 465).

Being political nowadays seems like a natural task for some people, opinions circulate in the most articulated and diverse forms of expression, on social media, but also in the ways people make themselves be perceived (Bennett, 2003, p. 3; George & Leidner, 2019, p. 5; Kavada, 2015, p.2).

When thinking about social movements, it is always simple for the mind to associate situations to which we connect, or that we see around us, such as the LGBTQI+ rights movement , the suffragettes, Occupy Wall Street, and recently, the #MeToo movement, in a larger scale.

Social movements originate in contexts that are mainly explained by the need of citizens to act or manifest disagreement. The role displayed by social media in social movements can be understood as a dynamic environment, autonomous, self-expansive and interactive, which makes the process of connectivity extremely shared: “(...) have often been impressive in terms of speed of mobilization, scope of issues, and the ability to focus public attention on these issues in the short term” (Bennet & Segerber, 2011, p. 773).

Three factors must be considered while thinking of online social movements. The first one is traditional forms of organizations, and their structures – most do not answer to civil societies’ needs and expectations – commonly political parties and Non-Governmental Organisations. According to Hibbing & Teiss-Morse (2002, p.3), it has become more challenging for public institutions to engage citizens in the political sphere, feeling safety and stability in the democratic structure, and not having the need to act in the political realm. Sometimes, citizens feel politics are inefficient, and this vision, according to

Dahlgren (2009, p.25) creates contentment about policy making, which leads to conformity with the systemic options of governance.

The second point to consider is how civil society actors all converge and work together in certain topics, to close a gap between the state and citizens, “(...)as states tend to lose control or meet with competition from other spheres over the authoritative allocation of values in society, citizens seek new arenas for political participation” (Stolle, Hooghe & Micheletti, 2005; p. 251).

Social movements gain strength through the sharing of similar aims and values, about social and cultural conduct: citizens do not look for institutions to represent them, but they look for institutions to fulfil a certain political wish/need. These movements correspond to citizens’ needs by claiming values that are transversal, on specific themes.

Some may argue that nowadays, citizens do not get involved into politics or the political life. This affirmation is not necessarily true, as old parameters that could be measured before, do not apply to the new social dynamics of interconnectivity and social media “(...)the internet and political consumerism are both adding to the tools of political activism, especially among engaged citizens” (Dalton, 2008; p. 91). As Bennett and Segerberg (2012) explain, the third factor is the symbiotic relations between citizens and these extremely globalized networks generated through the sharing of values and ideologies. This connection generates social movements, that resist and create new alternatives for social realities.

The biggest example of such resides in protests – connections between individual producers of content and their networks that reach the population: “(...)‘broadly disseminating feminist ideas, shaping new modes of discourse about gender and sexism, connecting to different constituencies, and allowing creative modes of protest to emerge’” (Baer, 2016, p. 18, apud Locke et al., 2018, p. 5). Personalized accounts share these types of content, that reach a broader and sometimes global audience, through social media, emails, and other online coordinated platforms, this type of network helps movements with goals such as visibility and agency to introduce topics directly into the public arena.

2.1. New media and activism

There is a shift in how news media, consumers and independent media have reconstructed the shaping and informative content about politics and the political capital: social media gained a new significance and importance degree in informing citizens (Gurevitch et al., 2009, p. 175).

This event can be explained by its very mutable and always changing content, that allows quick shares on different causes and links between societies’ interest. Social media are considered a support for political issues and the linkage between people and their common political concerns (Locke et al., 2018, p. 5).

The success of social media outlets on political matters resides on simple and easier to share political messages, that directly reach the audiences engaged in the same media “(...) using common

digital technologies such as Facebook or Twitter. Those media feeds are often picked up as news sources by conventional journalism organizations” (Bennett & Segerber, 2012, p.742).

Bonds between individuals and social media develop and strengthen into chain reactions that can serve as an impulse for a movement, once the sharing becomes self-sustained by those involved. These bonds can promote new ways to be in the political sphere, and most importantly, they make path for collective/ connective action, into challenging preestablished values and beliefs on public institutions.

Social movements exist in a networked society, or as Bennet and Segerberg (2012) would have it, a connective and (sometimes collective) society. It is very important to consider how they are generated, the dynamics in which they evolve, the values that sustain a movement, and the ideas and ideological stands that shape them. Nevertheless, these movements always search for a pragmatic approach to social concerns and in consequence, a will for social change, that comes from all the people that join and give voice to these collective ways of political participation.

This connective society explores the potential to new ways into which people in a social movement communicate, and are engaged in different topics: “interpersonal networks are enabled by technology platforms of various designs that coordinate and scale the networks, the resulting actions can resemble collective action” (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, p. 752).

This new social dynamic of participation becomes “entitled as self-motivating (...) personally expressive”, people identify with a cause and share content related to it, recognised by peers, giving way to a networked sharing, social networking involves co-production and co-distribution, revealing a different economic and psychological logic: co-production and sharing based on personalized expression (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, p. 752).

3. Feminism and social media

The feminist movement found its core values through years and years of women's struggle for equal rights. From suffragettes to nowadays, four waves have defined the insurgence of feminist ideology into the political agenda, and different were the ways in which the movement shift its premises (Munro, 2013; Charles, Wadia, Ferrer-Fons, & Allaste, 2018).

Charles, Wadia, Ferrer-Fons, and Allaste (2018, p.23) refer to how activism and social movements are often portrayed in waves, and most of the activities are characterized through these waves as a way of stating the most important characteristics in the time they surge, intertwined with periods of less alluring activity. Feminism is one of the social movements often explained through waves, resulting from changes in the way the movement organizes and makes itself perceived to the public and followers. It has been critiqued by the way its wave organization disregards the continuous characteristics of the movement, and such waves work more often as a division in the timeline of the movement than a complementary addition.

Nowadays, activism is again among the hot topics, and theorists have stated that such phenomena was enabled by the usage of internet and social media, providing a different arena in which social movements can broaden their reach.

Witnessing the current fourth wave of feminism, countless are the studies that define the way in which the movement has shifted back into visible arenas and has regained strength among feminist stands (Chamberlain, 2017; Knappe & Lang, 2014; Munro, 2013). Such change is defined by many as the social media and digital platforms effect, giving visibility to the organisation of social movements:

“the existence of a feminist ‘fourth wave’ has been challenged by those who maintain that increased usage of the internet is not enough to delineate a new era. But it is increasingly clear that the internet has facilitated the creation of a global community of feminists who use the internet both for discussion and activism” (Munro, 2013, p. 23).

Or we can also see it as “distinguishable from its predecessors by its basis in digital culture, a view that has been taken up by academic commentators” (Charles et al., 2018, p.24).

Forth wave feminism is based on “taking back” previous sentiments that were portrayed by the patriarchal society as “weak” and powerless by joining forces within the movement to take again a place into the international political agenda.

But how did feminism make its way back to the agenda? It is believed that feminism was brought back through empowerment in the media, and the presence of women in different sectors of important industries. Some may argue that the “point of no return” came from Hollywood, when in October 2017 actress Alyssa Milano tweeted on her personal account asking for everyone who was a victim of harassment or sexual misconduct to share their stories through the hashtag #MeToo (Rohlinger, 2019, p. 6). After that, many occasions allowed women in high castles to come forward and rise against the

gender pay gap, rape and harassment culture, outdated abortion laws, gender violence and other feminist agenda topics. Social media became the launching platform to debate #MeToo and its entrance into civil society, considered a movement that was effectively visible enough, to lead the discussion of gender disparities in the public arena (Manikonda, Beigi, Liu & Kambhampati, 2018, p. 1). Thousands of women across the globe shared their stories, using the hashtag, and turned it into a debate platform, unravelling patriarchal notions of justice and a tradition of silencing victims.

Nonetheless, feminist ideology and its visibility have also enabled moments to challenge political structures such as #MeToo, the Woman's March and the Global Women's Strike. Some of these movements were already present in society, such as 'Me Too' - one that "(...) initially emerged over a decade ago as part of a grassroots movement spearheaded by the African American activist Tarana Burke, and that it comes on the heels of other mobilisations, such as SlutWalk" (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020, p.18).

The "Me Too movement" started as a website for victims of social injustice, and underprivileged women in 2006, created by Tarana Burke¹. Regardless, the movement only became transnational when women in central mediatic positions turned to it, and in some ways, shifted the stands behind the movement per se. 'Me Too' made its way into the agenda, specially due to anti-Trump stands and the current political panorama, but it was deeply rooted onto social media platforms, and the way they "speak" to the masses (Rohlinger, 2019, p. 6).

The changing ways people communicate political stands influenced the feminist movement too:

"(...) women's understanding of their position in the world and their political struggles is changing. With more and more young feminists turning to the internet, it is imperative that academics consider the effects that new technologies are having on feminist debate and activism" highlighted by Munro (2013, p.25).

In this stage of communication studies, the influence of internet and social media in the way action and power are challenged by social movements is irrefutable: such can be a "powerful resource both for facilitating forms of action which have been evident in previous cycles of protest and for mobilizing young people" (Charles et al., 2018, p.24). Young activists take the lead into the new technology domain, and organise in forms of protest: "(...) the exploitation of new technologies appears more 'natural' to generations of young activists whose protests and grievances in the 2000s have been directed against older generations of power elites" (Charles et al., 2018, p.24).

Nowadays the importance relies on new media - for the renegotiated reconstruction of shared meanings, identities, and narratives, providing a sense of emotion and affections to the actual movement claims. This way, movements suffer a mutation by creating in its members a sense of collective identity,

¹ metoomvmt.org

facilitating an understanding of inequalities, and fuelling individual discontent on such. This identity, of what a movement stands for, is a crucial part of “recruiting participants” and establishing the movement, being a continuous process of “re/negotiation within social movement networks” (Charles et al., 2018, p.24).

Globally, changes in politics such as controversial elections have also had an impact in the feminist movement’s intensity, and its urgency to appear in the agenda, as explained by Banet-Weiser, Gill, and Rottenberg (2020, p.18) – “feminism had already been embraced and rendered desirable by high-power corporate women like Sheryl Sandberg, Hollywood stars like Emma Watson, as well as music celebrities like Beyonce’ – to name just a few”. Feminism has become once again a visible ideology, and as such the authors characterise it as a “feminist renaissance”, hopefully in line with “resistance” to neoliberal logics of feminism.

But how does one define feminism nowadays? So many terms and variants have been awarded to the movement, from the different waves’ approaches, to left-winged feminism (Arruzza et al., 2019), postfeminism and liberal feminism (McRobbie, 2008; Gill, 2016), neoliberal feminism (Rottenberg, 2017), and others. Accessing where feminism can go is of great relevance, throughout history, the movement has reinvented itself time after time, and it is in this context that it serves of great value.

In a manifesto that contains eleven theses, Arruzza, Bhattacharya and Fraser (2019) explain how feminism should be considered a fight for the 99% (an allusion to a slogan already presented in politics – Occupy’s “We are the 99%” protesting against the 1% of the population that controls most of the wealth in society). In their work the authors stress how feminism has regained strength by facing market oriented ideologies that have been corrupting the movement, and in March 2017 isolated local actions gave their place to a transnational strike, that “politized again the international women’s day” (Arruzza et al., 2019, p.22).

Furthermore, the authors explain other forms of feminism supported by capitalism cannot be considered a step forward in the movement’ stands, as “traditional media keeps on portraying feminism in its liberal form” (Arruzza et al., 2019, p.29). This form of feminism is based on meritocracy and not equality, which enhances the disparity between those who are already privileged while it keeps oppressing those who are already in disadvantage. At this moment, feminism has been risking becoming just as a hashtag, a trend, a vehicle used for self-promotion and less used to free the 99%. Numerous events have been converging into this liberal form, such as social media and celebrities that stand as feminists in the sphere.

Regarding how feminism can go on and be inclusive, the authors are adamant – “We need an anticapitalistic feminism – for the 99%” (Arruzza et al., 2019, p.33). Feminism as the authors describe it, must respond to a crisis with historical dimensions that set not only a loss of living quality, as it is now on the verge of a global ecological disaster. Feminism for the 99% is green, against racism, xenophobia, homophobia, and has per basis a socialist ideology.

3.1. Feminism and economic ideologies (postfeminism, neoliberal feminism & popular feminism)

In an age of extremely politicized news media outlets, where slacktivism² and digital activism gain way into social political interactions, we see the feminist movement and its shifts also utilizing methodologies to reach “audiences” or even people that understand its ideology (Chouliaraki, 2013, p. 108; Gurevitch et al., 2009, p. 166; Sjöstrand, 2019, p. 2). The movement had also to adapt its own approach to supporters, and some branches of it embraced an approach closer to the market ideology than assumed.

Three approaches seem closer to the market in which they emerge, but differ in terminology, and in how they were perceived in the social sphere: postfeminism, neoliberal feminism and popular feminism. Banet-Weiser, Gill, and Rottenberg (2020) talk of their different positionings related to the different ways feminism has evolved, taking turns at explaining terminology such as postfeminism, neoliberal feminism and popular feminism, specifically how these “(...) draw on and feed off one another, even as they are not reducible one to another” (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020, p.21).

As for postfeminism, such term came into the feminist studies in the 1990s, as a “(...) way of making sense of paradoxes and contradictions in the representation of women” (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020, p.4). In other words, postfeminism came as a way to interpret how women’s bodies and representations were gaining space into the media sphere, even if involved in contradictory messages such as ‘girl power’ and beauty standards: “(...) an intensified interest in sexual difference, and with the repeated assertion that any remaining inequalities were not the result of sexism but of natural differences and/or of women’s own choices” (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020, p.5). According to Rosalind Gill, it is important to notice the context of postfeminism as a result of a combination between neoliberal ideology, and feminist content:

“(...) much critical work on postfeminism has always attempted to think intersectionally. Key writers on postfeminism such as Angela McRobbie, Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker have all been attentive to difference, in particular writing critically about race and class, with some arguing that the female subject centred by postfeminism is «white and middle class by default»” (Tasker and Negra, 2007, apud Banet-Weiser et al., 2020, p.6).

Opposite to Gill’ and McRobbie’ notions of postfeminism, Catherine Rottenberg developed the term neoliberal feminism – as “(...) powerful and high-profile women were publicly identifying as feminist, something that we hadn’t seen in the past” (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020, p.7). This neoliberal

² For the effects of the current dissertation slacktivism or clicktivism is used to describe the online forms of activism, which sometimes can be seen as an inferior practice “prompts doubts as to the dedication of these participants, and the value of their actions” (Harlow & Guo, 2014, p. 466).

type of feminism “helps to spawn a new feminist subject, one who accepts full responsibility for her own well-being and self-care” (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020, p.7).

Neoliberal feminism is not understood as a “(...) set of economic policies but as a dominant political rationality that moves to and from the management of the state to the inner workings of the subject, recasting individuals as human capital and thus capital-enhancing agents” (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020, p.8). This concept can be understood while exploring the concept of neoliberalism and its dependence on human capital and exploitation. In these terms, neoliberalism’s first concern is the market and its’ wellbeing, as to produce wealth. This type of feminism can be understood in a “hyper-individualised” constructive form of womanhood as it is very easy to popularise and “(...) while it might acknowledge that the gendered wage gap and sexual harassment are signs of continued gender inequality” (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020, p.8), its solutions still are unexplored, only relying on the market of women in the task force, as consumers.

Popular feminism, the third branch of feminism in analyses, to gain strength nowadays, is sustained by different sets of social conditions: “(...) a continuum, where spectacular, media-friendly expressions such as celebrity feminism and corporate feminism achieve more visibility, and expressions that critique patriarchal structure and systems of racism and violence are obscured” (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020, p.9). Popular feminism materializes in the presence of the feminist ideology in different spheres of public life, specifically in the different platforms to which individuals are exposed, through which it becomes visible, or even trendy. Most importantly, popular feminism is one of many ways in which feminist ideology is reproduced along with neoliberal ways of living.

According to Banet-Weiser (2018, p. 1), feminism can be considered popular when: 1) in discourses and practices circulated in popular and commercial media – which provides feminism with accessibility beyond niche groups and academic interest; 2) popular feminism becomes just as the word implies, as it is liked and admired by people and groups with the same interests and values, which brings popularity; 3) the “popular” domain is also a space of struggle in which competing demands battle for power and for visibility. What these assumptions mean for Banet-Weiser (2018, p. 1) is that in the public sphere there are different types of feminism that battle each other for visibility, as a nuanced form of defending the same core of values differentiated by its applicable methodology. And in these terms, some become more visible than others, by its popularity³.

In its fundamentals, popular feminism is a junction of all that is popular in the social sphere about the ideology of the movement, with other terms such as hashtag activism/clicktivism/slacktivism and the political expression of celebrities.

On the other hand, McRobbie exposed how feminism has been instrumentalized by corporate consumer culture, passing as a neoliberal feminist guise: “(...)by these means including the

³ The author further explains how feminism as a movement is accessible and admired by everyone, being in no need to be defended.

instrumentalization of a specific modality of 'feminism' that there emerges into existence a neoliberal culture, with global aspirations, which has as its ideal subject the category of 'girl'" (McRobbie, 2008, p.531). These conditions made young consumers approachable by a corporate culture that made itself the champion of social causes, as popular feminism has insinuated itself into the markets and young women's lives.

Nowadays, feminism has been embedded into consumer culture, noticed through the proliferation of empowerment and womanhood vocabulary into consumer culture and its different platforms: "(...) many of the forms directed towards girls and young women seem to have embraced what has been troublesomely labelled 'popular feminism'" (McRobbie, 2008, p.532). This process of having feminism as a commodity in the consumer sphere can lead to what the author described as "(...) the effect of 'undoing' feminism, and of actively discouraging its renewal" (McRobbie, 2008, p.532).

When feminism became popular and was celebrated into different cultures, McRobbie expressed the concern that people might have started to feel like the politics behind feminist struggles were no longer needed, including the activism form of politics. Consumer culture tried to assume the advocate "role" for women's rights: in other words, postfeminism allowed the global market to re-invent "(...) the category of youthful womanhood, for whom freedom has now been won; or, in the case of developing countries, is in the process of being won" (McRobbie, 2008, p.533).

The focus in these themes has gone unnoticed in feminist writing, but twelve years later, a good part of culture studies has been dedicated to them: "(...) because aspects of feminism have found their way into the narrative content, these pleasures are now deemed less problematic even, seemingly, delightful" (McRobbie, 2008, p.534), especially regarding to popular feminism.

Conceiving the progresses of feminism as a commodity does not imply that it is good for the movement. Further, it would be necessary to look in a more critical way to the market-oriented options that are clearly laid out:

"(...) consumer culture seeks to triumphantly supplant the functions of the state (education and family) and position itself as the site of truth in regard to what it is to be a young woman today and to be recognized as such" (McRobbie, 2008, p.545).

Past nostalgia from other waves of the feminist movement might have interfered with the way feminism is predicated as a social movement, leaving out a critique to the means, through which young women are nowadays exposed to the consumer feminist culture and an effective reorientation of their ways into being active towards the movement, in a consumerist version of feminism "(...) merely adding a feminist voice to various moral panics" (McRobbie, 2008, p.548).

Inserted into the neoliberal culture, feminism and its popular cult is presented as a choice to consumers: "(...) popular feminism clearly connects to these neoliberal principles of individualism and entrepreneurialism, and in this sense neoliberal feminism helped construct the context for popular feminism to flourish in popular culture and media" (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020, p.10).

Contrary to what could be expected, these new ways of manifesting feminist ideology do not stand against the economic system, neither do they challenge hierarchical statuses, sexist culture or racist structures embedded in and hence made compatible with western societies. These feminisms are embedded in a structure of neoliberalist values that encourages women to achieve economic success and be entrepreneurial.

Popular feminism relates to older forms of feminism that did not challenge any type of structures, the end and the means of popular feminism is to reach visibility and, in a way, create a vocabulary constantly repeated and spread across different spheres and platforms of the consumer culture through visibility and supply-demand chains: “(...) most popular feminisms are typically those that become visible precisely because they do not challenge deep structures of inequities” (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Some resemblances may be assumed between popular feminism and the “(...) postfeminist sensibility in the ideological work it was doing, except that it involved a strong – oftentimes even defiant-sounding – championing of feminism as an identity” (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020, p.13).

Postfeminism is in this way, a lens through which one can understand the current changes and insertions of feminism in the capitalist market, which facilitated the upsurge of neoliberal feminism and popular feminism. One of the biggest questions, then, becomes: “(...) is the cultural work that the new and very visible feminism is doing exactly the same as the cultural work that the postfeminist sensibility was carrying out?” (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020, p.16).

4. Intertextuality – the importance of text in the feminist movement

Interconnectivity and the speed of information nowadays have eased the appearance of new metrics and dialectics through which people communicate in a group or recognize others as similar in the online sphere.

The understanding of intertextuality is important for online socialization, tied with the capacity of adapting different ideologies to a text inserted into popular culture, making it easy to identify. Communication is strongly grounded on textualized information, of very fast consumption, specially text and imagery. Consumers further appropriate coded language and develop understandings and connections through such, by recognizing similar information previously read (Wolf, 1999, p.56).

These connections are not something that happens by coincidence: some may argue that content creators are always aware of trends and dominant social themes, in a way that such are repeated online. Whelehan calls this the ventriloquist effect, in which feminist themes already visible in popular culture are enhanced in visibility through text: “(...) if one feels that understanding intertextual feminist/postfeminist references is the reward for a sophisticated reading of a text” (Whelehan, 2014, p.13).

This chain of textual messages creates a medium in which the spread of political messages is facilitated, especially when a popular theme gains strength, platforms see an opportunity to also incorporate it in their dialogues: “(...) base-texts keep appearing in new cultural expressions as intertextual material – narrative templates, imitated style registers, wandering motifs, parodied elements and simply quotes that will be recognized by the majority of their intended recipients”(Raud, 2016, p. 10).

Written styles and vocabulary are “copied”: as Kvidal-Røvik describes it, “(...) the ad that dresses up as art or art that dresses up as an ad”. Social political messages are then used in ads and reproduced, in what is sometimes called double or multiple coding, since it emphasizes “(...) how postmodern discourse works to create meaning out of the dialectic generated by juxtaposition and the resulting cognitive tension” (Kvidal-Røvik, 2018, p.213).

This aspect is not new to linguistics: as Wolf would have it, content creators with previous knowledge of linguistic codes guide their textual references to converge with these cultural trends (Wolf, 1999, p.56). Creating a successful textual code can assure the consumption and reproductions of the dialectics used, and at the same time, it creates a link into consumers’ vocabulary usage and further association and interpretation of objects or content, that show the same coding dialect:

“(...) a cultural subject comes into being in dialogue with such entities – texts – and inevitably participates in their production as well (...) all activities grounded in meaning, or cultural practices, also construct their participants while being constructed by them in the process: you become a «player» by «playing»”(Raud, 2016, p. 6).

The relations between those who issue information and those that consume it, became a symbiosis of content production in which a new style is generated, often unnoticed, through intertextual messaging, in a fragmented and spread out type of communication: “(...) engagement with increasingly sophisticated media and a visually literate audience can be understood as part of a postmodern condition in which audiences do not find reality in itself satisfactory unless it is recast as fascinating narratives in media” (Kvidal-Røvik, 2018, p.214).

It is well documented how women are constantly exposed to feminist messages (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020; Banet-Weiser, 2018; McRobbie, 2008), which find their way into advertising and marketing, and in this logic, into the consumer market. This advertising and even campaigns lead under the umbrella of feminism connect with emotional values, illustrating how the market is “pitching” to women with connections aimed at each of the viewers individually (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020, p.11). A direct example of such coding can be seen in the following paragraph:

“We can buy ‘Empowered’ crop tops at H&M, or for those feminists who have financial means, we can wear the US\$710 t-shirt designed by Christian Dior that proclaims, ‘We Should All Be Feminists’. We can drink our coffee out of mugs that say, ‘Smash the Patriarchy’ or ‘Women Power’ (and indeed I do drink my coffee out of these mugs!). Pop-up shops in New York, Los Angeles and London have all kinds of feminist merchandise for us to buy and then proudly display our feminism” (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020, p.11).

The neoliberal culture in which western societies are embedded has seen a trend rise, considered by Banet-Weiser, Gill, and Rottenberg (2020, p.11) as “feminist hashtag activism”. This type of activism was facilitated by a capitalist context, in which digital media platforms act as the foundation of all visibility. The popularity and divergence in this type of feminism can, hence, be thought as consequence of these media outlets in which it gained such attention.

According to Banet-Weiser, the discussion about popular feminism is not about its“(...) political intentions that energise a variety of feminist practices; it is about how these political intentions are marshalled by institutions and structures, and what they make available and what they foreclose in terms of politics” (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020, p.12). Popular feminism, providing space and praise for these types of content sharing, through lean-on strategies and empowering vocabulary, relies in many ways on a “platform capitalism” which implies the “(...) emptying or flattening out of the content of meaning, emphasising instead the endless traffic and circulation of this content” (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020, p.12).

5. Feminist objects: the feminist t-shirts phenomena

5.1. Feminist objects

A feminist object can be considered one used by women, described by Bartlett and Henderson as “synonymous or semi-synonymous”, such objects become of feminist usage in certain contexts, and are also defined “(...) by a direct connection with the women’s movement: they are things made by proclaimed feminists for movement purposes” (Bartlett & Henderson, 2016, p.161-162).

Diving further into the world of political objects, we can understand the relation between such and a movements’ reach, its visibility into the political agenda, divided into four major categories or classes of feminist objects: “corporeal things, world-making things, knowledge and communicative things, and protest things” (Bartlett & Henderson, 2016, p.162).

Popular and material culture walk side by side with the new creations in feminist ideology, especially as feminist culture is also performative, and always associated with the ways the movement has been expressing itself. The feminist political discourse is one of the most crucial categories in the process: being produced and disseminated, this discourse is spread in different objects and platforms through popular culture and aesthetics (McRobbie, 2008, p.536; McRobbie, 2015, p. 11).

There are two essential things to be retained from feminist objects: the first one is that these objects are politicized, created while the movement evolves, and updated as the concerns are also transformed. In this logic, the second has to naturally be related to the collective identity created and spread in such objects (Bartlett and Henderson, 2016, p.166). For the authors, the use of any type of object by a feminist, can be considered a form of communication between the individual feminist, and the political movement as an expression of identity. A t-shirt can become a feminist object by having “a feminist layer” added to it, such as when printing a political message in it (Bartlett & Henderson, 2016, p. 167; Kvidal-Røvik, 2018, p.6).

Feminism in the form of texts reproduced in the most different platforms and objects, is a subtle hint of how the women’s movement has generated its own vocabulary and discursive approach (Gill & Scharff, 2011, p. 11). When a t-shirt has a political statement in it we can understand the aim to communicate a certain ideology, and in feminist t-shirts the feminist rhetoric gives new purpose to the object, politicizing it and making it an activist object according to Bartlett and Henderson (2016, p.169) as “a means of circulating feminist politics publicly”.

These objects force the “(...) maker, viewer, or user to confront the now visible gaps in patriarchal ideology” (Bartlett & Henderson, 2016, p.170), t-shirts with feminist sentences are not aimed to inspire change but to circulate a humorous object: “(...) parodic, satirical, witty - and filled with cultural references and allusions” - these objects can express sentiments of being a feminist, or reproduce ironical speeches heard before (Bartlett & Henderson, 2016, p.170).

In western culture, the women’s movement started advocating for fundamental change in patriarchal schemes by, among other strategies, looking for objects that could be a part of that

transformation and then “(...) the women’s movement expanded the definition of politics, so that cultural activism – in the sense of remaking and politicizing literature, art, film, and so on – was an integral part of social transformation”(Bartlett & Henderson, 2016, p.157).

Considering a system to assess objects and ideologies behind their creations can be a start, to understand the importance of studying the relationship between objects and social movements. An example is Jean Baudrillard’ System of Objects that: “(...) identifies the way in which objects are organised into a system of meanings based on their technical, subjective, and ideological aspects. Baudrillard thereby historically contextualizes objects and broadens modes of interpreting material culture” (Baudrillard, 2005, apud Bartlett & Henderson, 2016, p.158).

Therefore, when talking about the women’s movement and how it articulates the role of feminist objects, its materialization became a means in which a whole system was changing accordingly. In other words, the codes, grammar and vocabulary associated with how the feminist movement communicated changed “(...) feminist objects are intrinsically activist objects, that is, the women’s movement remade and invented objects to make feminist things happen” (Bartlett & Henderson, 2016, p.159). In Australia during the second wave of the feminist movement⁴, in the 1960s, the production of feminist objects stood out in the way such were produced, as an economic manifesto against capitalism and production, activist objects were associated with the left wing nature of the movement in the country’s reality (Bartlett & Henderson, 2016, p.159).

5.2. Fashion and feminism

On the era of fourth wave feminism, and social networks as building blocks for raising awareness on women’s rights, the political agenda and the fashion industry met on a symbiotic and subtle way (Björklund, 2010, p.376). It has been a systemic constant how fashion can determine certain social assumptions, as social class, gender and even likes and dislikes, given communicating through fashion is not new (Parkins, 2008, p. 507). May, states the feminine body and the way women dress has always been seen as a reproduction of certain social patterns, but it is also seen as the building block of alternative identities, a way of (re)appropriation and a way to resist to imposed social norms (May, 2016, p.2).

According to Harutyunyan, “fashion has ‘talked’ politics during major political events without us noticing” (Harutyunyan, 2018, p.3). Democracies, especially in the western cultures, have found their ways into different types of expression, individually and collectively, being that fashion has become one

⁴ Second wave feminism “refers mostly to the radical feminism of the women’s liberation movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s” (Kroløkke & Sørensen, 2012, p. 7). This period in feminism was an escalation and increasing of visibility of the feminist cause, being marked by performative activism and the “taking back” of the public arena. This wave of feminism was theoretical and academic, pioneering in studies about women’s issues and producing a lot of vocabulary on gender studies.

of the most important ways of “self-expression, freedom of individual style as well as an opportunity to express political views through clothing pieces and accessories” (Harutyunyan, 2018, p.4).

Feminism, in recent years, has been one of the most inserted ideologies and political statements in fashion pieces, but feminist fashion statements take us back to the 1920s and the suffragettes’ movement:

“(…) during these protests that women started wearing white and made a major fashion statement in a political situation. Perhaps, wearing trousers in the 1920s became the next biggest political move through the help of fashion. Women started rebelling and fighting for their rights through clothes and fashion” (Harutyunyan, 2018, p.12).

The beginning of a bigger debate was in place, womenswear and their civil rights, hand in hand, and after the first step many brands followed, such as Coco Chanel, Yves Saint Laurent, Vivienne Westwood and adding to the list, Katharine Hamnett, who was “(…) considered to be the pioneer to design the slogan t-shirts. Clearly, the t-shirts designed by her had very straightforward political messages all over them” (Harutyunyan, 2018, p.16).

With the increased visibility fashion has presently, it is understandable that the coexistence of fashion and politics can be seen in different arenas, not limited to runways, and that spread through social media “(…) a brand can show support to a political issue either in a subtle way or in a very 'loud', noticeable way” (Harutyunyan, 2018 p.27).

One of the biggest cases of politization in the recent years in fashion was led by ‘Dior’, one high-end fashion brand, when in 2018 “(…) was unapologetically making political statements on the runway and not only” (Harutyunyan, 2018, p.31). The author stresses the involvement of the brand in supporting feminism, creating one fashion piece of feminist clothing that became trendy in social media, a t-shirt that said, ‘We should all be feminist’. This t-shirt’ caption was inspired by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’ book and TEDx talk that titles the same, and its price was US\$ 710.

Since Dior has become more political in the runways its profits and noticeability have also increased: “(…) whether or not Chiuri’s promotion of feminism on the runway is a marketing step or a result of genuine views and intentions, the brand has obviously succeeded in several aspects, due to its political fashion” (Harutyunyan, 2018, p.66).

For Sola-Santiago, the way fashion appropriates trends sometimes disregards historical, cultural and political heritage, being disrespectful and making a fashion item lose its original meaningful purpose (Sola-Santiago, 2017, p.1). This makes people question fashion industry’ ability to understand political causes and the identities behind social movements that some brands then sell. There is a belief that fashion is incapable of taking political stands, undermining and always subverting minor cultures to more established and “marketable” ones (Sola-Santiago, 2017, p.1). The fashion industry choses how and when to amplify a convenient type of political matter, being clear to the author that “(…) wearing political messages has to be trendy to happen” (Sola-Santiago, 2017, p.4).

5.3. Feminist t-shirts

Exploring Exploring the multiple convictions associated with women and their ways of dressing to express convictions, as political expression, as disruptive mechanism, a way of protest, or even a subtle form of implementation of change, women's bodies, aesthetics and clothing are assumed part of a bigger visual culture, assimilated by market ideology (Kotler & Tobacco, 2018, p. 346; Kvidal-Røvik, 2018, p. 7; Sola-Santiago, 2017, p. 6; Parkins, 2018, p. 424).

Fashion and history help clarify who detains power, and how people should dress according to their social statuses due:

“(…) in part to the widespread appropriation of feminist discourse to sell celebrity fashion lines and lifestyle brands, liberal feminist politics are increasingly associated with economic and political elites. Female celebrities are perhaps the most visible and influential proponents of this new high glamour style of popular feminism” (Hopkins, 2018, p. 99).

Acknowledging these assumptions as truthful, it is also true that people play a big part in the economy of supply and demand, particularly because consumers always decide the direction of production, rewarding and empowering certain trends, then transformed into fast fashion products (Kvidal-Røvik, 2018).

When thinking of feminist fashion, Parkins, refers to how feminism has supported its theoretical approach on socialism, providing a critical approach to capitalism (Parkins, 2008, p.501) given feminism, as a theory, has revealed itself as a way of confronting structures of power and dismantle such, as a rhetorical opposition. The author also emphasizes fashion's potential to give visibility to objects that carry theoretical meanings and challenge the structure of power in the feminist agenda: “Fashion, I shall argue, might be usefully conceived as a bridge between feminist cultural theory and some of the more stimulating currents of feminist epistemology” (Parkins, 2008, p.502).

Furthermore, Parkins, elaborates the potential of fashion as clothing materials that can also be described as discursive, in the way they are always connected to the person/body in which they are presented, a “(…) dualism of subject and object (…)” (Parkins, 2008, p. 502). Fashion is seen as a generator of discursive content, and “(…) intimate encounters between consuming subjects - ideologically associated with women - and material things: garments, fabrics, accessories” (Parkins, 2008, p. 502). The act of consuming fashion, in this situation, can reveal itself as a discursive practice that generates collective identities, and even patterns of consumption.

But when an object has meaning inscribed it does not mean that such is immediately perceived: it just means there is a hypothetical chance that people will understand its meaning from the model who wears it, or the potential person to wear it – the body, and the discursive network behind the meaning of such object. As a t-shirt can be covered, it means that the object can pass as non-political, being able to reach certain places than other types of objects would not (Kvidal-Røvik, 2018, p. 6). In practical terms,

we can understand that clothing cannot have significance without a body, and this body does not need to be physical: Parkins, stresses that an item of clothing is always associated with a body, even if imagined – “(...) refers to the materiality of an eventual wearer”. Parkins goes further and says that clothing is “discursively saturated” and is “always shaped and contextualized by fashion” (Parkins, 2008, pp. 506-507).

In Kvidal-Røvik's (2018, p.2) research there are contrasting views on how a fashion item can be perceived as a political communication instrument. Cultural critics from the Frankfurt School could easily interpret this act as a way for the neoliberal ideology to manipulate and enslave consumers into a collective accepted identity: wearing a t-shirt with a political statement does not really produce any type of social change, it only shifts attention from the real problem, to make it a “hit” or “fashionable”, in this specific case, be a feminist (Kvidal-Røvik's, 2018, p.2).

But in a more optimistic way, Kvidal-Røvik also believes t-shirts can be used as resistance objects – if commercialized and sold, they explain a big percentage of consumers that believe in what is sold “(...) socio-political messages placed on fashion T-shirts, circulating in the context of social media, can become a rhetorical resource for resistive communication” (Kvidal-Røvik, 2018, p.7).

The potential of fashion as a tool for feminism relies on its effective way of establishing visibility and especially act as performative influence. This way of looking to the potential of fashion is called agential realism, and it addresses the potentials associated with clothing for feminism:

“(...) the relationship between women and clothing. It also allows intimate dimensions of self to be written into dress and fashion at a theoretical level, a move that is compatible with feminist methodological aims of excavating the social nature of subjective experience” (Parkins, 2018, p. 507).

6. Methodology

The feminist movement has a broad range of influence in the public sphere, ranging from popular culture, to economic matters and most importantly, its social change objectives that keep on being updated as the years go by. Being a movement in the civil society for years, and given its waves organisation, we see the different changes on methods and approaches associated with the movement.

The execution of this dissertation has benefited greatly from a vast and diverse literature review, aimed at establishing a solid basis for the application of the next research methods. When talking about a social movement which impacts different aspects of society as the feminist movement, the way in which we understand its connections is fundamental for a better approach. These connections range from the way social movements organise nowadays, to how the feminist movement divided in different branches of action, was introduced to the neoliberal market, and reproduced in this visible economic system. Visibility, as discussed previously is dependent on different factors, from intertextual connections in popular culture, to celebrity stands which made the feminist movement popular. Popularity originates a different degree of visibility, that then allows the movement to be reproduced in the most diversified objects (physical or not) of popular culture – critiqued by many for leaving out of the feminist movement the discussion and action of social change, transforming the movement in a popular theme, hypothetically undressing it of social change goals.

6.1. Empirical object

The main goal behind this research was exploring the concept of activism within the feminist movement, by understanding how a feminist activist communicates their political stands, and which parameters are used to consider an action as political and in line with the movement's claims. Other goals were also established in this direction as understanding the diversity of objects/vehicles used to communicate political ideals (physical and virtual) and reflect on methods used by fourth wave feminists to reach visibility.

A multidimensional approach is seen as the best method in this specific case, ranging from influence of the literature already presented, and adding examples and uses associated with feminist t-shirts. In this case, an investigation was conducted on how the feminist movement in Portugal organises, how people directly involved with feminist organisations perceive the application and usage of t-shirts with feminist messages. The research question following this logic was: In the current context of feminism, can a t-shirt be a vehicle of political communication? This question aimed at exploring the criteria and different variants determining if a t-shirt is a political object of communication, and how people engaged in the feminist movement perceive the use of t-shirts with feminist messages.

Exploring the different fields and approaches of feminism, one can inductively generate the following hypothesis: Clothing items are a self-expression mechanism, we may consider it a means of

communicating political ideologies; When someone engaged in the feminist movement wears a t-shirt with a political message intentionally, it can be considered an act of political communication; Political messages on clothing items can indicate the presence of popular text in its creation; In gender issues, the usage of the female body and clothing items has always been associated with political acts for the feminist movement.

6.2. Type of method

Considering the execution of goals established in this dissertation, a qualitative method was selected, by exploring the experiences of feminist organisers through interviews, posteriorly transcribed. As the qualitative analysis is conducted, its process is inductive, from the execution of semi structured interviews, occurring within the logic of feminist sensitivity - which implies a sharing of experiences in an informal conversation logic (Bryman, 2012a, p. 410) to discourse analysis that allowed a closer examination and understanding of the data in order to proceed into thematic analysis, which combined allows one to understand communicative and social contexts between informants, as for the existence or not of similarities in vocabulary and concepts.

The people participating in the interviews were selected in a logic of representativity, what this means in practical terms: several feminist organisations, collectives, projects and networks within the Portuguese scopus and operating nationally, were contacted (via e-mail and through social media) in order to assess interest of their members to participate in the interviews, people from the following participated: Feministas Em Movimento; Feminismos Sobre Rodas; A Coletiva; Rede 8 de Março; HeForShe Portugal; União de Mulheres Alternativa e Resposta (UMAR). One person per organisation participated in the interviews, expressing their experiences and views on the research subject, from a perspective of individual involvement, having in consideration that, the participant's opinions, though similar to the groups in which they engage, cannot be generalised to an undivided opinion of a collective.

In total, six semi-directive interviews (interview guide can be found in Appendix A) were conducted from the 26th May 2020 to the 3rd June 2020 (the participants can be confirmed in Appendix B), limited by a criteria of theoretical saturation, through video call platforms (such as Zoom and Skype), recorded with the consent of the participants and posteriorly transcribed and analysed (with QDA Miner).

The reasoning of having one person per organization, is the diversification of experiences, within different contexts, as feminist organisations in Portugal do not necessarily have the same goals, and ways of action, maintaining the polarization of ideals and actions developed within the feminist agenda. This provides a broader scopus of ideas across different types of institutions and experiences, not focusing in one group of activists. Regarding the interest of interviewing feminist organisers and activists, goes for the level of engagement and participation of the people involved, a purposive sampling, meaning a certain degree of thematic awareness, as part of feminist organisations, and hence feminist agency.

6.3. Method definition

Qualitative research in social sciences is one of the traditional methodologies employed for the retrieval of data. This type of research provides its users with a diversified sense of context and views associated with the field in which it is applied. It provides a door to a certain social reality, and the relations between its agents that actively participate in such reality (Bryman, 2012, p.398).

The application of qualitative research is normally associated with the curiosity of understanding words and meanings connected with agents that operate within the social reality, aiming at theorizing on matters and information retrieved from observation and points of view from participants in the process (Babbie, 2010, p. 299; Bryman, 2012, p. 420). Understanding a social reality is the goal of the researcher, that participates closely in the process, being the conductor and interpreter of the problems presented. As for the way results are achieved, the qualitative method is perceived as a constant process of theorizing and questioning, guided by research questions and hypothesis, often mutable as the research develops and the closer understanding is achieved. This happens through an unstructured and adaptable process that aims at providing the researcher with a degree of flexibility, into deepening of the matters, leading to contextual understanding (Denzin & Strauss, 1988, p.8).

The results that are normally expected from a qualitative methodology, come mainly from participant observations, opinions and ideas that are considered of rich depth for interpretation of meanings, conducted with a small sample of individuals, relating to a micro context, and collected in natural settings, and dynamic processes: “(...) seeks an understanding of behaviour, values, beliefs, and so on in terms of the context in which the research is conducted” (Bryman, 2012a, p. 408). The same results, after analysis are what makes a path for questioning of previously existing concepts and theories: “(...) concepts and theoretical elaboration emerge out of data collection” (Bryman, 2012a, p. 408).

The data retrieved from this research originates from qualitative interviews - less structured and aimed at inquiring the interviewee's point of view in a certain matter, having the space to elaborate and explain their individual stands and important matters, which also can provide clarification for the researcher in which topics the participant feels of more importance (Bryman, 2012a, p. 470). The interviewing procedure is flexible in structure and in thematic approach, giving the researcher the possibility to adapt previously made interview guides, to a flexible order and wording, with the goal of receiving more detailed and reach answers from the participants: “(...) tends to be flexible, responding to the direction in which interviewees take the interview and perhaps adjusting the emphases in the research as a result of significant issues that emerge in the course” (Bryman, 2012a, p. 470).

In qualitative interviewing, there are two degrees of structure: unstructured or semi-structured. In this specific case, semi-structured interviews were selected as appropriate, as it allows the researcher to focus on the matters to be explored, following a common logic and question base, directed to specific fields of research, providing the participant discursive freedom to establish individual connections between topics, and share experiences:

“(…) questions may not follow on exactly in the way outlined on the schedule. Questions that are not included in the guide may be asked as the interviewer picks up on things said by interviewees. But, by and large, all the questions will be asked, and a similar wording will be used from interviewee to interviewee” (Bryman, 2012, p. 471).

6.4. Advantages of the method

Employing a qualitative research methodology in this case, showed advantages in several steps of the research, since literature exploration, to formulating and testing hypothesis and concepts associated with the theme. By applying this methodology in the research, one understands that starting with a contextual basis of literature can help to formulate the starter questions and hypothesis that lead the study in following steps. This can show a big advantage, when leading interviews, with acquired knowledge of the themes and vocabulary used, in this specific case, the vocabulary and agency themes used by feminist organisers.

When thinking of qualitative research, one can understand that its process based on induction can confer a certain degree of flexibility in how the research is conducted in every step, which by other words means that the theory and concepts are tested at the same time the research develops. This is a very important characteristic for an unexperienced researcher, that can also use the research as a learning process in which the topics and formulations start to get clearer with the developing of the research.

Interviewing to collect data for analysis can also be a benefit for the researcher, this type of method allows an extensive view on participants ideologies and political beliefs, helping to understand behaviours and habits. In order to achieve such results, one has transcribed and interpreted the interviews, following the logic of qualitative data analysis, more specifically discourse analysis, which allows one to dive further into the conceptualization of certain terms, the exposing of recurring themes and specially understanding what topics are convergent for participants, and certain feelings about a specific reality.

The advantages of qualitative data analyses reside on having an extended view on why participants feel or believe certain aspects - as for the wordings used, the vocabulary present and even the themes that are most used as examples. This can only be achieved in a method that prioritizes explanatory interpretations, if used a quantitative methodology, one could know what the participants beliefs were, but in most cases, not dive into the participants reasoning.

For such analysis, coding is used as a facilitator, qualitative coding, consists into grouping determined field areas and understand where are the resemblances and differences in ideas of participants, it can generate an easier application for the qualitative analyses, especially when themes are very broad, it can help to structure the opinions and matters that are focused and highlighted during

the interviews: “systematic coding is important for achieving validity and reliability in the data analysis” (Babbie, 2010, p. 308).

Adding to the previously mentioned strategies the usage of thematic analysis conveys already with the qualitative content and analysis of the text resulted from the interviews, this method aims at highlighting the themes that are associated with this type of feminist object, considered with a certain degree of importance to the participants:

“An emphasis on repetition is probably one of the most common criteria for establishing that a pattern within the data warrants being considered a theme. Repetition may refer to recurrence within a data source (for example, an interview transcript or document)” (Bryman, 2012, p. 580).

This type of methodology is similar to coding, starting from the researchers interpretation of the results and analysis by assembling the results into the following thematic areas: Women exploitation; LGBTQI+ issues; Discrimination against women; Racism; Intersectionality; #MeToo; Global Warming/Climate; Capitalism; Poverty; Domestic violence; Market abuses; Feminine hygiene; Patriarchy; Gender issues; Violence (gender based).

Apart from the coded themes (Appendix C), in Appendix D it is possible to see the codebook used in the discourse analysis of the transcripts.

6.5. Disadvantages and limitations of the method

Some of the most signalled critics to the application of qualitative methodology is that some researchers tend to generalise the concepts obtained to a whole reality, which means the emphasis on results obtained can mislead the interpreters, especially when samples are not completely representative of the social reality, this problem should be seen by the researcher as: “one of a number of possible representations rather than as definitive versions of social reality” (Bryman, 2012a, p. 398). Other critics related to the previous, explain that results achieved by this type of method can be tendentious as the researcher is the one that leads the sampling and analyses the data collected, which can be tackled by a constant distancing and scepticism from the researcher, though involved in the social research must focus their vision in a neutral point of view.

The researcher can also be conditioned in highlighting certain aspects that may differ from what other researchers would highlight in the same context, which is a natural condition of analysing individually a certain social reality:

“(…) qualitative researchers express a commitment to viewing events and the social world through the eyes of the people that they study. The social world must be interpreted from the

perspective of the people being studied, rather than as though those subjects were incapable of their own reflections on the social world” (Bryman, 2012a, p. 399).

This type of method should not be applied when the researcher is focused in having an extremely representative and clear view of people’s opinions, because qualitative methodology focuses in small and purposive sampling in order to apply an in depth analysis to certain phenomena – what this means is that qualitative research cannot be applied to a great number of population, as that would require a great means of human and economic resources. That is why in qualitative methodology, researchers often decide on purposive sampling, to illustrate a specific social reality:

“(…) sample sizes in qualitative research should not be so small as to make it difficult to achieve data saturation, theoretical saturation, or informational redundancy (….) the sample should not be so large that it is difficult to undertake a deep, case-oriented analysis” (Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007, p.289, apud Bryman, 2012, p. 425).

Qualitative research methods are also not indicated when one wants a more holistic view of their research field - would require a broader sample of participants and a quantitative approach, fact oriented enquiry method, resulting on statistics and general terms, that would be already influenced by the researcher. This type of method, for example, would leave out the diverse reasoning and meaning that can be obtained into a more unstructured way. Nevertheless, quantitative methodology, would be more representative as it could be applied to more people, and that would give the researcher a more representative sample of how people feel, about the theme explored. It is for this reason that qualitative approaches should never be selected if the hypothesis and goals of the research aim to determine absolute answers instead of meanings and social behaviours.

6.6. Method adequation

The choice of qualitative methodology was given a lot of thought from the beginning of research design, mainly as the objectives of this particular case aim at reflecting political beliefs, organisational matters and the nuances behind what makes a t-shirt into a communicative item – one could obtain a glimpse at it by using quantitative approaches, but qualitative methodology allows a bigger variety of results and variants to consider, when talking about a single topic.

One of the matters that stood out during the literature review, was the lack of studies in this area and the small amount existent, did not focus on the ideals of feminist activists - some had an approach closer to Public Relations and Marketing with testimonies of people in the sector (Harutyunyan, 2018; May, 2016; McRobbie, 2008; Hopkins, 2018), others to how social movements have been using social media to politically organise (Charles et al., 2018), and others more focused on the relation between fashion and feminism (Kvidal-Røvik, 2018; Parkins, 2018). In all the previous cases, something lacked,

specially the interconnection between popular culture, fashion, feminism and text, the connections that implicitly circulate in this sphere, so this dissertation aims at contributing to the discussion on multidimensional approaches as a means to understand pieces of social phenomena.

Conducting semi directive interviews to get a broader view on how feminist organisers perceive these phenomena is of great interest, mainly as people participate actively in politic matters, online and offline. It was essential to establish a comfortable flow of the interviews, so participants felt comfortable and open to respond to the questions asked according to their beliefs. Interviews are very useful as this method can originate a broader range of answers that could not have been thought by the interviewer. It is also a good way of collecting diverse data as by asking the same questions, it does not directly mean the data collected will be the same. This method allows the interviewer to be moderator and guide the direction of the questions, which provides flexibility and a better understanding of the questions, eliminating answers by confusion.

Qualitative data analysis reveals its importance mainly through the forms of discourse analysis and thematic analysis. Discourse analysis reveals itself of convenience to comprehend some parcels of the social reality, through the analysis of texts resulted from interviews understanding words utilized by participants to describe certain matters and topics, to understand different perceptions of terminology and common vocabulary. Vocabulary in discourse analysis is important, as it allows one to: expose similarities, or differences of how feminist activists think of the way they act and perceive the feminist ideology; expose repetition of uses of the same concepts; expose a vocabulary used by some feminist activists in Portugal; topics that are most important in the agenda of feminist activists.

As language and vocabulary were explored, one was able to identify common social matters that were recurrent in all interviews, thematic analysis explored the issues associated and claimed by feminist organisers, which deepens the explorations and implications behind feminist t-shirts beyond the messages explicitly present in such item.

Qualitative methodology therefore, is the suitable method for this type of analysis, and though some other methodological choices could have been made, the results and data collected would differ in richness and explanatory meanings, which individually suit the objectives and execution of hypothesis aimed in this dissertation.

7. Results

7.1. Feminism

There was a consensual opinion of what feminism is for the participants, which responded that “feminism is equality to all genders”, explaining that it should be broad enough and inclusive to non-normative/non-binary genders:

“(…) feminism is a fight for equality of rights between genders, but people have a very binary vision – we say genders in plural, not only binary”.

Through all the interviews, there was a general preoccupation with terms and vocabulary used regarding inclusion, specifically when talking about gender identity, interviewees explained feminism does not only concern women, it is broad also to men and people that do not identify as binary, some people also explained the belief of gender being socially constructed, and that this sometimes can generate split visions between inclusion to non-binary people: “regardless of gender, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, ethnic or racial identity, people with special needs – (...) I see feminism in a broader range than only that binary ideal of man-woman”.

The participants explained that individuals should always intersect fights and consider how “oppressing” models operate within the society – and when going through this reflection, feminists explained that all levels of inequality should be perceived, in order to comprehend other people’s struggles:

“feminism that is not intersectional I don’t even consider it feminism (...) if it is not going to free all, it is not feminism – (...) it is a very important point, in feminist evolution we need to make sure no one stays behind”.

Regarding how they perceive feminism, and what concept guides them, some people explained that feminism exists in different forms and with different variants, there are different ways and types of feminism: “There is no feminism, there are feminisms, different ways of facing the feminist fight”. Some examples of these types of feminism were liberal feminism, radical feminism, ecofeminism, indigenous feminism, intersectional feminism and one person mentioned that their feminism is “the same as Nancy’s, for the 99%” – which refers to one of the writers of *Feminism for the 99%*⁵. These notions go in accordance with the literature read, explaining how feminism though having core values (i.e. equality between all genders), has also different operational ways of actions, splitting it into different branches and fights (seen in Banet-Weiser, 2018).

7.2. Activism

Regarding to how people perceive activism within the feminist movement, participants highlighted the importance of education and generation of knowledge in a self-discovery path, oriented to a later collective action. Activism is seen to raise awareness and educate the next generations on diverse matters (participants note gender identity and human rights). Some describe activism as a fluid process in which alliances are made between different causes that stand together: “there has to be solidarity and we need to learn to stay ready to back those alliances (...) the claims come has the political situation demands”.

Most participants agreed that activism is action oriented often times, and it is strengthened within collective organisation, nonetheless, people also considered possible to have an individualized impact

⁵ (Arruzza, Bhattacharya & Fraser, 2019)

on the cause, by acting in accordance to their beliefs in their daily lives. Regarding the ways of action, feminist interviewees considered that there are different ways of action that can occur physically, or in an online oriented sphere, some examples were:

Physical action: education, workshops, non-formal education, actions that raise awareness in different topics, conferences and talks, striking – like the international women strike, assemblies, events, marches, protests, actions in schools, artistic expressions, activism – performative art as a way of protest, culture – books, theatre, even art pieces, law adjustment, actions like occupying the streets at night, distribution of women hygiene products;

Online: Artistic expressions, signing petitions online, Solidarity waves, shares in social media, raising awareness, online conferences, webinars.

The most recurring examples provided were the international women's day march (8th March) – that each year gets bigger according to the organisers, protests that occurred in the past years against domestic violence:

“we occupied the streets to inform of the patriarchal injustice reproduced inside our society (...) people started occupying the streets (...) it shakes the structure, all of it (...) it is making visible something that has been made invisible”.

In this sense, participants perceive activism, to challenge the structure and status quo, to claim change and equal rights. It is organised and action oriented, by and from people engaged in different topics that converge alliances and consecrated into physical or online action. This notion goes in accordance with the previous discussions on activism in the literature presented, more specifically, according to the alternative ways people find to organise and contest the policy making procedures, and on collective organisation.

7.3. Visibility and communication within the feminist movement

Talking of habits and organising tools within the feminist movement, activists stated the usage of online social media as an important way to communicate with people engaged on the themes, explaining that it can help the sharing of new events, as to promote online activism: “there are days when I flood social media and I know that I really am that person (...) I do a lot of virtual activism”.

Social media is seen as a space for sharing content and to help mobilize people to the streets and into political actions, such as protests and marches, specially social media outlets like Facebook and Instagram, it was stated that if the event is not shared on social media “will not exist, only through word of mouth, it will exist, but it will be with fewer people”.

Even though recognizing the convenience of social media, activists also stressed that online presence of people engaged and sometimes clicking on the “going” button on events, do not necessarily reflect the numbers of people that show up physically. This also reflects the impact and some critical

thoughts on online presence and effective action, when comes to political matters. Nonetheless, some participants explained that they reached out to their organisations when acknowledging them in social media outlets. These mediums are perceived as a way to engage activists and promote action while reaching an already targeted group of people that connects by resemblance of ideals, for example in the pages followed or content shared.

There was also the notion that social media will not, in participants' opinions, replace physical and more traditional ways of protesting, as though recognizing its importance, in actions such as sharing, signing petitions, and networks of solidarity online, this does not replace the importance of the streets for feminist activists:

“I think the virtual does not bring the greatness and expression of people being on the street, so it is different to see the number of people who signed a petition and to see these people on the street, right? (...) I do not think that feminists are going to abdicate the street space, or the street fight and I sincerely hope that they will not. Because it is an important space, it is a space that shows the volume of people claiming things, which is also a right”.

Feminists believe that one of the most important sources of communication are activism moments such as Marches, as it raises awareness on different themes in the agenda. These marches and protests have specific communication variants, people stated that they wear things associated to the movement while protesting, and there are verbal ways of speaking and discourse practices that are spread in the duration of such actions, there are also other communication items used, such as posters and banners. The physical actions are then shared on social media by the organisers that have a preoccupation with using the words, slogans and hashtags that resonate with themes: “maybe someone deepened their feminism, maybe it was the first time that someone went, maybe it was the first time that a man went”.

In connection with how to communicate political views, the participants mentioned: Documentaries, clothing, images, social media posts, tattoos, fashion, art, exhibitions, films, t-shirts, tote bags, marches, protests, hashtags, comedy sketches, podcasts, informal conversations, poetry, books, music, peoples image or/and body language, going to conferences and debates, online groups. These forms of communication are all linked to a performative action, as was discussed by Bartlett and Henderson (2016), some of these means of communication can be worn and used as a demonstration, and as a political claim. These examples show how connective can the movement be, as people involved use social media as a tool for mobilization into collective action, a point stressed by Verity Trott (2018), as new forms of connectivity help feminists to engage people and organise into physical action, the so called “feminist connective action”.

Connectivity shows its importance in the feminist movement through online presence of feminism and the visibility of the movement in nowadays' society. Participants agreed that never the feminist movement was so visible and debuted into popular culture as nowadays. The interviewees stressed the

importance of visibility as representation and a way to inspire also young women through example in different outlets, some people even explained that “for better or for worse, the feminist agenda is trendy”. Considering the feminist movement a trend, leads one to explore and interpret Chamberlain (2017), Knappe and Lang (2014) and Munro (2013) work, on how some feminisms become more visible and powerful in the social sphere, or as seen before, the “feminist renaissance/resistance” hoped by Banet-Weiser, Gill and Rothenberg (2020), to be against neoliberal mutations of feminism, making visible the disparities and abuses associated with it.

Sources of communication are considered also a learning process about the movement, which creates a dynamic that participants agree to be an influence of what circulates about feminism, and for some participants, social media has helped other feminist causes like #MeToo, which started by a Tweet and then expanded into other matters, like a “snowball effect”, highlighting the importance of hashtags on social movements “very aggregating in campaigns (...) we are not even aware of how viral these campaigns will be, and I think that the internet has been a very interesting vehicle there”.

Participants also noted that a lot of this visibility comes with international articulation, naming examples such as the International Women’s Strike, the Women’s March, protests for women assassinations such as Marielle Franco’s (Brazil), the song “Un violador en tu camino” that was sang in Chile for the first time and has spread out through world capitals, the #MeToo movement – that “gave visibility to the issue of violence” and showed how effective the use of hashtags can also be in international causes, explaining that these are also consequences of visibility: “since 2017/2018 - greater global visibility so to speak, the terms are also becoming more accessible, people are also learning and the media has to address them, because they explode within social networks and within marches”.

In addition to the practical uses of hashtags, such form of communication can be seen as an intertextual code, generated by feminists that produce content and vocabulary, as once people engaged in the feminist movement are aware of a certain hashtag, it quickly spreads internationally. Interpreting Wolf (1999), these hashtags are the code and link between the content created and the vocabulary transmitted, which leads to a further appropriation of the language and recognition of the vocabulary previously read on certain subjects.

In like manner, some people stated that feminism has gained a “popular culture” that facilitates inclusion into states’ agendas and dialogue with political leaders on policy making. It was also stated that this visibility helps “pressuring, including politicians and often boycotting companies and politicians who are against some feminist practice”. It is said that “it has never been so normal to say I am a feminist” – these observations go in accordance with Banet-Weiser (2018) and McRobbie (2015), which stress on the different ways through which feminism becomes of popular awareness.

Though acknowledging the importance of visibility, feminists do not agree on the purpose of visibility, saying that it is a means to achieve more power and exposure of what there is still to achieve, and an end – as visibility exposes disparities: “it ends up being both (...) it is a means that brings even more visibility, but it is an end because the visibility itself, normalizes it (...) a dialogue”. But some also

expressed that visibility is a means, because things do not change just because they are visible, in the words of participants: “it is important, super important, but it is a means, the visibility of the term feminism (...) this is a means, more important are the effective structural, and systemic changes”.

The understanding of a dualistic end to visibility, shows that participants even though claiming for more representation and exposure in the media outlets, do not believe that visibility is the way through which equality is reached. Visibility in this sense, is seen as a conversation starter, mostly a means whereby feminist activists guide agencies, in order to normalize the debate on inequalities, are able to exert change into political arenas. Feminists understand the types of feminism that become extremely visible can sometimes lack effectiveness in action and consummation of change, or as seen in McRobbie (2008), have the contrary effect and make people feel the movement and its claims as already established, not only but also Banet-Weiser, adds: “(...) the most visible popular feminism is that within the arena of consent: it consents to heteronormativity, to the universality of whiteness, to dominant economic formations, to a trajectory of capitalist «success»” (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p.16)

7.4. The feminist vocabulary

Visibility according to participants, is also a consequence and dialectic path for the spread and creation of feminist vocabulary, this vocabulary is something learnt through engagement, and people share and teach it through diverse platforms. Some were mentioned before, but there was an emphasis on social media content shared: following feminist pages, celebrity influence, education, and informal talks, and all the political and non-political spaces where feminist actions take place. Similarly, Kvidal-Røvik, (2018, p.532) explains how this vocabulary is copied and “dressed up”, being shared in the most diverse forms of content. The feminist vocabulary, is seen as international- “vocabulary is international, the terminology is the same, related to the feminist agenda (...) the feminist movement is an international movement, the agenda, all of it (...) the language you use, terminology is the same”. Understanding influences, participants noted that a lot of the text circulates in English (mainly from United States), and other causes across Latin America, and Brazil. Some participants also noted the big influence from the Spanish feminist movement. The linguistic connections are reached through closeness to Latin-American languages and cultures, and in the case of English, for its common use in the academic and news media realm.

Vocabulary in feminism is also seen as a way of educating people, and organisations see in it one of their most important roles. Feminists believe this process helps to demystify prejudices, educate people on the names of different types of themes and even to take back words that were seen before as bigot.

“(…) having a space for learning and training within associations, within collectives, within networks (…) - it is also important for people to understand, to educate themselves and also to understand things they did not know before and to be able to pass it to others”

Trying to understand this point, participants noted that there was some prejudice associated with the word, saying that people would generalize feminists as: witches, lesbians, feminazis, ugly and hysterical. But interviewees also said that this type of generalisation is fading, even if still present. Furthermore, when talking of feminism, participants also noted there is a confusion between feminism and misogyny:

“There is a lot of people that still think feminism is the contrary of misogyny, and it is not, feminism is a matter of human rights (…) it is important to deconstruct what is still causing confusion in the roots”.

Feminists believe that visibility can also tackle misconceptions that have been connected with feminist words that have been distorted by counter forces, such as misogynistic groups, as explained by Bannet-Weiser (2018), as the popularisation of feminism increases, the other forces are not still, they also gain visibility and spread misconceptions in order competing in the visibility arena for space.

Some common traits observed during the interviews on habits and behaviours that are present in the participants were the constant self-challenging into being updated with terminology and the agenda of the movement, and active political participation (mainly in marches and protests):

“being a feminist is a constant challenge, you have to learn every day and all the time, reflect and learn (…) to be constantly proof, (…) we have to be really willing to do it (…) to move away from the place of comfort and be open to listening to others, to put our knowledge and pre-conditions and prejudices in question, all the time... our own definitions, that is, to test our inner world on how to do better, how to perceive the other, new movements, how to articulate my idea of feminism with that of more recent or more distant movements, it is a constant internal challenge”.

All the participants were aware of the existence of specific vocabulary circulated in the feminist movement, and in that sense, a thematic research showed some of the themes that were more referenced across interviews, that can be seen in the Appendix C. The presence of vocabulary was hence present in the following themes: Women exploitation; LGBTQI+ issues; Discrimination against women; Racism; Intersectionality; #MeToo; Global Warming/Climate; Capitalism; Poverty; Domestic violence; Market abuses; Feminine hygiene; Patriarchy; Gender issues; Violence (gender based). These themes, mentioned in several interviews, stated a resemblance in wordings used by feminists, and a common

knowledge of adequacy of vocabulary, this can also be seen as a way of sharing agency, as all the vocabulary was of common use, this is stated by many authors as Kavada (2015) and Charles, Wadia and Allaste (2018), as contributing for the involvement and formation of people's collective identities.

To understand this process, a scheme was produced, that shows how the feminist vocabulary circulates within the public sphere in the Appendix D. One believes that the vocabulary created and circulated within the feminist movement, benefits from the intertextual connections established between social media and feminist activists, the feminist vocabulary presence in popular forms and the visibility of the feminist movement, which circulate and normalize the vocabulary into social arenas. Vocabulary produced from feminist agency is made visible by organisations and other civil society actors, which spread to news platforms and social media – with the popularity of the movement, objects also are created – at the same time, political actions occur, such as marches and protests, where this vocabulary is shared through different objects, making its way back into the agenda, and being object of news making and re-sharing of this production of vocabulary. Going a step further, this vocabulary, after achieving a certain degree of visibility, is then introduced into different popular culture mediums, such as movies, books, magazines, and even music.

7.5. T-shirts with feminist messages

Enquired about clothing to communicate politically, all the interviewees answered that the way people dress can be considered a political act and can manifest individual beliefs about certain matters. As these items can express political identities and are personified and relatable for those who wear them – this affirmation confirms the hypothesis: «Clothing items are a self-expression mechanism, we may consider it a means of communicating political ideologies».

The participants also noted that the usage of clothing to communicate political ideals is not new, and that women's bodies have always been vehicles of manifesting. On one side, feminists revived other times in history where women protested through clothing – as the suffragettes did (these examples converge with the work of Harutyunyan, 2018, p.12), and also referred to newer ways of expression such as the “slut walks” (manifesting against rape's connection with what women wear). Some participants have also stated that the usage of women's bodies is not new, and fashion brands also communicate through it, especially referring to beauty and body standards.

“what we wear in whatever context is also a reflection of who we are, and we end up communicating, the message we want to convey, even if it is not political, or directly political (...) everything has codes, images, semiotics (...) for example the slut walk (...) there was practically a dress code, it wasn't imposed, but as it was to fight for the right of women to dress freely (...) many of the protesters wore clothes that were said to be provocative, shorter - in the

sense of affirmation of the bodies and it is not because I have a skirt or a top or because my breasts are showing that I have to be violated”.

The hypothesis «In gender issues, the usage of the female body and clothing items has always been associated with political acts for the feminist movement» is confirmed, as clothing was seen as a protest media from the early stages of feminism. One of the examples was the usage of a type of clothing by the suffragettes, the appearance of “feminist t-shirts” in the 1960’s, and reproduced nowadays on the new popular feminism t-shirts, or the usage of a certain type of “provocative clothing” for the Slut Walks.

The participants noted that t-shirts with feminist messages can be considered good communicational items, as such communicate a person’s belief and at the same time, by wearing a t-shirt, one is giving visibility to the movement. Feminist t-shirts are considered by participants good conversation starters, as people may question the reasons why a person is wearing such item: “t-shirts can have this power, both good and bad, to make the person who is reading it think (...) when feminist t-shirts have these powerful messages it is really to make the other person think”. Indeed one can notice these affirmations regarding how a t-shirt can become a good communication item, by adding a “feminist layer” (Bartlett & Henderson, 2016, p. 167) or by being expressed and embodied by a person that takes a political stand wearing these messages (Kvidal-Røvik, 2018, p.6).

On having t-shirts with feminist messages, all the interviewees responded that had bought or made their own t-shirts, which they wear in different occasions. In their organisations, they have t-shirts with the organisation’ name and logo, and some also have messages. In one of the cases, the participant explained the creation of such t-shirts to protest fast fashion companies in Lisbon. Participants also noted seeing, during marches (in Brazil), stencils available for people who cannot buy t-shirts to make their own feminist protest t-shirt. These t-shirts, as participants described, are then used for actions, photographed, and shared into social media platforms – “I have a t-shirt that says, “the future is female” and once I shared it on Facebook and people commented” saying it started a conversation.

Some of the provided examples of messages in feminist t-shirts during the interviews were analysed, to understand how the messages are presented to people (this analysis can be seen in the Appendix E). It is often noticed a satirical and witty tone on the messages, which confirms the study lead by Bartlett and Henderson, which characterised the usage of these t-shirts as “(...) parodic, satirical, witty - and filled with cultural references and allusions” (Bartlett & Henderson, 2016, p.170), that also aim at empowering women and question gender inequalities. Some of the messages are more directed to feminism and express “equality” and “power” sayings, others engage into specific vocabulary and cultural references. Another interesting discovery was the presence of celebrity quotes such as Gloria Steinem and Emma Watson, and even a song lyric from “Who Run the World - Girls”, a song by Beyoncé. Consequently, one can consider the hypothesis «Political messages on clothing items can indicate the presence of popular text in its creation», this affirmation can be seen as truthful, as the

vocabulary and codes produced within the feminist movement are circulated, learnt and reproduced in diverse objects, as logic of consumer identification with the matter and sometimes, a way for the market to profit from the social movement.

Regarding the potential of t-shirts, one could feel some ambiguity on the matter, as feminists believe that there has to be a conscious consumption behind feminist t-shirts, because if not, people could wear those t-shirts without knowledge, or even bought from brands that do not have good employment practices towards women. On the positive side, the interviewees stated that it can inspire people, and take it to places where before it did not circulate: “the t-shirt has this power to take the message to other places, other spaces, cause some reactions too ... someone may be walking on the street and read a sentence that impacts them and from that sentence do some research”. It is considered to broaden the feminist spaces and can even be considered “cool” – “to see anything feminist - oh maybe feminism is cool”.

The factors and conditions that legitimize the usage of t-shirts with feminist messages, were described specifically. Production wise, the participants explained that people should search, when possible (economically) to buy from second hand, fair trade commerce, local productions, sustainable (ecologically), and from organisations and associations that help and are for feminist causes, explaining that they understand the appeal to buy from fast fashion companies as these are cheaper but “there are limits for this game”. The limit here is drawn by asking questions such as “How are the products made? How are they distributed? Does the company pay taxes? Does the company exploit its workers?”. There was also a concern with cultural appropriation, to which participants added that there should be a concern with wearing things that concern people directly and resonate individually, similarly, in Sola-Santiago it was possible to confirm the notion of the disregard for historical culture and political heritage, which can lead these fashion items to lose the purpose of being impactful and genuine (Sola-Santiago, 2017, p.1).

Concerning on the places where the use of these t-shirts is seen as impactful, the participants stated that one of the best places and situations to wear a feminist t-shirt proudly is on marches and political protests, as it communicates in a particular context “they have a bigger impact”. But there was also a reference to wearing it on their daily lives, for different occasions as a conversation started and sometimes purposed usage:

“it all depends on the context, if people are in the right context, in the context in which that makes sense, yes, now if you only use it because it looks cool, then maybe not, if you have no connection with what is written, if it does not contribute to what is written, I think that people from the movements represented in these sentences, have the right to feel a little defrauded”.

Furthermore, participants stated that there are places to where they would never wear a t-shirt, as they consider it “too political” such as work places (because of client bias), to classes (if not comfortable

and with support from people, as it can spark conversations), to meetings and job interviews (as it looks unprofessional) and some participants also stated that in some places of the world, it can be a dangerous act (explaining that in Brazil, people sometimes are beaten for wearing the colour red – of the opposition party).

7.5.1. Economic arenas and the popularisation of feminism

Concerning how economy impacts the feminist movement and if feminism has an economic ideology, there were split visions, mainly because feminism operates nowadays into different neoliberal arenas. Some people noted that market oriented economies are not beneficial for women, due to big wage gaps between genders, access to high places in companies and even to the way the market treats women on social causes: such as maternity leave, divorce, and even abortion rights. There were several notes about the exploitation of women in peripheral countries as cheap work force:

“feminism is to make this whole invisible world visible, - it’s not innocent that capitalism doesn’t want to show you children in China sewing, nor in Bangladesh, nor women, and it’s going to glamorize and sell it to you in another way, (...) it will also use your body and your identity as a woman to do it, and also condition you as a woman, in the use of these pieces (referring to clothing), then it is impossible to consider, as I understand it, something that resembles feminism coupled with capitalism”

The previous testimony goes in accordance with Banet-Weiser perception of gendered economies of visibility, and the body of gendered people as a product of such: “(...) its value is constantly deliberated over, surveyed, evaluated, judged, and scrutinized through media discourses, law and policy” (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 28).

Some participants also noted during certain times of the year, brands are outspoken about feminism and direct campaigns towards it, which they call “purple washing” – which was explained by the participants as an attempt to “sell the feminist cause”. Feminist organisers feel very negatively about this matter, as sometimes it is a “hypocritical” approach as brands do not give conditions to their employees. These feelings can be justified through the work of Arruzza, Bhattacharya and Fraser, when talking of liberal forms of feminism, part of the problem on why feminist claims are not being taken seriously: “(...) although it condemns «discrimination» and stands for «freedom of choice», liberal feminism refuses to confront the socioeconomic conditionings that make freedom and empowerment impossible to the large majority of women” (Arruzza, Bhattacharya and Fraser, 2019, p.29). Furthermore, Angela McRobbie, also stressed on the commercialisation of feminism and how fragilizing this can become, as liberal economies try and make themselves champions of feminism, which for the author can signify an “undoing of feminism” (McRobbie, 2008, p.532), making it commodity.

On the other hand, participants noted that in an organizational and state oriented society, some of the measures aim at tackling disparities and combating these types of company abuses, such as reducing the gender pay gap, inclusion of women at work places (through representation quotas), institutional funds that help organisations, and law measurements. But even though those measures are applied, which participants also explain as “band-aid” measures, this still does not challenge the dominant structure, which allows the market to keep “using feminism”:

“this market-oriented feminism is very problematic, because it uses a message from a social movement to reinforce... not to reinforce... but without the slightest respect or reflection on how the commodity production process is somehow contributing to this gender oppression”.

It is important to stress what was said by Banet-Weiser et al. (2020), as these types of popular feminism reinforce the economy, and its neoliberal structure and values, encouraging women to participate and not challenge the structure and its disparities, it encourages some women to profit from other women’s exploitation, as the meritocratic system, is based in privilege, as discussed by Arruzza, Bhattacharya and Fraser (2019, p. 30).

During the reflections of what feminist t-shirts imply, its potential, the places, and moments where these items are used, it was possible to see what the biggest concerns are regarding the usage of t-shirts. One of the concerns, was the industry of fast fashion and its “appropriation” of feminist messages. Feminists say because feminism is “trendy”, the fashion industry assumes that it can profit by the usage of these themes, making a direct connection to the capitalist economy:

“(...) to use a fight for a form of profit (...) to take ownership of a fight, a fight that is critical of this form of (economic) organization, so to speak, and transform it into a product, of consumption. It is to reverse the logic of the struggle for consumption within capitalism itself”.

The participants named this aspect as “purple washing” and stressed this action as immoral, and sometimes hypocritical, because of stated cases of women exploitation in third world countries, and lack of working rights:

“when big companies or fast fashion start to take over a space of struggle (...) to use something that is trendy, within the discourse of the current media and be able to bring profit to you as your company exploits children, exploits women, pays women less, or produces these products in a place where labour rights are minimal, so it is contradictory in that sense”.

Such phenomena can be understood when going back to Sola-Santiago and the way in which the fashion industry also agencies on what to be amplified, and what is trendy enough to be considered a fashion “hit” (Sola-Santiago, 2017, p.4). It is then understandable why through a critical eye of Frankfurt School, one could assume, that the fashion industry also choose to legitimize neoliberal practices and

create a consumer identity based on the usage of such items as a way of resembling. It is in this sense that the act of wearing a t-shirt cannot always be assumed as a political act, as it is known to reproduce these logics and not because it implements any type of social change (Kvidal-Røvik's, 2018, p.2).

It is also stressed that fast fashion industry is one of the biggest producers of waste and pollution, raising ecological worries in all the interviewees on sustainable and responsible consumption, as the capitalist model is “destroying the world”. There must be a concern with all the factors, because otherwise “the feminist message can be undermined for consumption objectives”.

“Even if it is a political act it can be an act of pure hypocrisy! Although it is a political act, because it is ... if I say I’m a feminist and then buy a 1000 euros t-shirt and walk around saying I’m freeing my sisters with the t-shirt, I have little idea of the reality around me (. ..) it ends up hurting feminism, I think it hurts feminism”.

But feminists see this as an opportunity to speak out against this market appropriation and raise awareness about the ways and conditions women are exposed in working environments. But even though the visibility aspect of t-shirts, there is a need to tread carefully on these aspects, because in fast fashion consumption, women are “consuming exploited women’ work”.

It is in this sense the hypothesis «When someone engaged in the feminist movement wears a t-shirt with a political message intentionally, it can be considered an act of political communication»: can confirm t-shirts with feminist messages as good communication items, a way of expression, conversation starters, a protest object. Furthermore, these items have to be thought in a critical way, specially involving ethical discussion, as where they are produced, who they empower, which messages and questions they raise, and specially, the intention of the person who wears it, only then, can a t-shirt be considered a valid act of political communication.

8. Conclusions

Living in a society that has been named as globalized and connective, one needs to look at the social reality and the ways social movements find to challenge it, also from growing in it. The feminist movement as all social movements, is seen in a great variety of forms, or more specifically in branches and ways of action. When one thinks of forth wave feminism, it is almost natural the mental connection between social media, and the feminist movement. This connection if studied, can be understood from the ways people organise in online spheres in order to achieve certain social change goals, and the presence of some forms of feminism into the popular culture, or popular feminism, that are circulated and aid the visibility goals of the movement.

On account of the popularisation of feminism and the (re)appearance of feminist t-shirts within different backgrounds, the research question – “In the current context of feminism, can a t-shirt be a vehicle of political communication?” – led the following steps in the investigation. Some of the hypotheses generated on the beginning of the research which aimed at answering the previous question were: Clothing items are a self-expression mechanism, we may consider it a means of communicating political ideologies; When someone engaged in the feminist movement wears a t-shirt with a political message intentionally, it can be considered an act of political communication; Political messages on clothing items can indicate the presence of popular text in its creation; In gender issues, the usage of the female body and clothing items has always been associated with political acts for the feminist movement. For a better understanding of the previously mentioned cases, a qualitative analysis was led, focusing on discourse and thematic analysis that resulted from interviews to feminist organisers/activists.

Weighing up all the insights resulted from the research, and trying to answer to the question that led such dissertation, it was verified that indeed a t-shirt with feminist messages can be considered a political communication object, not disregarding the influence of popular culture in its commercialisation and the criteria that establish the act of wearing such as ethically accepted by feminists.

Feminist t-shirts are considered objects that communicate people’s identities and political beliefs, wearing a feminist t-shirt is also considered as an act of political communication, when worn in protests, marches, shared online, or even when feminists wear them in their daily lives. One believes that the act of wearing a t-shirt with a feminist message is an intentional act, thought by the person which embodies it, to communicate something in different occasions, though being believed that marches are where these types of communication are in their best potential.

The biggest challenge faced during the research consisted in the constant questioning and necessity to approach the theme in a multidimensional and plural way, through recognising the necessity and interconnections that are vital to the clear vision and answer to the research question, one assumes as inevitable the complexity of such exercise. In addition, it is understood that there is still a very limited

amount of research in the subject, having to interconnect and explore different literature approaches to better analyse the referred theme.

Feminism is seen as a fight towards equal rights between genders, non-binary, intersectional, against racism, aware of environmental issues and other types of oppression such as sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, ethnic or racial identity. Feminism is plural, divided on different branches of action, in these branches, economically, it was stressed how capitalistic approaches to feminism are based on exploitation and the oppression of minorities, which means it does not free and yield equality.

Types of feminism that become popular, were critiqued by the participants, which believe that visible and market oriented approaches do not tackle disparities, and have the effect of legitimising certain abuses in order to empower little portions of the population, which creates a divide between the women who are empowered and those who produce, in precarious conditions, empowerment objects.

It is in the following economic logic of visibility, content spread and “trending” within social media, is (re) produced and commercialised as feminist objects. This dissertation explores the conditionings and the ways one can perceive the act of commercialisation as unethical or acceptable, nuancing between conscious consumption and neoliberal engaged consumption, such as the act of buying t-shirts with feminist messages from fast fashion brands, which was highly critiqued.

Regarding the object in analysis – t-shirts with feminist messages – these objects are not new to the feminist movement, as there were t-shirts being made in the early 1960’s with political and feminist messages inserted, nonetheless, what is new is the way in which they are inserted in the economic consumer logic. Whereas in the 1960’s these t-shirts were used and made as women’s rights protests, nowadays, t-shirts are produced and commercialised in large scale by companies that do not practise what they “preach” horizontally. Another factor that diverges from the previous cases is the message and intention being spread, on the one hand t-shirts were produced as a direct intention to challenge political structures and obtain more rights for women, whilst nowadays, a big amount of the messages presented in t-shirts aim mainly at celebrating the act of being a feminist or share content that was popularised within other logics such as social media viral content.

The reflection is then on the power of social change obtained within this visibility and the capacity of such objects to challenge the economic structures that do not empower women. People do not believe these can be reflected on simply making feminism visible, in direction with visibility, there should be consequential social changes, if such does not happen the feminist movement is risking its vocabulary as a popular culture asset, that in some way, contributes to the legitimizing of the existing structure.

9. References

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10. Appendices

Appendix A – Interview session plan

Interview guide:

- ✓ Ask for consent to record the interviews.
- ✓ Explain the contexts of the interview and the purpose of the data collected, also the dynamics and structure of the three parts of the interview
- ✓ Explain the criteria of selection to the person – being interviewed as part of a feminist group but make clear that none of the participants views will be generalised to a collective opinion.
- ✓ Make the participants comfortable and explain that they can share their experiences and opinions freely.

Date, Name, Gender, Age, Organisation, Time in the organisation

Part 1 – The feminist movement

(This part aims to understand concepts and types of vocabulary that people involved in the feminist movement use and consider relevant. In this part it is also intended to compare what was learnt during the literature review with the knowledge of people who are directly involved with the movement)

1. What concept of feminism guides the way you participate civically?

- (Examples - forms of intervention / action)
- (What do you consider to be activism in the feminist movement?)
- Lately, we have seen different in places and occasions people sharing that they are feminists. Can we describe a feminist person? How so?
- What vehicles are used to express feminist causes?

2. People who identify as feminists often have different economic ideologies. Do you think the feminist movement has an economic ideology?

- What would you say about the way the market inserted feminism? (images of empowered and independent women, equality quotas, women consumers)

3. Do you believe in the existence of a certain type of vocabulary associated with the feminist movement?

- How and where can you learn it?
- Do you create or share this type of vocabulary?
- National? Global?

Part 2 – Mobilizing strategies and visibility

(It is intended to understand how social media are integrated with social movements, and how they may or may not benefit from social media for networking. It also helps to understand whether social networks can affect the way we communicate and interact with a social cause)

1. How do you communicate your feminist ideology?

- Do you use social media for that?

- What others can we consider?
2. How do you communicate during political actions? Does anything change?
 3. From your point of view in organizing and being part of feminist mobilizations and actions, do you believe that other types of expression are replacing more traditional means of political action?
 - For example, sharing on social media about feminist content, images of demonstrations on members' accounts, political clothing with feminist messages?
 - Do you consider that social networks helped to organize political actions?
 4. Considering some of the movements that have been leading the way for discussions in the public sphere, such as #MeToo, would you say that feminism is now more visible on the political agenda?
 - Is this visibility an end or a means to achieve other goals?

Part 3 – Feminist t-shirts

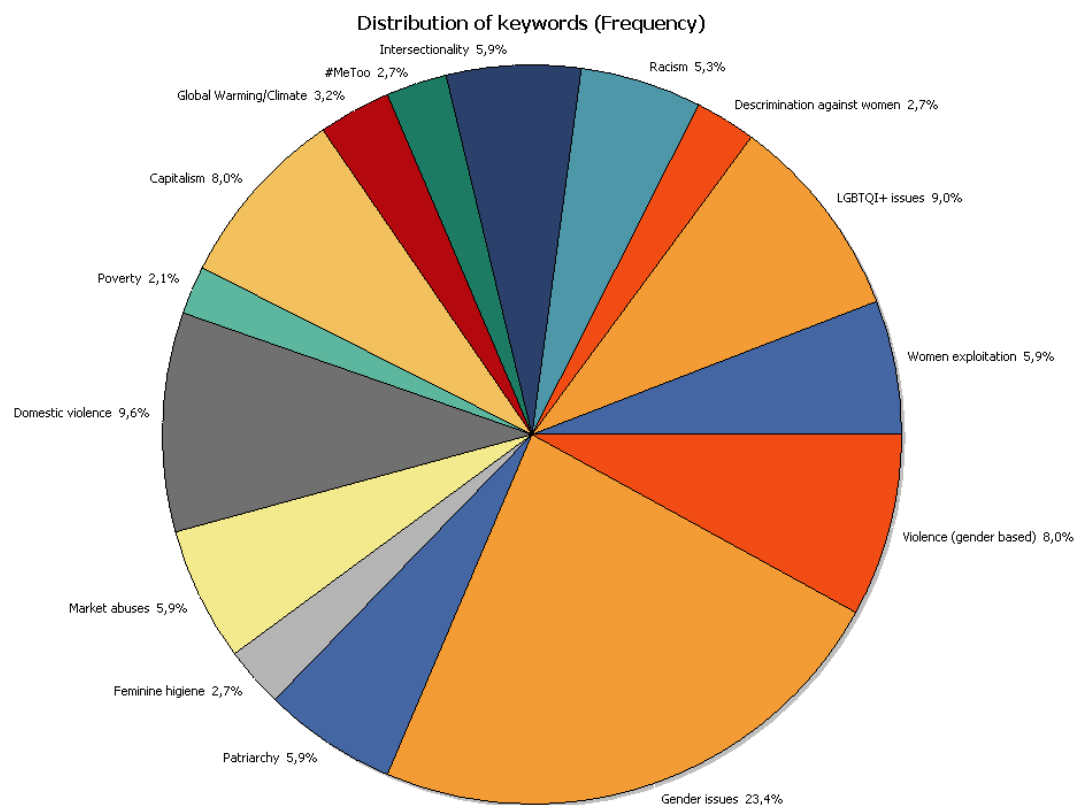
(This part aims to understand whether t-shirts with feminist messages can be considered by people in the feminist movement as a means of political communication. It is intended to clarify what may or may not be considered part of the feminist movement, what can be considered ethical in terms of use for political actions. These questions are also intended to inquire about economic ideology - buying fast fashion objects, local producers, or the preference for creating personalized items)

1. Do you think the way people dress can be considered a demonstration of political beliefs? Do you consider it a form of political expression or identity?
 - Do you think t-shirts with feminist messages are a good object of communication?
 - When someone wears a t-shirt with political messages, can we consider it a political act? Are there any factors that can determine this?
2. Have you seen, shared, bought, or created a t-shirt with feminist messages?
 - Why? How?
 - Would you wear a t-shirt with feminist messages?
 - In which circumstances?
 - Why? Personal identity, association with the message? Or for a political act?
3. Do you think buying t-shirts with feminist messages from “fast fashion” brands ethical?
 - Would you prefer to buy from local producers? Or would you rather make your own t-shirt?
 - What is the meaning you associate with selling these t-shirts? Are there conclusions that people should draw from this act?
 - Do you think that feminism can be seen as choosing a (commercial) lifestyle and losing the potential of the message by associating with these brands?
 - Do you think people prioritize the brand or message when they buy? Knowing the conditions under which brands manufacture them (exploitation of women)
 - Do you think this economic dimension is compatible with the original feminism, or does it distort the movement - the act of buying even knowing?
 - Do you think people wear these t-shirts for social status rather than movement?

Appendix B – Interviews and participants details

	<i>Interviewee</i>	<i>Organisation</i>	<i>Time in the organisation</i>	<i>Date of the interview</i>	<i>Consent for recording</i>	<i>Audio and transcriptions</i>
1	Maria João Medeiros	HeForShe Portugal	2 years	26 th May 2020	Recorded	Available for request
2	Marta Calejo	Feminismos Sobre Rodas	1 year	27 th May 2020	Recorded	Available for request
3	Carolina Ferraz	Feministas Em Movimento	Since summer of 2019	27 th May 2020	Recorded	Available for request
4	Tainara Machado	A Coletiva	Since April/May 2019	28 th May 2020	Recorded	Available for request
5	Cheila Rodrigues	Rede 8 de Março	Since February 2019	28 th May 2020	Recorded	Available for request
6	Joana Salles	UMAR	15 years	3 rd June 2020	Recorded	Available for request

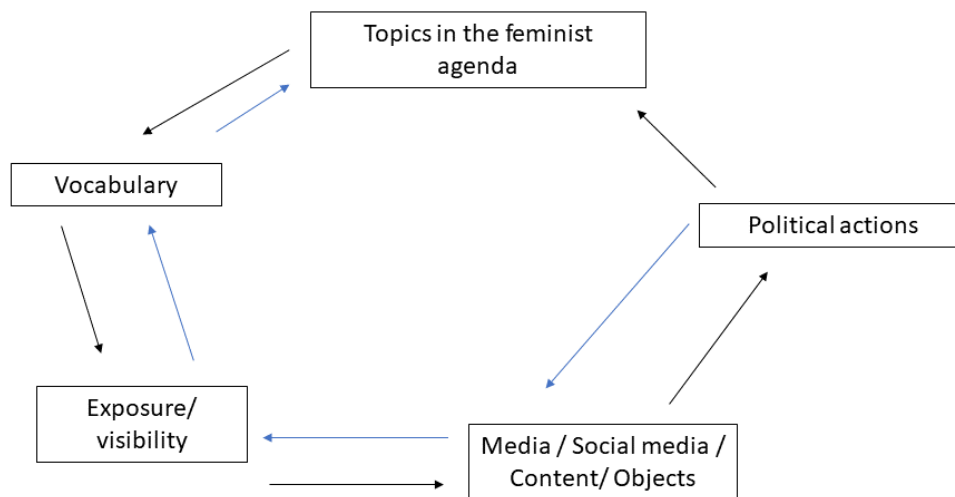
Appendix C – Thematic analysis of feminist topics during the interviews (frequency)



Appendix D- Codebook used in the discourse analysis

- | | | | |
|---|---|--|---|
| <p>Feminism</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • feminism concept • activism concept • activism examples • feminist profile • feminism economy • feminist vocabulary | <p>Social movement and Visibility</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ways of communication • examples of communication • social media • organising • visibility | <p>Feminist t-shirts</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ways of expression • feeling about t-shirts • factors that determine • other communication objects • messages • potential of t-shirt • fast fashion • local/others • reflections | <p>Social Issues/ethics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women exploitation • LGBTQI+ issues • Discrimination against women • Racism • Intersectionality • #MeToo • Global Warming/Climate • Capitalism • Poverty • Domestic violence • Market abuses • Feminine hygiene • Patriarchy • Gender issues • Violence (gender based) |
|---|---|--|---|

Appendix E - Feminist vocabulary circulation in the social sphere



Appendix F – Messages in feminist t-shirts mentioned by feminist organisers

Message	Meaning
<i>“This t-shirt was made by a woman who won x by the hour to make x number”</i>	Refers to exploitation of women in the work force/ fashion industry
<i>“if not me who, if not now, when?”</i>	Emma Watson quote, from He For She, United Nations
<i>“Future is female”</i>	Implying women participation into building future generations
<i>“Smash the patriarchy”</i>	To abolish the patriarchal system
<i>“of course, I am feminist, how can I be a woman and not be a feminist?”</i>	Quote by Gloria Steinem

<i>"smash the purple washing"</i>	Made to be witty, against fast fashion producing "smash the patriarchy" t-shirts
<i>"feminism the theory that women are people"</i>	Sentence in a tote bag of a political party
<i>"who had Marielle killed?"</i>	Brazilian activist that was murdered
<i>"play like a girl"</i>	Witty, to take back previous bigot on girls being bad at sports
<i>"female rights"</i>	Equal rights for women in terms of law
<i>"who runs the world - girls"</i>	Lyric of a song from Beyoncé titled the same
<i>"Not one more"</i>	Female assassinations because of domestic violence
<i>"We don't sell feminism"</i>	Protesting the usage of feminism in fast fashion brands
<i>"I'm Frida but I don't Kahlo"</i>	In Portuguese "calo" means to shut up
<i>"free the nipple"</i>	To spark a conversation on the usage of Bras and female nipples
<i>"feminism is not for sail"</i>	Protesting the usage of feminism in fast fashion brands
<i>"You have to shake the patriarchal three until something falls out of it"</i>	Popular expression
<i>"Ele Não"</i>	From the Brazilian feminist movement, against the actions of the president Bolsonaro
<i>"We should all be feminists"</i>	Inclusiveness to everyone, notion of feminism as human rights
<i>"feminism does not rhyme with capitalism"</i>	Express economic views against capitalism in feminism
<i>"Shantey you stay"</i>	From Ru Paul's Drag race, a LGBTQI+ series
<i>"study like a girl"</i>	To do things like a girl, before was considered as weak, now it seems empowering, taking back of the expression
<i>"We are the granddaughters of witches you couldn't burn"</i>	About medieval practices of killing women for witchcraft
<i>"purple is not a fashion"</i>	Purple is the colour of feminism, so it says feminism is not a commodity for fashion