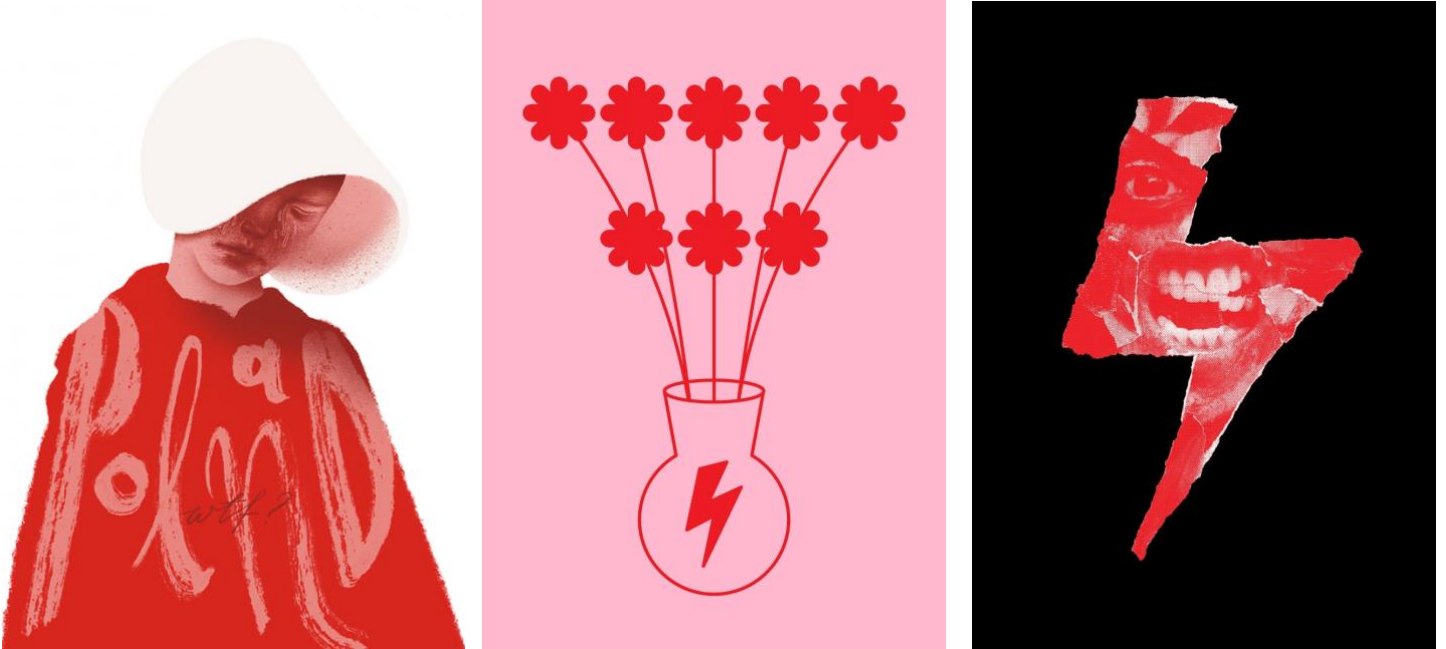# FOURTH WAVE FEMINISM: FEMINIST DIGITAL ACTIVIST STRATEGIES IN POLAND

Note. (Madej, 2020; Podkościelny, 2020; Szymkiewicz, 2020)

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Table 1: Abbreviations

KO	Civic Coalition [*Koalicja Obywatelska*]
PiS	Law and Justice [*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*]
IVF	In-Vitro Fertilization
TVP	Polish Television [*Telewizja Polska*]
OSK, Strajk Kobiet	All-Polish Women's Strike [*Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet*]
SMO	Social Movement Organization
SM2.0	Social Movement 2.0

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 A TRUE FEMINIST GRASSROOTS MOVEMENT

On October 22nd, 2020, Poland's unlawful Constitutional Tribunal, controlled by Jarosław Kaczyński's Law and Justice Party [*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS*], declared pregnancy terminations on the grounds of fatal or severe fetal abnormalities unconstitutional, imposing a near-complete ban on abortion (Chałupnik & Brookes, 2022, p.309; Koralewska & Zielińska, 2022, p.676; Nacher, 2020, p.269; Pronczuk, 2020a, para.1; 2020b, para.2, Pronczuk et al., 2021, p.2). The ruling was followed by widespread outrage and unprecedented resistance, organized by the grassroots movement All-Polish Women's Strike [*Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet*, hereafter *Strajk Kobiet*], against right-wing nationalism and the war against gender ideology (Graff, 2019, p.472; Przybylska, 2020, p.10). Nearly 480,000 Poles across 410 cities and small towns took to the streets braving tear gas, the threat of prosecution, and a surge of coronavirus cases to stress commitment to modernization and Europeanization, resulting in the largest demonstrations since 1989 (Fazan, 2023, p.12; Gwiazda, 2021, p.130; Magdziarz & Santora, 2020, para.1; Szczęśniak, 2020, para.33; Żukiewicz & Gerlich, 2023, p.1424).

The mass mobilization of resistance occurred online, and was marked by intense symbolic activity and connective action with the dissemination of images, memes, hashtags, anti-government slogans, and symbols (Gessen, 2020, para.6; Graff, 2019, p.474; Paradowski, 2021, p.240). The movement is exceptionally intersectional and internally-diverse, with most initiators and participants having no prior political organizing or activist experience (Małecka, 2021, p.100; Oślizło, 2021, p.218). This has led the new wave of resistance to widely be regarded as the birth of a true, feminist grassroots movement (Gessen, 2020, para.1; Nacher, 2020, p.261). The Polish case illustrates the volatility of the struggle for reproductive justice, and its dependence on temporal socio-political landscapes (Bennhold & Pronczuk, 2022, para.2; Król & Pustułka, 2018, p.1). For a thorough understanding of how the Strajk Kobiet protests arose, the following subsection discusses the contemporary war on gender.

1.2 THE WAR ON GENDER IDEOLOGY

The contemporary rise of transnational authoritarian, neo-conservative mobilization seeks to undermine liberal democracy and discredit *gender*, whereby the concept is strategically employed as a catch-all term signifying the moral chaos attributed to sexual liberation, women's rights, and gender equality (Araszkiewicz & Czarnacka, 2019, p.2; Balcerzak, 2023, p.24; Bielska-Brodziak et al., 2020, p.41S; Graff, 2014, p.431, 2017; Gwiazda, 2021, p.130; Peroni & Rodak, 2020, p.4S). This new wave of fundamentalist attacks against so-called *gender ideologies*, which derives power from collective anxieties caused by individualism and neoliberal globalization, are a form of hetero-patriarchal backlash (Bielska-Brodziak et al., 2020, p.52S; Harding, 1991, p.373; Korolczuk, 2020b, p.165; Nacher, 2020, p.262; Nagata, 2001, p.484). *Heteronormativity* is a normative model of gender that reinforces a hierarchical gender order, with heterosexuality presented as the norm (Hall, 2019, p.1498; Korolczuk, 2020b, p.167; Lasio et al., 2019, p.502). By marginalizing non-heteronormative, non-Christian identities and dismantling feminism, the patriarchal order and dominant notions of citizenship are restored (Bielska-Brodziak et al., 2020, p.42S; Korolczuk, 2020b, p.166; Nawojski et al., 2018, p.63; Peroni & Rodak, 2020, p.4S). In Poland, the anti-gender narrative frames *gender ideology* as *the civilization of death*; a cultural invasion and ideological attack on national tradition, the Polish family, and the Polish nation, deemed more detrimental than Nazism or Communism (Araszkiewicz & Czarnacka, 2019, p.3; Bielska-Brodziak et al., 2020, p.42S; Graff, 2014, p.431; Kasia, 2020, p.26; Korolczuk, 2020b, p.167). The gender regime in Poland is not new. Polish nationalism has frequently employed the female body as a battleground (Hall, 2019, p.1498; Król & Pustułka, 2018, p.3).

Poland was once a destination for women seeking abortion. Under the Communist regime, an egalitarian stance on reproductive rights, influenced by Marxist philosophy and difficult living conditions, facilitated the legalization of widespread access to abortion from 1956[1] (Bennhold & Pronczuk, 2022, Eliminating Section; Taub, 2020, para.14). Women from Western democracies, e.g., Sweden, traveled to Poland for abortions well into the 1980s, seeking procedures their governments would come to embrace decades later (Bennhold & Pronczuk, 2022, Eliminating Section; Pupavac, 2022, p.3). However, this reality quickly

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[1] In 1932, Poland was the second country in the world to legalize abortion in cases of threat to life or health, rape or incest (Hussein et al., 2018, p.11).

shifted with the system transformation to modern capitalism (Nawojski et al., 2018, p.53; Pupavac, 2022, p.3). After the Communist government collapsed in 1989, the Catholic Church continued to play a significant role in supporting the pro-democracy movement and economic liberalism (Cocotas, 2017, para.3; Grabowska, 2012, p.390; Król & Pustułka, 2018, p.2; Lasio et al., 2019, p.502). Despite facilitating a smoother shift to democracy compared to numerous post-Communist nations, a newly assertive Catholic Church became embedded within politics, compelling the new Parliament to enact legislation in line with the its social conservatism (Balcerzak, 2023, p.26; Cocotas, 2017, para.4). A key priority of the Church, anti-abortion legislation, was matched by neoliberals' desire to reduce state intervention from economic life (Cocotas, 2017, para.5; Taub, 2020, para.13). Following direct intervention by Pope John Paul II, a draconian legal framework (i.e., The Act on Family Planning, Human Embryo Protection and Conditions for Legal Pregnancy, referred to as *the compromise*) banning abortion with only three exceptions[2] came into effect in 1993 despite opposition from 60% of Poles (Cocoas, 2017, para.15; Davies, 2016, para.14; Gessen, 2020, para.10; Grabowska, 2012, p.393).

The post-1989 period saw a *conservative revolution*; the consolidation of the new order at the expense of women, marked by the so-called *compromise*, became a contradictory yet structural side-effect of Polish modernization (Araszkiewicz & Czarnacka, 2019, p.2; Ekiert & Kubik, 1998, p.100; Hussein et al., 2018, p.11; Korolczuk, 2019, p.885). Feminism was denounced as an import of Western ideology and a remnant of the communist regime, prompting retraditionalization trends and the implementation of policies limiting women's reproductive rights (Grabowska, 2012, p.389; Król & Pustułka, 2018, p.3; Nawojski et al., 2018, p.65; Żuk & Żuk, 2017, p.696). The new balance of power reinforced a gender regime that idealizes women as Adam Mickiewicz' romanticized 'Polish Mother' [*Matka Polka*] martyrological myth, silently relegating them to domesticity and emphasizing their reproductive role (Araszkiewicz & Czarnacka, 2019, p.5; Hall, 2019, p.1498; Król & Pustułka, 2018, p.5). Within the masculine/feminine dichotomy in Polish nationalist discourse, women self-sacrifice to defend the collective ethnic honor and are imagined as passive, bodily carriers of the nation (Graff, 2014, p.433; Król & Pustułka, 2018, p.14). The symbolically and morally high status of femininity does not, however, translate into tangible political power (Król & Pustułka, 2018, p.4). The resulting marginalization of women's

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[2] These three exceptions are: threats to the woman's life or health, severe and irreversible fetal defects, and pregnancies resulting from rape or incest.

claims to citizenship is evident in the 1997 Polish constitution, which refers to women as *mothers* and citizens as *men* (Hall, 2019, p.1498).

In 2015, the far-right, populist-nationalist party PiS, closely aligned with the conservative wing of the Catholic Church, secured a majority in parliament (Araszkiewicz & Czarnacka, 2019, p.2; Cocotas, 2017, para.5; Cullen & Korolczuk, 2019, p.6; Gwiazda, 2021, p.130). The political climate became progressively more intimidating (Balcerzak, 2023, p.24; Hall, 2019, p.1499). Over its eight years of rule, PiS compromised media freedom and the Constitutional Tribunal's judicial independence; PiS turned state media, *TVP*, into a mouthpiece for propaganda and appointed the majority of the Tribunal's judges (Fazan, 2023, p.17; Gwiazda, 2021, p.130; Higgins, 2023, para.14; Piasecka & Strzyżyńska, 2023, para.1; Pronczuk, 2020a, para.13; 2020b, para.3; Wierzcholska, 2018, p.228). The pervasive rhetoric of a *war on gender* justified ideological backlash against progressivism as well as the complete control over women's bodies (Balcerzak, 2023, p.26; Hall, 2019, p.1498; Korolczuk, 2020b, p.167; Król & Pustułka, 2018, p.3). Funding for in vitro fertilization (IVF) was withdrawn, access to emergency contraception was restricted, sexual education was criminalized, and the LGBTQ+ community was demonized[3] (Balcerzak, 2023, p.24; Gwiazda, 2021, p.130; Kasia, 2020, p.26; Żuk & Żuk, 2017, p.659). In addition, gender-based violence was undermined, with PiS questioning the constitutionality of the Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence[4] (Araszkiewicz & Czarnacka, 2019, p.3; Korolczuk, 2020b, p.165; Król & Pustułka, 2018, p.12). By employing nativist rhetoric, PiS created a binary division between rural ordinary folk (*'us'*), perceived as defenders of traditional Polish and Catholic values, and the liberal and diverse urban elite (*'them'*) (Korolczuk, 2020b, p.166; Nacher, 2020, p.263). This rural-urban divide, which shares an ideological structure with right-wing populism's us-versus-them framework, is characterized as a *cultural war* between urban modernization and rural traditionalism (Bielska-Brodziak et al., 2020, 41S; Nacher, 2020, p.263).

In line with PiS' agenda, key religious fundamentalists and anti-choice actors (e.g., Ordo Iuris Institute, Stop Aborcji [*Stop Abortion*]) advocated for an absolute abortion ban in 2016; the proposed bill would remove existing exceptions and introduce criminal prosecution

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[3] It is noteworthy that, while the LGBTQ+ community was accused of pedophilia and promoting *gender ideology*, the Polish Catholic Church was facing severe accusations of pedophilic crimes (Wierzcholska, 2018, p.212).
[4] Donald Tusk has since withdrawn PiS' motion to withdraw from the treaty, which argued that the treaty promotes *gender ideology* by regarding gender as a social construct (Amiel, 2021, para. 1; Tilles, 2024, para.5).

(Bennhold & Pronczuk, 2022, para.16; Król & Pustułka, 2018, p.8). A wave of mass protests organized by grassroots initiatives Strajk Kobiet[5] and Girls for Girls [*Dziewuchy Dziewuchom*] erupted on an unprecedented scale (Cullen & Korolczuk, 2019, p.7; Hall, 2019, p.1504; Hussein et al., 2018, p.12). Dubbed the *Black Protest* [*Czarny Protest*], Poles wearing all-black clothing flooded the streets holding umbrellas, which would later become the dominant symbol characterizing the protest's visual aesthetics (Araszkiewicz & Czarnacka, 2019, p.3; Hussein et al., 2018, p.11). The Black Protest led to the rejection of the radical bill by Parliament, and a significant shift in public opinion (Cullen & Korolczuk, 2019, p.7; Hall, 2019, p.1508; Nawojski et al., 2018, p.55).

Jarosław Kaczyński pursued the elimination of the exception for severe and irreversible fetal defects legislatively (Goldberg, 2024, para.8). In 2020, following PiS' transformation of the Constitutional Tribunal, a ban could be enacted iniquitously[6] (Bennhold & Pronczuk, 2022, Eliminating Section; Fazan, 2023, p.12; Gwiazda, 2021, p.130). This ruling, aligned with larger resistance to the party's growing authoritarianism, sparked the largest protests since 1989 (Fazan, 2023, p.12; Hall, 2019, p.1509). Moreover, by disrupting services, organizing sit-ins, and defacing churches, protests broke long-held taboos and confronted the Catholic Church's influence (Gessen, 2020, para.7; Henley & Strek, 2020, para.16; Santora et al., 2020, para.4). The 2020-2021 Strajk Kobiet protests epitomized a political awakening, illustrating the mobilizing force abortion ban backlash triggers (Goldberg, 2024, para.3). This awakening led to an existential moment for Poland's democracy: voter turnout in the 2023 parliamentary elections reached 74.3%, a record *higher* than the historic 1989 elections that led to the Soviet system's collapse (Crawshaw, 2023, para.1; Higgins, 2023, para.5; Rainsford, 2023, p.2). The centrist, pro-European Civic Coalition [*Koalicja Obywatelska*, *KO*] led by Donald Tusk, ended one-party rule (Crawshaw, 2023, p.1; Higgens, 2023, para.1). The primary instigator was the mobilization of youth[7] and women. Notably, those under 30 exhibited higher voter turnout rates compared to over-60s, and turnout was higher among women than men (Crawshaw, 2023, para.3; Kassam, 2024, para.6; Piasecka & Strzyżyńska, 2023, para.5; Rainsford, 2023, para.12). After eight years of

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[5] Strajk Kobiet [*Women's Strike*] is a feminist grassroots organization established in 2016, that addresses women's rights as well as broader social and feminist issues (e.g., LGBTQIA+ rights, secular state, climate crisis, ableism, and mental health) (Chałupnik & Brookes, 2022, p.309; Pupavac, 2022, p.4).

[6] Only 1 in 10 Poles support the stricter ban (Bennhold & Pronczuk, 2022, para.10).

[7] Young Poles are increasingly cutting ties with the Catholic Church due to its overstepping presence in political matters (Nacher, 2020, p.270; Raciborski, 2020, p.7).

electoral authoritarianism, Poland now faces the challenge of rebuilding a modern, liberal democracy (Goldberg, 2024, para.1). While Donald Tusk has vowed to prioritize abortion liberalization and the introduction of same-sex civil partnerships, it is uncertain whether draft bills[8] will be passed in Parliament (Kassam, 2023, para.9, 2024, para.10). In addition, Poland's PiS-aligned president, Andrzej Duda, is expected to veto many initiatives (Goldberg, 2024, para.15; Kassam, 2023, para.9).

1.3 DIGITAL RESISTANCE

New digital technologies provide alternative channels, platforms, and modalities for visibility, civic expression, and action planning, leading web-based campaigns to be increasingly used for political resistance (Aadnesgaard, 2020, p.87; Blanc, 2021, p.486; Castells, 2007, p.257; della Porta, 2011, p.801; Mendes, 2015, p.42; Uldam, 2018, p.41; Vissers et al., 2012, p.1). *Collective mobilization* occurs when individuals collectively organize against existing political structures to disrupt the status quo, and involves the activation of shared beliefs and emotions to garner support (Moskalenko & McCauley, 2009, p.241; Ruggeri, 2012, p.2). Social media enables individuals to broadcast calls to action across broad, online networks that surpass personal, offline connections (Segesten & Bosetta, 2017, p.1628; Van Dijk & Poell, 2015, p.3). With the expansion of social media's technological affordances, the feminist movement is increasingly leveraging digital media to increase awareness, challenge societal norms, and mobilize support (Chon & Park, 2020, p.75; Uldam, 2018. p.42; Vissers et al., 2012, p.2). This has led scholars (Chamberlain, 2017, p.10; Dinçer, 2023, p.287; Peroni & Rodak, 2020, p.5S; Quiles, 2020, p.57; Zimmerman, 2017, p.54) to declare the formation of a distinctive, fourth feminist wave, characterized by the use of digital media and online platforms.

Through their ability to visualize resistance, visual signs are powerful tools for driving political engagement (Rovisco & Veneti, 2017, p.2; Szczepańska & Marchlewska, 2023, p.58). Visuals are inherent characteristics and core identifiers of social movements

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[8] Three draft bills concerning Poland's abortion law have been announced. The Left party and Tusk's Civic Coalition propose legalizing abortion up to the 12th week of pregnancy (Kassam, 2024). Conversely, a draft bill by a conservative member of the Tusk-led coalition, Third Way, aims to revert to Poland's strict 1993 abortion laws and is most likely to garner parliamentary support (Kassam, 2024).

through the incorporation of symbols; symbols serve as synecdoches for the movements they signify (Goodnow, 2006, p.166; Szczepańska & Marchlewska, 2023, p.58). New technologies give preference to visuals over textual content, as their synthesizing power effectively disseminates information and captures attention (della Porta, 2013, p.139; Jenzen et al., 2021, p.415). Moreover, hashtags, images, illustrations, and memes are increasingly employed as a symbolic language for building collective identity, establishing political agendas, and expressing solidarity (Schill, 2012, p.126; Turnbull-Dugarte, 2019, p.3).

A defining characteristic of the Polish feminist movement is its adept use of social media for sharing news updates, slideshows, infographics, and protest information. Here, the movement employs imaginative art forms to amplify awareness, mobilize supporters, and strengthen movement membership. Iconic imagery, such as the immediately recognizable blood red lightning bolt[9] (see Figure 1), could be seen on social media posts, banners, stickers, embroideries, graffiti, and have become synonymous with the Polish feminist movement (Batycka, 2020, para.7). Language and discourse, too, played a pivotal role in articulating emotions spurred by the Tribunal's ruling and expressing widespread discontent with PiS (Szczepańska & Marchlewska, 2023, p.60). Various artists[10] created music criticizing the ruling, and protesters boldly displayed banners or shared posts online proclaiming "To Jest Wojna"[*This is War*], "Wypierdalać" [*Fuck Off*], "Nigdy Nie Będziesz Szła Sama" [*You Will Never Walk Alone*], #AniJednejWięcej[11] [*Not one more*], and "***** ***" (a tongue-in-cheek, censored cryptic message that stands for "Jebać PiS" ["Fuck PiS"]). In addition, visual metaphors turned into cultural and political icons of resistance. According to Żukiewicz and Gerlich (2023, p.1419), the utilization of iconic popular symbols is a strategy increasingly employed by protest organizers. Visuals from the HBO adaptation of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* permeated online and offline spaces, and became an abundant source of symbolic material (Santora et al., 2020, para.5; Żukiewicz & Gerlich, 2023, p.1419). The role social media played in orchestrating a networked, grassroots Polish feminist movement illustrates the transformative potential of digital activism for effecting social and political change (Pond & Lewis, 2019, p.215). This research seeks to gain insights

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[9] The red lightning bolt is part of Strajk Kobiet's logo, designed by Ola Jasionowska.

[10] Examples include: Taco Hemingway - Polskie Tango, Słoń - Wojna Totalna, The Witches Choir - Twoja Władza, Szpaku - Ośmiogwiazdkowy S*urwiel, Michał Szpak - Polska to Kobieta.

[11] Izabela, the first victim of the abortion ban, was hospitalized in Pszczyna for oligohydramnios. Doctors delayed taking action until Izabela's fetus, diagnosed with prenatal defects, passed away. Izabela's death reignited nationwide protests in September 2021, honoring her memory with the message "Ani jednej więcej" [*Not one more*] and "Jej serce też biło" [*Her heart was also beating*] (Pupavac, 2022, p.9).

into the movement's distinctive utilization of symbols, as explored through the following research question:

How do Polish artists employ symbols to visualize and mobilize the Polish feminist movement?

Figure 1

Strike (Milach, 2020)

1.4 ACADEMIC RELEVANCE

Technological advancements afford greater avenues for communication, with the internet and social media assuming a dual role as both the organizational form and mode of action for social movements (Castells, 2009, p.21). Existing scholarly literature (Blanc, 2021, p.487; boyd, 2010, p.1; Breuer & Farooq, 2012, p.3; Canella, 2017, p.24; Castells, 2007, p.249; Chon & Park, 2020, p.73; Li et al. 2020, p.854; Loader, 2008, p.1920; Maffie, 2020, p.1; Pearce et al., 2019, p.1; Poell & Van Dijk, 2015, p.1; Tufekci, 2013, p.849) has extensively investigated the utilization of social media as instrumental channels for activism. Research themes include hashtag activism (Ahmad & Thorpe, 2020, p.676; Clark, 2016, p.1; Jackson et al., 2020, p.185; Mueller et al., 2020, p.1), collective and connective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2011, p.2; 2013, p.27; Gerbaudo, 2014, p.264; Gregg et al., 2020, p.2; Kavada, 2015, p.872; Polletta & Jasper, 2001, p.286; Smithey, 2009, p.659), (in)visibility online (Cotter, 2019, p.896), microcelebrities (Chan & Gray, 2020, p.354; Hurley, 2023, p.1), digital storytelling (Couldry, 2008, p.2), memes (Shomova, 2022, p.2; Soh, 2020, p.1), and slideshow activism (Dumitrica & Hockin-Boyers, 2023, p.3318).

Recent studies have also examined social media's efficacy as a form of feminist practice (Duffy & Hund, 2019, p.4984; Jackson, 2018, p.33, Jain, 2020, p.2; Jane, 2016, p.284; Xiong et al., 2019, p.10), delineating benefits, limitations, and defining key concepts like *platform feminism* (Singh, 2018, p.2) and *networked feminism* (Turley & Fischer, 2018, p.128). While scholars (Beaty, 2017, p.1; Chałupnik, & Brookes, 2022, p.308; Korolczuk, 2016, p.91) analyzed digital feminist activism surrounding the Black Monday protests, academic literature on the 2020-2021 Strajk Kobiet protests have largely been overlooked (Kasia, 2020, p.26; Paradowski, 2021, p.241). Kampka (2023, p.125) analyzed banners, memes, and photo documents, Żukiewicz and Gerlich (2023, p.1418) conducted research on the movements' use of popular culture symbols, and Jarynowski and Płatek (2022, p.219), Paradowski (2021, p.239), and Trzcińska (2021, p.2; 2022, p.157) analyzed the Twitter discussion on abortion and the 2020-2021 protests. The state of the art pays little attention to the ways in which Instagram can function as a space for resistance and activist possibility (Cornet et al., 2017, p.2474; Pearl, 2018, p.2). Therefore, this study addresses broader calls for more research on visual communication and alternative social media platforms to Twitter (Pearce et al., 2019, p.2).

In addition, there is mounting interest in the relationship between visuals, media ecologies, and repertoires of protest within social movement research and media studies

(McGarry et al., 2020, p.23; Rovisco & Veneti, 2017, p.2). Social movement theorists have offered insights into the role of artivism within contentious political contexts, emphasizing its uses for mobilization, communication, and collective expression to advance political objectives (Campana, 2011, p.281; Glaveanu, 2017, p.2; Milbrandt, 2011, p.17; Ryan, 2015, p.3; Sawer, 2007, p.41). For instance, scholars Highfield and Leaver (2016, p.2), Crepax (2020, p.72), and Fagerholm et al. (2023, p.1034) engage with how (feminist) protest is visualized, that is, rendered visual, through iconography and social media, and Moreshead & Salter (2023, p.875) and Greer (2014, p.9) investigate how craftivism circulates online. However, despite the abundance of visual imagery offered by digital artifacts, researchers consistently prioritize textual analysis (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013, p.73; Doerr et al., 2013, p.1; Jenzen et al., 2021, p.415). Thus, this thesis can provide novel insights into the function of protest art and symbols within the occupied space of the Polish feminist movement.

1.5 SOCIAL RELEVANCE

The success of social movements relies heavily upon individuals' civic participation (della Porta, 2013, p.138). Digital activism is a topic worth investigating as it enables citizens to participate in political discourse, engage in self-expression, and transform individualized dissents into mobilized action (Chrona & Bee, 2017, p.49; della Porta, 2011, p.806; Van Haperen et al., 2018, p.409). The ubiquitous adoption of communication technologies has fundamentally altered the modalities through which individuals engage in the political process, thereby substantively contributing to the rise of transnational activism (Pond & Lewis, 2019, p.215; Wajcman, 2004, p.2).

Political participation is regarded as imperative for the advancement of nation-states, and constitutes a core aspect of democracy (Breuer & Farooq, 2012, p.21; Howard & Parks, 2012, p.360). Until 2015, political participation in Poland was low, with Poles labeled as *passive democrats* (Gwiazda, 2016, p.132). By offering tools, content, and formats for coordinating, mobilizing, and organizing civil society, social media function as spaces for enacting civic engagement and can, therefore, strengthen democratic agency (Jha & Kodila-Tedika, 2020, p.15; Kenski & Stroud, 2006, p.173). In similar vein, artivism can heighten civic consciousness; the co-creation of artistic activities serves as a means for citizens to

engage in collective expression and align themselves with pro-democratic principles (Patsiaouras et al., 2018, p.79).

In addition, by contributing to the formation of a shared collective identity, digital media support women's consciousness-raising efforts and political agenda (Aadnesgaard, 2020, p.87, Rogan & Budgeon, 2018, p.4). Social media provides opportunities for women to establish mutual support networks, thereby enhancing notions of solidarity and political empowerment, and consequently encouraging greater political participation (Mendes et al., 2018, p.4; Zimmerman, 2017, p.56). Lastly, conservative, anti-gender rhetoric poses a threat to liberal democracy and underscores the Catholic Church's influence within political decision-making in Poland (Wierzcholska, 2018, p.17). Given that core values of democracy are at stake, gender issues should be prioritized rather than dismissed as a diversionary tactic (Graff, 2014, p.434). The recent rise of nationalist revivalism, populism, and fundamentalism adds urgency to the pressing need for discussions concerning threats against women's rights (Król & Pustułka, 2018, p.1).

1.6 CHAPTER OUTLINE

The following chapter discusses the intellectual structure and conceptual underpinnings of the most prominent research themes and theories on fourth wave feminism, digital activism, connective action, artivism, and symbols. The third chapter addresses the rationale of the methodology of this research, i.e., the research design, data collection method, and data analysis procedure. The fourth chapter presents the main themes emerging from the visual analysis. Lasty, the fifth chapter summarizes the research's main contributions and limitations, addresses the research question, and outlines recommendations for future research enhancements.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework synthesizes the concepts and theories drawn from existing scientific literature. Their incorporation provides a robust foundation for gaining an understanding of new digital technologies' impact on movement organizing and mobilization processes, as well as the conditions necessary for individuals to act together to achieve a common political or social goal.

2.1 NETWORKED SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

A *social movement* is a system of informal networks that mobilizes citizens, on the basis of shared collective identities, dedicated to the common pursuit of social change (Diani, 1992, p.4; George & Leidner, 2019, p.3; Mansell & Hwa, 2015, p.8; Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2002, p.466; Zald & Ash, 1966, p.329). The primary aim of a social movement is to redefine power structures, norms, institutions, or ideologies, and sustain collective identities for overcoming barriers to progressive change (Diani, 1992, p.4; Gregg et al., 2020, p.3; Mendes, 2015, p.2; Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2002, p.466). Social movements manifest themselves through a range of organizations (Zald & Ash, 1966, p.329). *Social movement organizations* (SMOs) are regarded as carriers of movement ideas and skills; an SMO is a structured, formalized organization that aligns its objectives with those of a particular social movement or counter-movement, and aims to realize and implement these goals (Smith, 2005, p.227).

 The internet has profoundly disrupted the way social movements originate and evolve by shifting the focus of activity from street-based actions to screen-mediated activities (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013, p.40; Cornet et al., 2017, p.2474; Earl & Kimport, 2011, p.9). Foust and Hoyt (2018, p.37) refer to the convergence of Web 2.0 platforms and resistance activities as *Social Movement 2.0* (SM2.0). The pervasiveness of social networks enables key social movement actors to expand audience reach (Cornet et al., 2017, p.2474; Şener, 2021, p.10). Moreover, by promoting self-organization and interpersonal interaction, social media enables individuals to fulfill a more proactive role in social movements and act as catalysts of collective action (Leong et al., 2019, p.173; Maffie, 2020, p.2). According to Smith et al. (2018, p.4), online communications mobilize social movements through two distinct

mechanisms. First, social media platforms facilitate the process of *opinion-based social identity formation*; by providing resources for political discourse and facilitating the dissemination of information, expressions of solidarity are built (Chon & Park, 2020, p.74). Moreover, by enabling individuals to voice expressions about injustices, an illegitimate outgroup or authority can be identified, and consensus regarding goals and strategies for action can be reached (Smith et al., 2018, p.4). Second, social media fosters an *identity-norm nexus*, leading individuals to regard their commitment to addressing social injustices as an intrinsic aspect of their personal identity (Smith et al., 2018, p.4). The identity construction process plays a central role in interpreting grievances across all manifestations of collective action (Smith et al., 2018, p.4).

2.2 COLLECTIVE ACTION

According to Bennett and Segerberg (2012, p.6), individuals are more likely to work together towards social change when *collective action frames* are present. A shared collective identity acts as a catalyst for *collective action*, whereby individuals intentionally participate in an organization, bound by a sense of belonging and common purpose, to undertake actions for a common goal (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, p.6; George & Leidner, 2019, p.3; Postmes & Brunsting, 2002, p.290). Castells (2007, p.249) posits that, in order to transform power relations, collective actions aimed at challenging social organization are necessary.

Polletta and Jasper (2001) define *collective identity* as "a cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution" (p.285). The formation of a collective identity is a continuous process characterized by contradictions and negotiation (Beraldo, 2022, p.1099). Melucci's (1996) definition highlights the fluidity of the concept: collective identity is "an interactive and shared definition produced by a number of individuals […] concerning the orientations of their action and the field of opportunities and constraints in which such action is to take place"(p.70). Thus, collective identity comprises a movement's common practices, visions, and boundaries, and necessitates constant realignment (Diani, 1992, p.9; Kavada, 2015, p.875). An individual may adopt a collective identity or sense of 'we-ness' when the social movement's struggles and goals come to be recognized as one's own; it involves imagined or directly experienced feelings of identification and membership (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, p.10; Corry & Reiner, 2021,

p.199; Kavada, 2015, p.875; Polletta & Jasper, 2001, p.285; Pond & Lewis, 2019, p.214). In their research, Zhou and Wang (2018, p.157) found that familiarity with other members and a strong collective identity derived from shared beliefs, emotions, and cognitions have a positive impact on the perceived benefits of movement participation. Similarly, Loader (2008, p.1922) and Smithey (2009, p.659) state that collective identity serves as an incentive to participation and is closely connected to solidarity, which plays a fundamental role in sustaining a movement over time.

2.3 DIGITAL ACTIVISM

Activism is a collective process by which groups of people, united by a common goal, work in solidarity to exert pressure on decision-makers and advocate for changes in policy, conditions, or practices (Chon & Park 2020, p.73; Fagerholm, 2023, p.1034). Social media and technological advancements have fundamentally transformed the repertoires of communication utilized by activists and grassroots organizers, prompting a shift in how awareness is fostered and participation mobilized (Glenn, 2015, p.2). *Digital activism* is defined as digitally mediated social or political activism (Dumitrica & Hockin-Boyers, 2023, p.3320; George & Leidner, 2019, p.4). A plethora of terms are employed to describe overlapping concepts, including social media activism, internet activism, and networked activism (Özkula, 2021, p.64). The terminological ubiquity of the concept signals its broad popularity and increasing scholarly recognition. This research adopts *digital activism* as a comprehensive and all-encompassing descriptor.

Digital media provide alternative channels for visibility, debate, organizing, and action planning (Blanc, 2021, p.486; Castells, 2007, p.257; della Porta, 2011, p.801; Opeyemi, 2018, p.6; Schuster, 2013, p.17). Social media have also made contemporary social movement participation faster and more effective by mobilizing strategic *social action* (i.e., petitions, campaigns, marches) and providing opportunities for the powerless to voice grievances, recruit participants, and disseminate narratives that resonate with the public consciousness (Crepax, 2020, p.76; della Porta, 2011, p.805; Kuo, 2016, p.2; Leong et al., 2019, p.176; Özkula, 2021, p.61; Vasi & Suh, 2016, p.142; Young et al., 2019, p.2). Individuals can take action by means of mentions, tags, and citations, while hashtags, reposts, and retweets facilitate instantaneous discourse, reciprocal communication, and content

exchange (Van Dijk & Poell, 2015, p.3). In addition, networked clusters of individuals coalesce and mobilize on social platforms to amplify messages beyond their immediate circle (Kuo, 2016, p.3). In contrast to 'traditional' offline actions, online participation enables groups to extend reach across geographical boundaries in a cost-effective manner and engage in real-time (Glenn, 2015, p.2; Kuo, 2016, p.3; Schuster, 2013, p.19). Consequently, digital technologies facilitate the coordination of protest and afford new possibilities for collective identity and solidarity to be built (Lee, 2020, p.3; Loader, 2008, p.1922; Peroni & Rodak, 2020, p.5S).

2.4 SLACKTIVISM

Novel forms of digital activism are praised for their reach, immediacy, directness, interactive capabilities, and networkedness (Couldry & Hepp, 2012, p.94; Özkula, 2021, p.61; Rospitasari, 2021, p.665). A fundamental resource of any protest is its scale; the greater the mobilization, the higher the likelihood that decision-makers will engage in negotiations (Żukiewicz & Gerlich, 2023, p.1419). While there is consensus that activists' online efforts can help an issue gain prominence in popular discourse, the efficacy of digital activism in catalyzing *significant, lasting impact* is subject to extensive debate (Breuer & Farooq, 2012, p.6; Kenski & Stroud, p.173, 2006; McCafferty, 2011, p.18). Several scholars (Travers, 2003, p.4; Trott, 2021, p.1125; Weber et al., 2003, p.27; Yang & DeHart, 2016, p.1) argue that social media, coupled with the anonymity afforded by digital participation, strengthen democracy[12] and boost political efficacy, political knowledge, and engagement. Van Dijk and Poell (2015, p.3) and Mihailidis (2020, p.3), for instance, state that social media increase engagement in daily civic life and enhance the life cycle of civil action. Critics, conversely, contend that digital activism has minimal impact on participatory behaviors, dismissing it as *slacktivism* or *clicktivism* (Breuer & Farooq, 2012, p.3; Dahlgren & Hill, 2020, p.9; Glenn, 2015, p.2; Kenski & Stroud, 2006, p.177; Yang & DeHart, 2016, p.2). The term *slacktivism*, a combination of "slacker" and "activism," is increasingly employed pejoratively to refer to low-effort, self-aggrandizing digitally-enabled political activities that do not produce tangible impact (Cabrera et al., 2017, p.403; Ghadery, 2019, p.11; Lee & Hsieh, 2013, p.1; Noland, 2020, p.2; Özkula, 2021, p.61; Vitak et al., 2011, p.1). These scholars posit that such

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[12] It is important to note here that platforms are not inherently democratic (McGarry et al., 2020, p.22)

lackluster online participation activities serve as nominal, token gestures of support rather than meaningful engagement and commitment, as they are driven primarily by a desire to appease one's conscience (Breuer & Farooq, 2012, p.4; Cabrera et al., 2017, p.404; Dahlgren & Hill, 2020, p.9; McCafferty, 2011, p.18; Noland, 2020, p.2; Smith et al., 2018, p.3). In addition, according to Breuer and Farooq (2012, p.4) and Lutz et al. (2014, p.6), engaging in performative solidarity can be detrimental to citizens' subsequent participation in civic affairs, given that the minimal personal effort required by digital activism can already satisfy individuals' motivation to act; this is referred to as the *replacement thesis* (Cabrera et al., 2017, p.403). Digital activism has also faced criticism for perpetuating political apathy and oversimplifying political discourse through its immediacy and temporary nature, as well as for its harmful effects like surveillance and hacking (Özkula, 2021, p.61; Şener, 2021, p.7).

Despite criticisms, engagement in typical 'slacktivist' activities (e.g., sharing, commenting, reposting, liking) is widespread and has been shown to have *spillover effects*, positively influencing involvement in more traditional and resource-intensive forms of *social protest*, i.e., political expression aimed at effecting societal or political change by influencing public perceptions, attitudes, behaviors, and policy (Conroy et al., 2012, p.1535; Lee & Hsieh, 2013, p.1; Mansell & Hwa, 2015, p.3; Żukiewicz & Gerlich, 2023, p.1419). From a resource perspective, by lowering the barriers and costs associated with acquiring political knowledge and participation, social media heightens users' political interest and political empowerment (Harlow, 2011, p.6; Harlow & Harp, 2012, p.200). This accessibility, in turn, leads to increased political participation (Opeyemi, 2018, p.6; Vitak et al., 2011, p.2). Moreover, small acts of engagement rooted in mundane, everyday life practices, are necessary for connecting the public world to politics (Moreno-Almeida, 2021, p.1547). Even seemingly phlegmatic and inconsequential acts can influence individuals' perceptions of their own ideological convictions and political principles (Nacher, 2020, p.260).

Thus, digital media, particularly social media, have cultivated a new participatory culture and mode of citizenship wherein activists engage within globally interconnected and horizontally structured networks (Breuer & Farooq, 2012, p.6; Şener, 2021, p.1). *Technological affordances* are the material features and possibilities for action that technologies provide to users (Etter & Albu, 2021, p.87). Various social media affordances can transform activists' civic engagement, including visibility, replicability, and searchability (boyd, 2010, p.7). *Media ideologies*, beliefs and perceptions about media and their technological affordances, shape how individuals engage with and assess digital media as a tool and space for protest (Jenzen et al., 2021, p.417; Soh, 2020, p.4). Thus, any substantive

societal impact technologies can have depends on media ideologies and the effective use of technological affordances, rather than technology itself (Earl & Kimport, 2011, p.14).

2.5 NARRATIVE STRATEGIES

Shared identities and beliefs are constructed through *interpretive framing* - a strategy for communicating cultural and symbolic constructions of reality, and motivating individuals to act collectively for solving culturally recognizable problems (Loader, 2008, p.1925). Digital media provide social movements with alternative channels for challenging dominant communicative power through enabling public access to competing interpretive frames (Loader, 2008, p.1926).

The narrative strategies employed by movements for framing can be viewed through the social phenomenon of *digital storytelling*, i.e., personal narratives that reshape hierarchies of voice and agency, and increase accessibility to the public sphere by being told and shared using digital media (Couldry, 2008, p.3). Stories serve as affective triggers; through their empathic potential, stories have the capacity to connect structural and institutional issues to audiences and serve as a tool in activist organizing (Canella, 2017, p.25; Couldry, 2008, p.23; Freistein & Gadinger, 2020, p.221). By enhancing rhetorical framing, social media can help build momentum and expand collective consciousness (Foust & Hoyt, 2018, p.41). For instance, online hashtags are described as *affective publics* that mobilize activists by functioning as affective storytelling structures (Canella, 2017, p.26).

2.6 CONNECTIVE ACTION

The wide availability and accessibility of social networking sites have significantly changed the time-space dynamics of social and political relations (Jenzen et al., 2021, p.418; Loader, 2008, p.1928). Social media platforms' technological affordances have greatly expanded the collective action repertoire of social movements, with activists' collective identity extending online (Young et al., 2019, p.3; Van Dijk & Poell, 2015, p.3). In contrast to the conventional logic of collective action, social media-enabled movements are constructing and acting upon critical understandings of social reality through *dispersed networks* of political action (Casas-Cortés et al., 2008, p.28; Lee, 2020, p.2; Leong et al., 2019, p.173). This shift has led recent

social movement scholarship to advance the theory of *connective action* (Dejmanee et al., 2020, p.3948; Leong et al., 2019, p.173; Mihailidis, 2020, p.4; Young et al., 2019, p.2).

Digital activism operates based on the *logic of personalized politics* (Bennett & Segerberg, 2011, p.2; Dejmanee et al., 2020, p.3948). The personalization of politics is enabled through the logic of *connective action*, which exploits the personalization of causes afforded by digital media networks to aggregate individual actions (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013, p.27; George & Leidner, 2019, p.4). Network technologies disseminate digital activism through connectivity and interpersonal networks, which leads to the development of movements characterized by decentralized, individualized expressions of political engagement (Dejmanee et al., 2020, p.3948; Young et al., 2019, p.2). Moreover, these dense networks facilitate wider public engagement through the application of *personal action frames*, which can increase movement membership and introduce stories, concerns, and concepts into public consciousness (Bennett, 2012; Bennett & Segerberg, 2011, p.3; 2013, p.149; Beraldo, 2022, p.1101; Canella, 2017, p.26; Özkula, 2021, p.61).

Carty (2010, p.160), Canella (2017, p.26), and Beraldo (2022, p.1101) assert that online networks and personal narratives are inadequate substitutes for conventional modes of participation, as interpersonal connections are central to shaping collective identity and facilitating mobilization. Kavada (2015, p.873), on the other hand, argues that while connective action can effectively aggregate mobilized publics around contentious issues, it may only foster loose networks without sustaining engagement, as observed in the typically brief lifespan of social media-driven protests. Van Dijk and Poell (2015, p.4) elaborate on this further, positing that the dynamics of connective action are as much shaped by users' communicative actions to reach a common (political) goal, as by the platforms' politics.

2.7 COALITION BUILDING

Social movements are shaped by multiple intersectional inequalities and power dynamics, which influence agendas, participation, and the framing of issues (Roth, 2021, p.2; Stoltz, 2021, p.2499). *Structural intersectionality* looks at the effects of multiple subordination (Roth, 2021, p.3). Individuals can be multiply disadvantaged or privileged in some respects, while also being disadvantaged or privileged in others. *Political intersectionality*, on the other hand, focuses on the ways in which positionality influences and shapes the construction of

collective identities, the framing of agendas, and the adoption of particular strategies (Roth, 2021, p.3). Moreover, it comprises efforts to achieve inclusion and mitigate power differences, and address structures of inequality. *Coalition building* is a central strategy for achieving political intersectionality and necessitates acknowledging power differentials, recognizing shared interests, and respecting differences (Chamberlain, 2017, p.4; Dietze & Roth, 2020, p.14; Roth, 2021, p.9). Drawing from the concept of *allyship*, this strategy underscores the principle that "no one can be truly free unless everyone is free" (Jackson et al., 2020, p.153).

2.8 POWER AND COUNTER-POWER

A *public* refers to a space that establishes its own membership norms through its circulation and adoption by otherwise unrelated individuals (Habermas, 1989, p.2). According to Habermas (1989, p.7), the *public sphere* is a conceptual realm where (equal) citizens collectively engage in reasoned argumentation and political debate, contributing to the formation of public opinion and democratic norms. Feminist scholars Nancy Fraser and Rita Felski were among the first to scrutinize Habermas' idealization of a democratic public sphere, noting historical exclusion of women from the concepts of 'citizen' and 'public' (Felski, 1989, p.169; Jackson & Banaszczyk, 2016, p.393; Travers, 2003, p.7). Felski (1989, p.164) proposed a framework comprising a plurality of spheres, coining the term *counterpublic*. *Counterpublics* denote a subset of publics determined by exclusion from access to power, where marginalized social groups can challenge hegemonically constructed universals and dominant narratives (Fazan, 2023, p.21; Felski, 1989, p.171; Loehwing & Motter, 2009, p.223). By facilitating the circulation of counternarratives, these alternative public spheres promote solidarity, cultivate oppositional identities, and inspire action (Fraser, 1990, p.56; Rodgers, 2022, p.5). Thus, the counterpublic is an inclusive extension of Habermas' mainstream public sphere, addressing the role of power, the consolidation of identity, and access within civil society (Jackson & Welles, 2015, p.933; Loehwing & Motter, 2009, p.222; Travers, 2003, p.7). In this process, counternarratives enhance group cohesion while simultaneously influencing cultural significations (Rodgers, 2022. p.5). This influence results from *discursive politics*, i.e., "the politics of meaning-making" (p.35), predominantly through linguistic mediums (e.g., debate, conversations, stories) that reformulate, reinterpret,

or rethink society's norms and practices (Katzenstein, 1995). By reproduction, language produces reality-effects (Butler, 1999, p.26).

Online networks afford movements and activists the capabilities of two-way or many-to-many mass communication, enabling mobilization through the dissemination of alternative narratives and diverse forms of knowledge (Castells, 2007, p.249; Hoydis, 2020, p.1; Jackson & Banaszczyk, 2016, p.392; Jackson & Welles, 2015, p.396). Concurrently, this extends and pluralizes the public sphere by facilitating the emergence of subcultures advocating for connective action (Postmes & Brunsting, 2002, p.292). Digital media platforms provide a *networked public sphere* - a space for decentralized communication, which empowers interlocking counterpublics to challenge dominant narratives and advocate for social change (Chon & Park, 2020, p.76; Dinçer, 2023, p.290; Renninger, 2014, p.1). Within this framework, social networking sites are described as *networked publics* (boyd, 2010, p.2; Renninger, 2014, p.6). *Networked publics* facilitate social, cultural, and civic interactions, and enable individuals to connect with those beyond their immediate social circles (boyd, 2010, p.2; Soh, 2020, p.4). According to Castells (2012, p.7), these networks of resistance contribute to the production of *counter-power*. *Counter-power*, the ability to challenge power dynamics embedded within society's institutions and claim representation, necessitates a relational struggle over dominant paradigms through the dissemination of alternative narratives (Castells, 2007, p.239). Thus, the technological architecture of social media empowers marginalized groups by enabling them to reshape narratives and engage in political contests over the social construction of meaning (Castells, 2007, p.249; Jackson & Welles, 2015, p.395).

2.9 FOURTH WAVE FEMINISM

Feminism is an umbrella term encompassing a range of movements, theories, and ideologies that aim to redefine women's subjugated societal status by dismantling systemic gender-based inequalities, challenging patriarchal structures, and defending women's rights (Abdelmoghni, 2022, p.631; Gelgile & Shukla, 2023, p.2; Heger & Hoffmann, 2023, p.394; Jain, 2020, p.2; Malinowska, 2020, p.1; Mendes, 2015, p.2). The development of feminist interventions and feminist ideology is frequently embodied through the metaphor of 'waves'. Despite its embeddedness, scholars (Benjamin & Schwab, 2021, p.4; Guest, 2016, p.11;

Jouët, 2018, p.135; Michelis, 2023, p.2; Quiles, 2020, p.59) consider the dominant interpretative paradigm flawed, oversimplified, and misleading as it excessively emphasizes age and generational differences, perpetuates a linear progression of mutually exclusive feminist paradigms, and implies that contemporary feminism is beyond criticism. However, the wave metaphor is useful for illustrating shifts in communicative practices and denoting the chronology in which various schools of thought emerged (Guest, 2016, p.11; Jouët, 2018, p.135; Quiles, 2020, p.59).

By providing spaces where women can create networks of mutual support and perceive each other beyond patriarchal stereotypes, digital platforms and social networks have significantly contributed to a qualitative change in feminist movements (Rodak, 2020, p.119S). The *fourth wave of feminism* has emerged as a distinctive feminist movement due to its reliance on social media platforms for technological mobilization and representation (Benjamin & Schwab, 2021, p.4; Cabrera et al., 2021, p.417; Chamberlain, 2017, p.10; Gelgile & Shukla, 2023, p.3; Looft, 2017, p.894; Ostaszewska, 2020, p.4067; Peroni & Rodak, 2020, p.4S; Zimmerman, 2017, p.56). While critics maintain that incorporating social media use into organizing strategies is insufficient for delineating a distinct wave (Munro, 2013, p.23; Şener, 2021, p.2), its recognition signifies the emergence of a new agenda, a new approach, and a new era of intense feminist activism (Chamberlain, 2017, p.5; Malinowska, 2020, p.2). Fourth wave feminism seeks to rectify shortcomings of past feminist waves by addressing salient topics such as intersectionality, rape culture, women's reproductive rights, commodification, and gender shaming (Benjamin & Schwab, 2021, p.3; Chamberlain, 2017, p.12; Mendes et al., 2019, p.11). Moreover, through its anti-essentialist, participatory approach the fourth wave has fostered more inclusive, transnational solidarities between feminists, embracing intergenerational dialogue and perspectives of those marginalized by the mainstream (Malinowska, 2020, p.2; Rodak, 2020, p.116S, 120S; Tazi & Oumlil, 2020, p.45). Despite embracing diverse identities, critics argue that fourth wave feminism has fostered highly individualized formations and expressions of feminism (Cabrera et al., 2021, p.417; Mendes, 2015, p.32; Schuster, 2013, p.12; Singh, 2018, p.2).

The recent resurgence of feminisms can be attributed to the enhanced visibility facilitated by digital technologies' affordances, as well as the current cultural moment whereby feminism is gaining popularity (Banet-Weiser, 2015, p.183; Rodgers, 2022, p.6). *Popular feminism*, *mainstream feminism*, or *choice feminism* refers to feminist ideas and superficial practices that gain widespread visibility and circulation through mainstream channels, including media-friendly expressions such as popular media, celebrity feminism,

corporate feminism and the commercialization of feminist ideals (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020, p.9; Crepax, 2020, p.74; Mendes et al., 2019, p.9). *Instagram feminism*, for example, is characterized by the extensive adoption of a visually striking 'girly' aesthetic, which overtly embraces motivational slogans and stereotypical feminine motifs, e.g., rhinestones, glitter, flowers, and sequins (Crepax, 2020, p.75). Banet-Weiser et al. (2020, p.11) criticize mainstream feminism for commodifying feminist critiques. Despite the rise of a thriving market targeting girls centered around girl power and the self-governed empowered feminist subject, the broader social and economic landscape reduces the 'power' in girl power to *consumer* power (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020, p.9; Singh, 2018, p.2). This consumerist, market-driven reproduction of pseudo-feminism equates consumption with achieving autonomy and self-realization, while reinforcing neoliberal imperatives of individualism and de-emphasizing feminism's core collective identity (Rodgers, 2022, p.6). However, popular feminisms and figures validate the legitimacy of feminist ideas and politics and can, therefore, persuade the public of the necessity of feminist modes of being and knowing. Moreover, diverse feminist communities *also* continue to form and expand through the use of new media (Rodgers, 2022, p.6).

2.10 DIGITAL FEMINIST ACTIVISM

Tech-savvy, gender-sophisticated feminists are harnessing the affordances of social media to engage in feminist activism and explore novel modes of representation and communication (Malinowska, 2020, p.5; Mendes, 2015, p.34; Tazi & Oumlil, 2020, p.54). Digital platforms, synonymous with social media, serve as spaces for feminist protest (Singh, 2018, p.2). These platforms empower feminists to transcend gender borders, organize direct action, offer counter-hegemonic perspectives, and bring feminist issues into the mainstream (Ahmad & Thorpe, 2020, p.669; Dinçer, 2023, p.288; Munro, 2013, p.24; Peroni & Rodak, 2020, 4S). Thus, they provide safe zones in cyberspace for feminist counterpublic actors to engage collectively (Ahmad & Thorpe, 2020, p.685; Jain, 2020, p.7; Turley & Fisher, 2018, p.131). Discourse "constitutes situations, objects of knowledge, and the social identities of and relationships between people and groups of people'' (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, p. 258). By extension, through the utilization of hashtags, retweets, likes, and comments, social media facilitates discursive practices that can reinforce or challenge existing power dynamics

(Jackson & Banaszczyk, 2016, p.392). Consequently, social media platforms operate as a *public* (Jackson & Banaszczyk, 2016, p.395).

Moreover, the interactive and interpersonal nature of social media platforms enhances the visibility and accessibility of feminism (Singh, 2018, p.4; Van Dijk & Poell, 2015, p.3). Dispersed social networks are instrumental to collaborative learning, raising gender awareness, and empowering communities to counter patriarchal hegemony (Palomo-Domínguez et al., 2023, p.27). Social networks, characterized by non-hierarchy, informality, and inclusivity, enable women to challenge the collective myth of women's role in society by functioning as consciousness-raising groups, or what hooks (2000, p.47) defines as *circles of women* (Rodak, 2020, p.119S). Within these circles, women engage in storytelling to find recognition and reconciliation from other group members (hooks, 2000, p.47). However, the democratizing potential and mobilizing power of social media maintains problematic power dynamics through the proliferation of misogynistic or sexist narratives (Ahmad & Thorpe, 2020, p.679; Şener, 2021, p.3; Willem & Tortajada, 2021, p.63). Digital spaces conducive to the flourishing of mainstream feminism are concurrently imbued with hierarchies of power and algorithmic bias that perpetuate existing structures of inequality (Ahmad & Thorpe, 2020, p.672; Singh, 2018, p.2; Willem & Tortajada, 2021, p.63). In navigating these challenges, some feminists may opt to refrain from engaging in mainstream counter-publics (e.g., comment sections) to shield themselves from harassment or gentertrolling (Heger & Hoffmann, 2023, p.394; Mendes et al., 2018, p.6). Additionally, media-enabled organizing is highly affective and time-consuming (Lee, 2020, p.2). Digital feminist tactics encompass agenda-setting, fostering call-out culture, hashtag campaigns, data activism, and digital archiving (Şener, 2021, p.2). Moreover, feminist activists' digital labor include tasks such as content moderation, content production, coordination of volunteers, participation in public events, blogging, solidarity building with platform users, and designing websites (Mendes et al., 2019, p.81). These labor-intensive practices can lead to emotional exhaustion or technostress resulting from constant access and exposure to information (Lee, 2020, p.3; Mendes et al., 2019, p.96; Young et al., 2019, p.3).

Nevertheless, digital platforms give women unprecedented power to shape their own content and narratives (Munro, 2013, p.23). Feminist activists creatively reappropriate or combine platforms' existing affordances and practices of use to generate new forms of content, spurring what is referred to as *vernacular creativity* (Dumitrica & Hockin-Boyers, 2023, p.3320; Jenzen et al., 2021, p.423). For instance, *slideshow activism*, a new visual and

rhetorical political tactic that involves creating a slideshow akin to a PowerPoint presentation on a particular issue, is transforming Instagram into a vibrant space for visual storytelling, advocacy, and information distribution (Dumitrica & Hockin-Boyers, 2023, p.3318; Ledford & Salzano, 2022, p.258). This discursive practice, developed by activists, advocacy groups, and artists using Instagram's swipeable, ten-image carousel feature, harnesses the aesthetics of the platform and employs both text and visual elements (Dumitrica & Hockin-Boyers, 2023, p.3318; Ledford & Salzano, 2022, p.258). At the core of this approach lies the notion of *templatability*, a logic where aesthetics are standardized and readily replicated by users to

Figure 2

Slideshow Activism (Wiatrowska, 2020)

make content, thus increasing its appeal and likelihood of spurring widespread engagement (Dumitrica & Hockin-Boyers, 2023, p.3320). In the subsequent section, another prominent mode of digital feminist protest is discussed: *hashtag feminism*.

2.11 HASHTAG FEMINISM

Hashtags (#), as tagging markers, exhibit significant thematic organizational potential and contribute to the formation of *social media publics* or *hashtag publics* (Mendes et al., 2019, p.16; Özkula, 2021, p.69). Due to their algorithmic construction, hashtags offer discursive frame processes that allow users to easily locate, circulate, and articulate experiences, beliefs, and topics via digitally networked communities (Kuo, 2016, p.2; Mendes et al., 2019, p.16). Hashtags build common narratives from shared identities and experiences, and challenge dominant public narratives on women's issues (Jackson & Banaszczyk, 2016, p.395). By bridging individual, easily consumable narratives with collective action to condemn and highlight the systemic nature of social injustices, *hashtag feminism* epitomizes "the personal is political" (Şener, 2021, p.4). Hashtags #MeToo and #YesAllWomen, for instance, function as collective action framing tools or conversation anchors that offer a visual depiction of sexual assault and harassment (Dejmanee et al., 2020, p.3948; Kuo, 2016, p.11). Hashtagged narratives document and consolidate individual testimonies into a unified rhetorical framework, thereby functioning as affective storytelling structures or *affective publics* (Canella, 2017, p.26; Dejmanee et al., 2020, p.3949). These publics operate through a logic of *personalized action frames*; networks of users utilize easy-to-personalize frames to organize action, demand change, and coordinate digital and offline modes of political engagement (Bennett & Segerberg, 2011, p.3; 2013, p.149; Beraldo, 2022, p.1099; Özkula, 2021, p.69). By leveraging activist hashtags, counterpublics can collectively articulate heterogeneous components without conforming to uniform interpretations (Beraldo, 2022, p.1101; Kuo, 2016, p.3).

Feminist hashtag activism offers spaces for social support, solidarity, awareness raising, and community building (Dejmanee et al., 2020, p.3948; Mendes et al., 2018, p.13). However, feminist hashtag activism can be triggering for some women, including survivors of sexual assault (Mendes et al., 2018, p.3). Individuals participating in hashtag campaigns face significant emotional and psychological burdens, and are frequently subjected to online harassment or threats (Dejmanee et al., 2020, p.3948; Trott, 2021, p.1126). In addition, hashtag feminism may oversimplify complex issues, legitimize certain voices over others, and tends to attribute responsibility to the individual rather than structural dynamics (Dejmanee et al., 2020, p.3948; Şener, 2021, p.4).

2.12 THE POWER OF SYMBOLS AND VISUALS

Semiotics, the study and analysis of signs and symbols that express cultural contents, finds its first explicit mention in the works of John Locke (Bakker & Hoffmann, 2005, p.334; Dianiya, 2020, p.215; Dumitrica & Pridmore, 2019; Harrison, 2003, p.47; Lawes, 2019, p.1; Uttal & Yuan, 2014, p.2). Referred to as *semiotike* or the *doctrine of signs*, Locke positioned semiotics as one of the three branches of knowledge, alongside physics and ethics (Mikhaeil & Baskerville, 2019, p.5). *Signs*, encompassing words, text, images, and visuals, are imbued with meaning (Curtin, 2007, p.52; Dianiya, 2020, p.215; Dumitrica & Pridmore, 2019; Hurley, 2023, p.5). Signs possess the ability to disrupt dominant narratives, challenge societal preconceptions, and reinvent reality (Przybylo et al., 2018, p.4). Nothing is a sign until it is interpreted as such. In other words, a sign only acquires significance upon its interpretation. *Symbols* are signs which are interpretated as referring to the object they denote by virtue of agreement or habitual connection (Aiello, 2006, p.93; Bakker & Hoffmann, 2005, p.339; Dąmbska, 1982, p.125). Thus, a *symbol* refers to any type of signitive object, including an individual image, phrase, word, or visual (Bakker & Hoffmann, 2005, p.339; Dąmbska, 1982, p.125; Goodnow, 2006, p.166). Fagerholm et al. (2023, p.1039) argue that a strategic utilization of visual symbols is necessary for conveying complex information.

Social movements have adeptly employed *semiotic repertoires* for articulating and condensing ideals, goals, and organizational identities (Beraldo, 2022, p.1100; Goodnow, 2006, p.168). The concept of *protest repertoire* involves actions adopted by movements or activist collectives, predominantly through visual and aesthetic means, to convey messages (Fagerholm et al., 2023, p.1036). Visuals create meaning; they not only suggest reality but are also understood as an additional source of communication, supplementing written or spoken text (Russmann & Svensson, 2016, p.2). For instance, feminist signs and symbols hold profound cultural and historical significance, serving as resistance frames against misogyny and markers for countercultural exploration (Przybylo et al., 2018, p.1). Moreover, visuals are powerful cultural tools for driving political engagement (Rovisco & Veneti, 2017, p.2). They have a mobilizing effect as they are instrumental in establishing political agendas, propagating perceptions, communicating political messages, and visualizing resistance (Corner, 2011, p.36; Jenzen et al., 2021, p.417; Turnbull-Dugarte, 2019, p.3).

Visuals harness emotive responses (Corner, 2011, p.36; Schill, 2012, p.126). The elicitation of emotions has a significant impact on political dynamics, particularly within the sphere of visual culture (Fagerholm et al., 2023, p.1035; Freistein & Gadinger, 2020, p.221).

Emotions serve as frames for personal and social understanding, shaping self-perceptions while situating individuals within a wider collective (Freistein & Gadinger, 2020, p.224). According to George & Leidner (2019, p.3), social movements need to have an identity that is unique and identifiable. *Visual identity*, an umbrella term for visual elements such as typography, colors, slogans, images, and logos, serves a symbolic language for constructing identification and positively influencing loyalty and reputation (Fagerholm et al., 2023, p.1036). For example, colors have historically been employed by political parties and social movements to convey themes, as well as sustain and create collective identities (Fagerholm et al., 2023, p.1036).

By consolidating multiple meanings and emotions, symbols can construct solidarity among individuals who otherwise lack the cohesion needed to act collectively (Awad & Wagoner, 2020, p.4). Slogans and symbols are developed as part of a campaign's persuasive rhetoric strategy, akin to how the persuasive power of verbal slogans is utilized for motivating action (Goodnow, 2006, p.166). Non-verbal symbols utilized in social campaigns, referred to as *movement identifiers* or *all-purpose symbols*, function as logos representing the movement (Goodnow, 2006, p.170). As such, they serve as visual tropisms, or synecdoches implying a relationship of convertibility of their respective social campaign's cause (Awad & Wagoner, 2020, p.5). In addition, movement identifiers enable participants to express affiliation, without explicit declaration (Goodnow, 2006, p.170). According to Goodnow (2006, p.170), campaign symbols need to be replicable, possess some intrinsic underlying message, and hold a certain degree of ambiguity. This replicability and ambiguity contributes to their simplicity, and enhances their ease of recall. Thus, symbols are powerful rhetorical constructs - they help us comprehend the world around us and can become part of the public consciousness or collective memory (Awad & Wagoner, 2020, p.4; Goodnow, 2006, p.170).

"Web 2.0, with its opportunities and limits, […] facilitate[s] the spread of information transmitted via images even more than words" (della Porta, 2013, p.138-139). Social networks and digital platforms enable the widespread dissemination of symbols and *visual artifacts*, e.g., photos, illustrations, hashtags and memes, the latter two discussed in subsequent sections (Cornet et al., 2017, p.2475; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p.65). These artifacts serve as social instruments for sense-making, thus reinforcing the notion that the act of *seeing* is synonymous with knowledge and strongly linked to existing power dynamics (Cornet et al., 2017, p.2475). New forms of mediated activism amplify protest communication's visual character (Jenzen et al., 2021, p.428). The rise of *visual activism*, fueled by digital platforms, showcases activist behaviors and emphasizes the political or

socioeconomic context of specific causes (Cornet et al., 2017, p.2475). Przybylo et al. (2018, p.3) highlight the collaborative nature of symbology and feminist knowledge production; by facilitating multi-authored forms of collaboration through processes such as blending, remixing, sharing, archiving, social media enables feminist words and symbols to transcend geographical boundaries. *Social media imaginaries* refers to the media imaginaries attributed to social media, as well as how these imaginaries are circulated and expressed online (Jenzen et al., 2021, p.415). *Visual communication*, an expanding subfield of communication science, studies mass-mediated visuals in contemporary contexts (Russmann & Svensson, 2016, p.2), informing and sustaining social media imaginaries by providing alternative media appropriations for enacting social and political engagement (Jenzen et al., 2021, p.419). By participating in both content creation and dissemination, public and commercial mass media no longer have exclusive control over the visual narrative of protests (Doerr et al., 2013, p.5). Thus, symbols and visuals are powerful tools for creating new spaces of resistance and addressing injustices (Przybylo et al., 2018, p.3).

2.12.1 Hashtags as Symbols

Hashtags have gained prominence as non-linear, participatory online spaces for signaling affiliation, stimulating dialogue, and fostering connections (Ahmad & Thorpe, 2020, p.676; Mihailidis, 2020, p.2). Hashtags have *narrative agency*; by enabling digital storytelling and the co-production of narratives through personal information sharing (i.e., stories, personal experiences, thoughts, feelings), hashtags cultivate collective identities (Mihailidis, 2020, p.3). Drawing on Habermas' (1989, p.7) notion of the *public sphere*, hashtags serve as *signs* of contention in online political discourse. In addition, hashtags are open to negotiation, renegotiation, and re-appropriation and, thus, operate as signifiers (Beraldo, 2022, p.1101; Foust & Hoyt, 2018, p.42). The inclusion of a particular hashtag in a post, for example, signifies a users' readiness to engage with and be visible to a broader social movement using or searching for similar hashtags (Ahmad & Thorpe, 2020, p.676). By producing dialogical spaces and enabling loosely connected groups to collectively influence civic matters, these semiotic repertoires align with the connective action and participatory culture framework (Beraldo, 2022, p.1102; Mihailidis, 2020, p.3).

2.12.2 Memes as Symbols

Marshall McLuhan advanced the concept of learning by humor, arguing that "a perceptive or incisive joke can be more meaningful than platitudes lying between two covers" (McLuhan & Fiore, 2001, p.10). Reading this statement, one may argue that McLuhan's insight foreshadowed the emergence of the internet meme, now deeply ingrained within our cultural fabric. According to its classical definition, a *meme* is a unit of cultural information capable of transmission (Dawkins, 1976, p.249; Mihailidis, 2020, p.3; Shomova, 2022, p.3). Memes shape the textures of social experience that develop as individuals engage with the different technologies that make up the internet (Hine, 2020, p.29). *Internet memes* typically adhere to rule-based structures and feature image-text pairings (Beraldo, 2022, p.1101; Moreno-Almeida, 2021, p.1546). These distinct, replicable templates act as sign-vehicles for conveying and reshaping content (Soh, 2020, p.7). As memes undergo a process of imitation, adaptation, reproduction, remixing, recontextualization, and co-creation by numerous online users, they generate multi-layered iterations of the original meme (Esteves, 2018, p.10; Shomova, 2022, p.4). Thus, the denotational content of a meme remains dynamic across iterations; its legibility depends on the explicit recognition of a seemingly autonomously circulating collection of intertextual citations, referred to as a *mimetic chain* (Johann, et al., 2023, p.228; Soh, 2020, p.5). Memes are intrinsically attractive to collectives as they can be read as a common language and, therefore, form and signify communal belonging (Moreno-Almeida, 2021, p.1546). Memes assume the form of symbols, only intelligible to in-group members (Shomova, 2022, p.4). The imitative nature of memes underscores their reliance on *prosumption*, i.e., the interconnected process of content production and consumption, epitomized by the role of *produsers*, i.e., users who produce (Esteves, 2018, p.11; Palomo-Domínguez et al., 2023, p.28).

Memes, as cultural signifiers, articulate counter-narratives and can be regarded as an effective mechanism of participatory digital culture (Mihailidis, 2020, p.3; Shomova, 2022, p.3). Within political contexts, memes have become entwined with political discourse and events (Johann, et al., 2023, p.229). *Political memes* serve as persuasive instruments, conduits for grassroots activism, and mediums for individual and collective identity expression (Johann, et al., 2023, p.228). Despite their seemingly low-level of commitment, memes act as entry points into political discussions, and represent highly democratic forms of

communication due to their accessibility; memes require low levels of (digital) literacy to be constructed and circulated (Johann, et al., 2023, p.234). Moreover, memes reclaim visual representation, and act as links between online and offline spaces for civic participation (Jenzen et al., 2021, p.415; Mihailidis, 2020, p.3). This form of, albeit cynical, political participation evidences the logic of connective action; memes give space and power to digitally networked communities, thereby shaping collective emotional experience and identity (Mihailidis, 2020, p.4; Shomova, 2022, p.4). The significance and effectiveness of political memes stems from their affective qualities, given that emotions play a pivotal role in politics (Freistein & Gadinger, 2020, p.225). Operating as a *politics-emotion nexus*, political memes serve various functions, including responding to political developments, reinforcing political identities, and shaping broader discourse (Johann, et al., 2023, p.228). Soh (2020, p.5) suggests that the political productiveness of memes is rooted in their ambivalent nature; memes can be viewed as either political tools or sources of humor. According to Rosenberg (2016, para.14), *laughtivism* serves as a mechanism for dismantling defenses, thereby fostering a receptive environment wherein individuals are more inclined to engage with and contemplate presented arguments. While there remains a constant risk that the political significance and ideological power of memes will be dismissed due to associations with humor, it is precisely humor that renders memes pragmatically useful (Soh, 2020, p.5). Soh (2020, p.5) argues that, in order to circulate and signal protest, the denotational content of memes must be interpretable as political. However, I argue here that all memes, irrespective of their content, are political; memes form and disseminate narratives opposing dominant discourses and embody symbols of meaning-making (Esteves, 2018, p.3).

2.13 ARTIVISM

Eagleton (1990, p.328) posits that power has become aestheticized. *Aesthetics* encompass practices that generate new commonalities of sense amidst disturbances in established modes of thought, shaping the formation of collective meanings (Hansen & Danny, 2015, p.2). Politics, arising from disputes over what is perceptible, is inherently aesthetic as it necessitates a shared sense of perception and a critical departure from established common sense (Hansen & Danny, 2015, p.2). Moreover, aesthetics enforce the ideas of dominant social groups, making it a highly effective tool for political hegemony (Eagleton, 1990,

p.330). *Aesthetic protest* disrupts common sense and, therefore, reveals the contingency of self-evident facts of perception and our taken-for-granted conceptual order, known as the *division of the sensible* (Hansen & Danny, 2015, p.2).

Baudrillard (1993, p.70) suggests that society transforms into a system of visual signs, saturated with art that has no clear significance. Social movements utilize a range of artistic practices (Stammen & Meissner, 2024, p.19). *Art* explores the complexities of the human experience and can become symbolic representations of movements, serving as both emotional and cognitive triggers for collective action (Awad & Wagoner, 2020, p.5; Patsiaouras et al., 2018, p.76; Stammen & Meissner, 2024, p.21). By fostering empowerment and movement building, the production of visual media becomes a mode of engagement and activism (McGarry et al., 2020, p.100; Stammen & Meissner, 2024, p.20). *Artivism*, a blend of 'art' and 'activism', denotes aesthetics, artistic expressions, and symbolisms increasingly disseminated online to effect social change (Palomo-Domínguez et al., 2023, p.26; Rodal et al., 2019, p.25; Sandoval & Latorre, 2008, p.81). In addition, artivism provides activists with aesthetic joy, replenishing their energy and dedication invested in their work and enabling the sustained pursuit of social movement activity (Milbrandt, 2010, p.8; Patsiaouras et al., 2018, p.78). Examples of artivism include the Quilting for AIDS/HIV, the Guerilla Girls Collective, and the Pussy Riot (Moreshead & Salter, 2023, p.876; Palomo-Domínguez et al., 2023, p.26).

The artivism movement started in feminist and queer theory, and derives from the concept of *protest art* or *action art* (Abouelnaga, 2020, p.165). *Protest art* seeks to effectively convey meanings and symbols designed to influence positive change, capture public interest, draw media coverage, and inspire action (Patsiaouras et al., 2018, p.76). With the emergence of decentralized, delocalized social networks, protest art is no longer linked to the space-time in which the manifestation of art takes place (Rodal et al., 2019, p.24). The *Lasswell model*, which portrays communication as a linear, one-way process wherein an active sender transmits a message to a passive receiver, has been reimaged (Lasswell, 1948, p.218). Receivers are now *prosumers* - i.e., active recipients are instant information-transmitting agents that produce and consume content and ideas (Palomo-Domínguez et al., 2023, p.28; Rodal et al., 2019, p.25).

Audience involvement in artistic experiences can facilitate social interaction, promote a sense of belonging, and reinforce individuals' connection to the artistic message (Patsiaouras et al., 2018, p.78). According to Mandolini (2023), "a deeper involvement of artivists with transnational intersectional feminist movements generally corresponds to a more inclusive, effective and participative artivistic product" (p.1). By enabling users to

Figure 3

Strajk Kobiet Protest Art Example 1
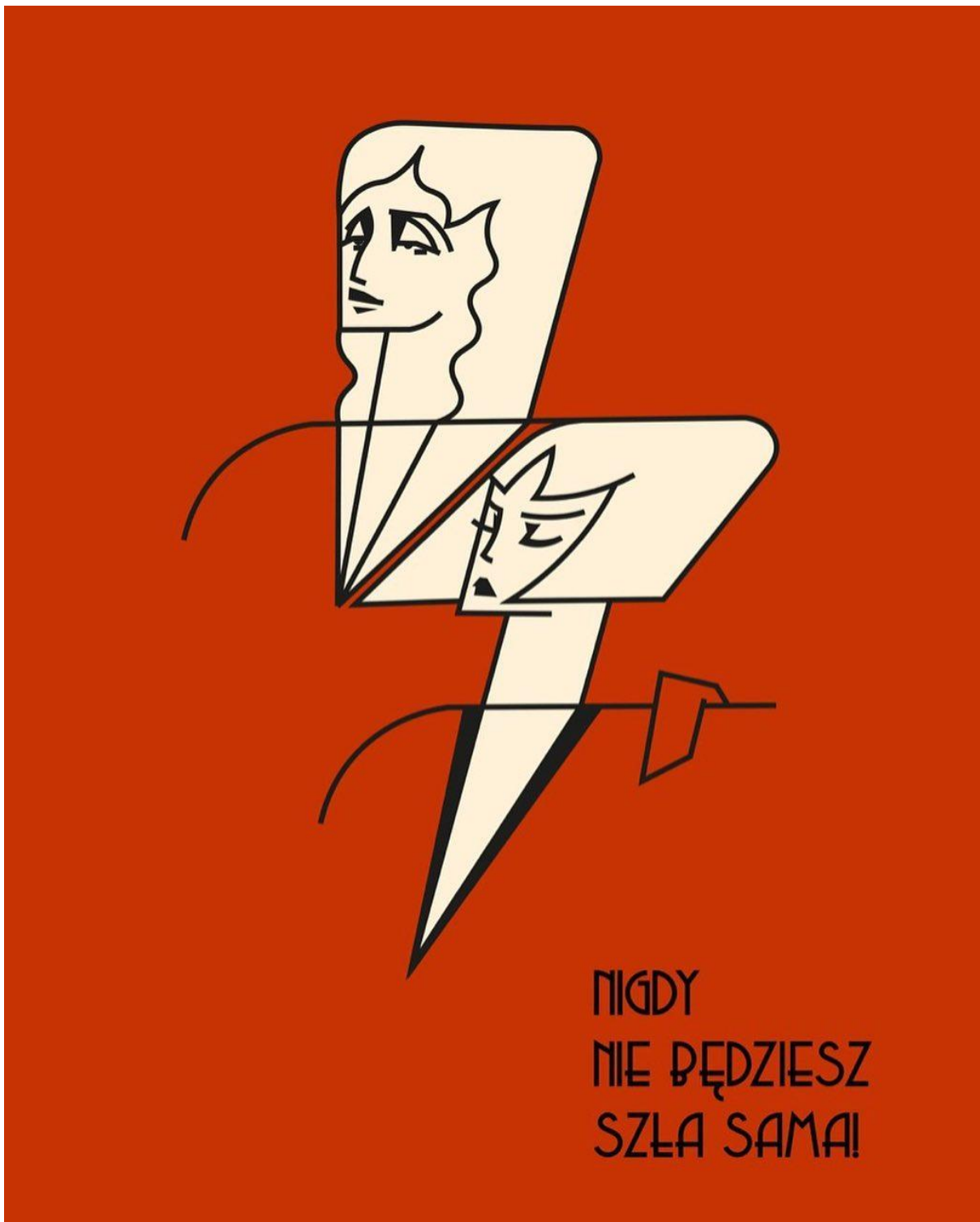
Note. Nie Będziesz Szła Sama [*You Will Never Walk Alone*]. (Selamawit, 2022)

Figure 4

Strajk Kobiet Protest Art Example 2

Note. Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet, 25 Lipca 2023, Nigdy Nie Będziesz Szła Sama [*All-Poland Women's Strike, July 25, 2023, You Will Never Walk Alone*]. (Strajk Kobiet, 2023)

Figure 5

Strajk Kobiet Protest Art Example 3

Note. Praw Życz [*To Wish (Someone) Rights*] (Hejmo, 2021)

articulate thoughts and affiliations through the joint creation of meaning, the *act* of making becomes empowering (Esteves, 2018, p.3).

Craftivism, a sub-genre of artivism, is a trend observed across social media platforms (Esteves, 2018, p.11; Moreshead & Salter, 2023, p.876). *Craft*, a gendered form of labor historically undervalued by predominantly masculine societies, is perceived as a gentle mode of creative expression that women passively and quietly engage in (Moreshead & Salter, 2023, p.876). However, Parker (2019, p.5) contends that 'feminine' art forms like embroidery empower women, functioning as sites for feminist text and holding rhetorical and political significance, particularly in contexts where women's roles are confined to the domestic sphere. As the empowering act of craft making strengthens social bonds, craftivism can be regarded as a feminist modality of *DIY citizenship* (Esteves, 2018, p.10; Moreshead & Salter, 2023, p.876). The emphasis on togetherness in craftivism and creativity has led some to advocate for replacing the 'DIY' abbreviation with 'DIT' (do-it-together) (Esteves, 2018, p.10).

Figure 6

Craftivism

Note. Wypierdalać [*Fuck Off*]. (Drożyńska, 2020)

2.14 VISIBILITY

Digital spaces offer newfound visibility to protests and groups previously condemned to invisibility (Palomo-Domínguez et al., 2023, p.24). Marginalized groups, in particular, employ digital spaces to reclaim space and challenge dominant representations (Ahmad & Thorpe, 2020, p.669; Doerr et al., 2013, p.4). In cyberspace, feminists create alternative visible feminist publics, and claim distinct feminist spaces without retreating from the broader, mainstream public sphere (Beraldo, 2022, p.1103; Travers, 2003, p.7). The term *space invader* refers to a marginalized group or individual who reclaims, disrupts, navigates, and challenges the dominant power relations and structural constraints within a (digital) space from which they have historically been excluded (Ahmad & Thorpe, 2020, p.672). By asserting presence and visibility, space invaders regain control of representations and reimagine new forms of identification (Ahmad & Thorpe, 2020, p.672). The act of utilizing digital space and its affordances to (re)claim agency and make oneself visible is inherently political, serving as a form of resistance against hegemonic structures (Ahmad & Thorpe, 2020, p.685). While it is necessary to be publicly and mediatically visible in order to claim social existence, recognition, and political agency, that same visibilization is susceptible to frameworks of vulnerability (Theodoro & Cogo, 2019, para.4). This is referred to as *the (in)visibility paradox*. Trott (2021, p.1126) found that those who initiate or actively participate in online forms of feminist activism, frequently become the subject of public scrutiny, online harassment, and mainstream media attention. Moreover, within the mediated economy of visibility, feminism competes with *popular misogyny*, a networked form of misogyny, for legitimacy (Banet-Weiser, 2015, p.189; Dejmanee et al., 2020, p.3947).

   Despite the proliferation of *counter-public spheres* facilitated by digital platforms, platform commercialization and algorithmic functions determine content visibility (Şener, 2021, p.2). *Algorithms* are computer programs that define a series of computational processes for organizing data to produce a desired outcome (Cotter, 2019, p.898). Algorithms streamline information and interactions through *algorithmic facilitation*, i.e., the process of sorting, filtering, and ranking content (Etter & Albu, 2021, p.75). To increase engagement, algorithmic environments provide platform users with personalized content and recommendations, ultimately determining who or what attains visibility (Cotter, 2019, p.896; Sorce, 2023, p.215). Thus, algorithms, functioning as disciplinary apparatuses, dictate participatory norms (Cotter, 2019, p.896). The increasing sophistication and pervasiveness of algorithms and datafication significantly impacts the design and execution of digital

campaigns (Cotter, 2019, p.900; Sorce, 2023, p.215). In order to navigate algorithmic rankings, activists anticipate their internal mechanisms and features (Cotter, 2019, p.897; Sorce, 2023, p.215).

On the one hand, social media platforms' algorithmic environment can strengthen activists' symbolic work for meaning-making (Etter & Albu, 2021, p.69). For instance, algorithms such as hashtag algorithms allow users to easily retrieve information (Etter & Albu, 2021, p.70). In addition, activists entering social media spaces with the aim of achieving visibility can reach *microcelebrity status*, i.e., the state of achieving popularity or fame by leveraging digital participatory media (Chan & Gray, 2020, p.355; Hurley, 2023, p.1). Yet, algorithms can hinder collective action through *algorithmic distortion*, i.e., information opacity, overload, and the manipulation of information leading to misinformation and biases (Etter & Albu, 2021, p.68). In addition, algorithmic functions can lead to the formation of filter bubbles and opinion echo-chambers, potentially resulting in radicalization (Şener, 2021, p.6). Algorithms may also hinder the actualization of collective affordances, as profit-driven algorithmic operations influence platform functionality (Etter & Albu, 2021, p.71).

3. METHODOLOGY

The methodology chapter addresses the research design and outlines the sampling procedure, data collection process, and data analysis method. Lastly, this chapter discusses the ethical implications of the study.

3.1 RESEARCH DESIGN

In accordance with social constructionism, this research assumes reality to be a communicative construction (Way et al., 2015, p.1; Wigginton & Lafrance, 2019, p.5). Consciousness is developed from active engagement with, and experience of, reality from within the social relations in which we exist (Choudry, 2013, p.131). *Qualitative research* is a form of social inquiry with the overarching goal of gaining greater interpreted understanding of particular social phenomena based on socially constructed realities, whereby alternative notions of knowledge are considered (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.78; Brennen, 2017, p.4; Renz et al., 2018, p.1). Therefore, qualitative research is a well-suited method for enhancing knowledge of social structures and actions within contextual, evaluative, or explanatory frameworks (Ritchie, 2003, p.26). Thus, to examine the Polish feminist movement's symbols, as well as the non-textual in artivism, data analysis was conducted using a qualitative empirical method: visual analysis.

3.2 VISUAL ANALYSIS

Visuals have the ability to create persuasive arguments and strongly impact media users' attention (Filimonov et al., 2016, p.2). Moreover, images play a central role in activist communication as they produce recognition and can render political contestation and expressions of dissent (in)visible (Neumayer & Rossi, 2018, p.5). As feminism undergoes a process of digitization and assumes increasingly aesthetic dimensions, Instagram has emerged as a site of social movement documentation and a space for articulating and discussing gender-related issues (Crepax, 2020, p.75; Pearl, 2018, p.2). Instagram images

embody Jenkins et al.'s (2013, p.1) notion of *spreadable media*, i.e., media users share for their own purposes within a participatory culture. According to MacDowall (2016), Instagram acts "as a set or backdrop for the production of digital content and a site of globally connected political action" (p.232). Notably, discourses pertaining to the visual representations of feminism, femininity, and the female body have become popular on the platform (Crepax, 2020, p.75). Therefore, posts on Instagram - a social networking platform and distinctly visual medium that privileges the dissemination and sharing of photographic image and video representations, rather than text-based messages - were analyzed (Cara, 2018, p.334; Cornet et al., 2017, p.2475; Hurley, 2023, p.2).

3.2.1 Sampling Logic

In the case of social media data, the unit of analysis is an Instagram post (i.e., an image). Digital content was sampled using a non-probability, purposive sampling method; applying theoretical sampling and intentional bias, a valid sample was selected based on the researcher's own judgement to ensure relevance, usefulness, and representativeness (Marshall, 1996, p.524; Tongco, 2007, p.154; Vehovar et al., 2016, p.330). In addition, after identifying the research area, criterion-based sampling was applied: 1) the posts were taken from public Instagram profiles, 2) the professional artist has Polish nationality or is currently based in Poland, and 3) the post depicted *visual art* (i.e., graphic design, multi-media art, collages, illustrations, or paintings). Posts including videos, protest photographs[13], and/or GIFs were excluded from the defined scope of the study. Moreover, comments were excluded to protect the privacy of third-party Instagram users.

Instagram offers a visualized possibility of imaging movements. To explore how Instagram functions as a platform for movement branding and facilitates the spread of symbols, posts accruing higher numbers of likes were prioritized. The methodological rationale behind this choice was predicated upon the assumption that such posts enjoyed wider circulation, thereby imbuing them with greater representation significance and making them more likely to be embraced and adopted by movement participants.

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[13] Within the context of the 2020-2021 Strajk Kobiet protests, *protest* photographs that eternalize physical, real-life moments of protest, while assuming a form of visual art that can be circulated online, primarily served as a form of documentation rather than art specifically curated for online dissemination.

3.2.2 Data Collection

For the visual analysis, research units were collected as secondary data through the web version of Instagram. To refine the scope of data collection, the data corpus was narrowed to digital content posted on Instagram between April 1st, 2020, and March 12th, 2021, coinciding with the peak of mobilization and the immediate aftermath. Thus, the current research is cross-sectional; data was collected within a single time-frame (Babbie, 2021, p.106). The final corpus of $N = 163$ posts that met the sampling criteria were collated and manually downloaded for semiotic analysis.

3.2.3 Semiotic Analysis

A *symbol* is an abstract sign that links the symbolic sign and its signified through complex cultural knowledge; a symbol's relation to a particular referent is based on arbitrary and conventional associations (Amrullah & Sokowati, 2022, p.2; Berger, 2010, p.10; Curtin, 2007, p.51; Dumitrica & Oosterman, 2022). To uncover the meanings, associations, and cultural significance of Strajk Kobiet's movement symbols, the data corpus was analyzed using a semiotic approach. *Semiotics* is the study of signs and signifying practices (Berger, 2011, Semiotics of Blondeness Section). In the 20th century, semiotics diverged into two distinct traditions: the European tradition led by Ferdinand de Saussure (and continued by scholars such as Roland Barthes, Umberto Eco, and Julia Kristeva) and the American branch pioneered by Charles S. Peirce (Aiello, 2006, p.92; Dumitrica & Pridmore, 2019; Hurley, 2023, p.6; Mikhaeil & Baskerville, 2019, p.5). According to Saussure, the creation of meaning relies on language, comprising elements like sounds, images, written text, as a system of signs (Amrullah & Sokowati, 2022, p.3). Within this system, a *sign* is defined as the relationship between a *signifier* (that which represents the form of language and produces meaning) and the *signified* (the ideas or concepts associated with it - the meaning itself) (Amrullah & Sokowati, 2022, p.3; Curtin, 2007, p.53). Charles S. Peirce extends beyond de Saussure's proposed linguistic confines of the signifier and signified, defining *semiosis* as a triadic framework consisting of the semiotic concept of 1) *signs*, i.e., an entity that refers to something else, 2) the *object*, the referent of meaning, and 3) the *interpretant* or *meaning-effect*, the interpretation and subsequent construction of meaning (Aiello, 2006, p.90; Curtin,

2007, p.53; Hurley, 2023, p.6). The present visual analysis is informed by the Saussurean approach to signification.

Saussure's follower, Roland Barthes, was the first semiologist to apply semiotic concepts to the analysis of visual imagery (Aiello, 2006, p.94; Curtin, 2007, p.54). Barthes posited that visual signification is articulated into two interrelated layers of meaning; first-order meaning or *denoted meaning* (the immediate or literal meaning - who or what is objectively depicted?), and second-order meaning or *connoted meaning* (the symbolic or ideological meaning - what ideas, values, and meanings are inscribed by cultural codes?) (Amrullah & Sokowati, 2022, p.3; Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2011, p.27). In addition, Barthes introduces an additional ideological layer to signification: the *myth* (Aiello, 2006, p.95; Dianiya, 2020, p.216). While connotation pertains to the ideological meanings *attached* to signs, the myth encompasses the ideological concepts *evoked* by signs (Calefato, 2008, p.73). Therefore, myths, as modes of significance, are both culture-specific and ambivalent (Calefato, 2008, p.75). Moreover, this suggests that when symbols are contextualized, greater power is given to the meaning (i.e., the combination of denotative and connotative meanings) of an image (Aiello, 2006, p.94). The current visual analysis adopts Barthes' semiotic analysis method, which emphasizes the subjectivity, positioning, and role of the reader in constructing meaning, as well as the cultural situatedness of meaning (Aiello, 2006, p.94; Curtin, 2007, p.55).

To analyze the symbols present across the data corpus, signs were distinguished into two different forms: *verbal signs* (e.g., slogans, call to actions) and *non-verbal signs* (e.g., shapes, objects, the use of color). *Representations*, derived from the word "represent", involves symbolizing, encoding, or signifying something through representational codes (Dianiya, 2020, p.214). Representations can be based on a *text*, i.e., messages with independent existence, comprising, among others, symbolic signs, objects, and language (Dianiya, 2020, p.214). Moreover, the signifying power of color is a salient theme in applied semiotics (Bateman, 2014, p.2; Danesi, 2013, p.403). According to Danesi (2013, p.403), *metaforms* are symbols that encompass words, images, rituals, and concepts that share a common pattern of metaphorical reasoning and, therefore, are connected semiotically through a poetic, yet vernacular, logic. Previously regarded as a mere expression of more abstract content, or a resource for meaning-making, colors serve as potent metaforms and psychological tools; conveying emotional expressions within culturally-embedded practices, colors occupy a central position in nearly all semiotic analyses (Bateman, 2014, p.1; Danesi,

2013, p.403). In the Results section, the symbols are categorized into overarching thematic groupings.

3.3 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

While the internet offers abundant opportunities for observing, examining, and analyzing behaviors and communication patterns, this necessitates the development of new ethical guidelines (Hansen & Machin, 2013, p.26). All Instagram posts/visual media collected were sourced from publicly accessible social media accounts. Moreover, these visuals were sourced directly from the respective artist's Instagram account or, with few exceptions, from artist collectives' or Polish magazines' public profiles.

Lastly, in considering ethical implications it is imperative that the effects of positionality on the production of knowledge through *reflexivity*, i.e., a situating technology that can be employed for destabilizing power imbalances within the research process by negotiating understandings of situatedness, are acknowledged (Maxey, 1999, p.201; Rose, 1997, p.306). The practice of reflexivity is a "deconstructive exercise for locating the intersections of author, other, text, and world" (Macbeth, 2001, p.35). Specifically, *self-reflexivity* is the process of reflecting on how one's own positions, interpretations, and perspectives are perpetually shaped by factors such as social class, ethnicity, gender, and religion (Hurley, 2023, p.7; Maxey, 1999, p.200; Rose, 1997, p.312; Roulston & Choi, 2018, p.236). Particularly, semiotic analysis recognizes the dynamic nature of the significance attributed to images or objects, acknowledging that interpretation of representation is shaped by intricate inter-relationships between individuals, the image or object itself, and broader cultural contexts (Curtin, 2007, p.52). Engaging in self-reflexivity heightened the researcher's awareness regarding how their own positionality shaped initial thoughts and interpretations, and, in turn, mitigated the impact of interpretative bias.

4. RESULTS

The fourth chapter discusses the findings from the visual analysis. These findings, presented in this chapter thematically, will be used to draw insights into the Polish feminist movement's accumulative visual self-representation and digital protest media imaginaries.

4.1 THE RED LIGHTNING BOLT

The single red lightning bolt symbol is one of the most iconic symbols of the feminist movement's aesthetics, and has become ubiquitous in the movement's visual culture. The lightning bolt symbol was originally created by graphic designer Ola Jasionowska as the official Strajk Kobiet emblem for Black Protest organizers in 2016. Featured in the lead role across many of the visual images, it is clear that the symbol has become the dominant feature of the movements' aesthetic image, and the biggest visual beneficiary of its massive scale.

Figure 7

Red Lightning Bolt
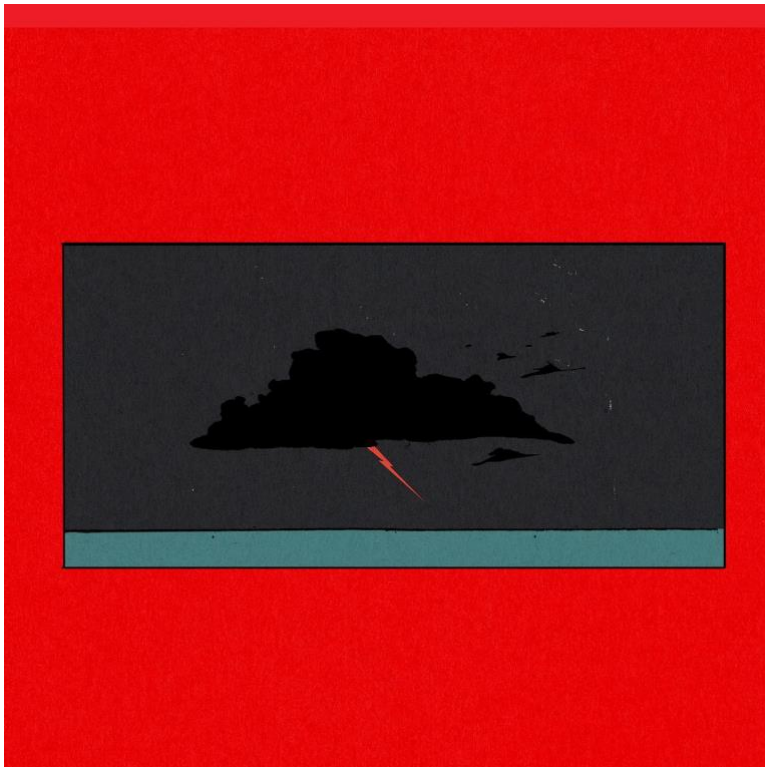
Figure 8

Red Lightning Bolt in Window

Figure 9

Exit Symbol
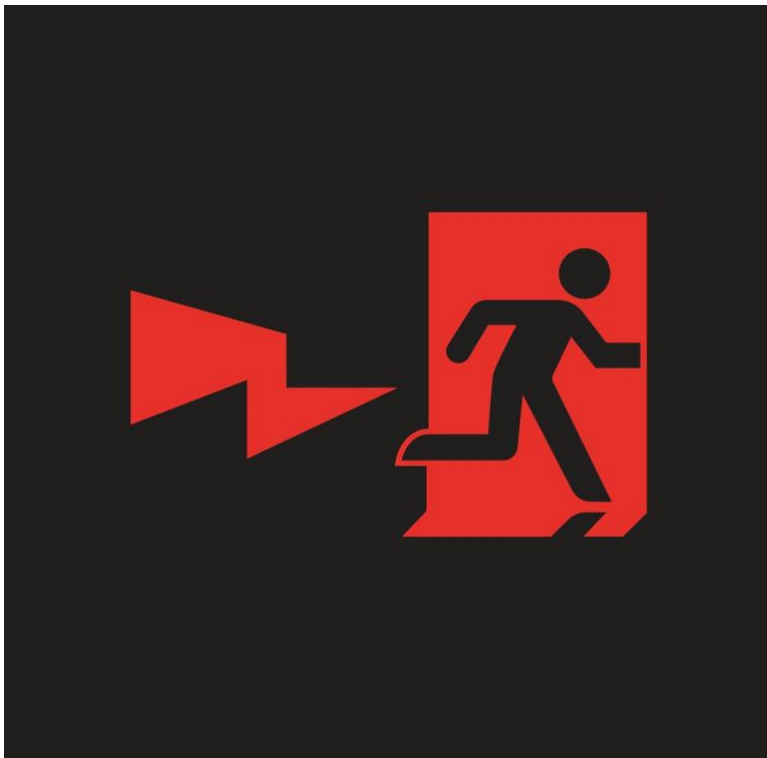
The symbol has a standalone life and as illustrated by Figure 9, is the subject of mass visual exploration, appropriation, remixing, and recontextualization due to its replicability stemming from its simplistic, ambiguous, graphic form. The lightning bolt is a flexible, universal signifier linked to many culturally conditioned signified entities, representing concepts such as divinity, power, judgement, warning, victory, and speed across various mythologies (e.g., Zeus, Perun, and Thor utilized the lightning bolt, or *thunderbolt*, as a divine weapon). On the other hand, the lightning symbol is a common metaphor for rebellion, anger, and aggression, and is typically present on high-voltage facilitates, railway crossings, and electrical equipment to indicate areas requiring heightened caution. Thus, the red lightning symbol serves as a unifying visual motif signaling solidarity and resistance against oppressive policies; it signifies the energy, alertness, and urgency of the Strajk Kobiet protests and, consistent with its association with rebellion, indicates a transition towards civil disobedience (Swidlicka, 2020, para.5; Zieliński, 2020, para.13). As a *movement identifier* or *all-purpose symbol* (Goodnow, 2006, p.170), the depiction of the red lightning bolt enables the artist to express affiliation with the Polish feminist movement, without the need for explicit declaration. Moreover, according to Jasionowska, it acts as a warning sign or threat
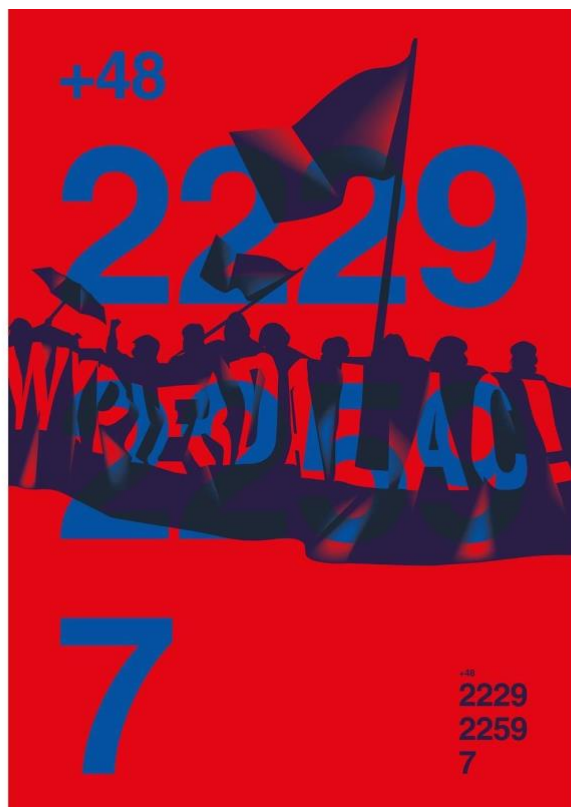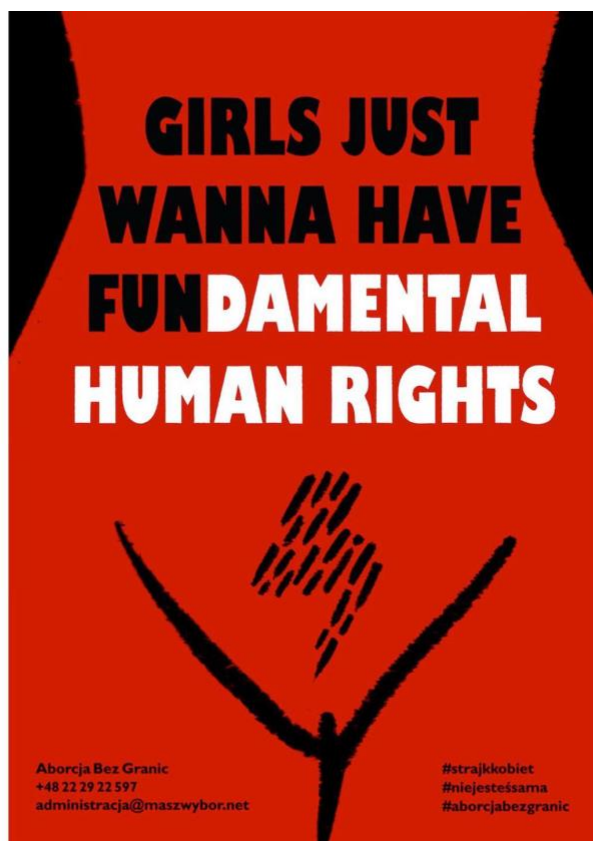
Figure 10

+48 22 29 2259 7

Figure 11

Aborcja Bez Granic

when conventional requests and verbal appeals fail to effect change: "It says: Watch out, beware. We will not accept to deprive women of their basic rights" (Wądołowska, 2020, para.5).

Symbols such as "Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet" [*All-Poland Women's Strike*], "OSK", "Women's Strikes in Poland" "Strajk Kobiet" [*Women's Strike*], and "#strajkkobiet" [*#womensstrike*] were depicted alongside the iconic red lightning bolt symbol, directly referencing the feminist grassroots social movement that led the 2020-2021 protests in response to the Constitutional Tribunal's ruling. Moreover, the Strajk Kobiet logo, featuring the silhouette of a woman's side profile and a red lightning bolt striking directly across it, was present across the visual works. This combination of signs conveys a message of *power* (red lightning bolt) and *femininity* (female silhouette), unified in the pursuit of reproductive rights. References to other international, women's rights initiatives are also made. "Aborcja Bez Granic" [*Abortion Without Borders*] / "#aborcjabezgranic" / Email: "Administracja@maszwybor.net" is a grassroots transnational initiative operating across multiple European countries, that aims to help people access abortions (at home with pills or

in clinics/hospitals abroad). The URL "www.aborcynydreamteam.pl" refers to the Aborcyjny Dream Team [*Abortion Dream Team*] website, a feminist collective and founding member of Aborcja Bez Granic. By disseminating the contact information of these initiatives, Polish artists play a pivotal role in de-stigmatizing abortion. Lastly, the 11-digital number "+48 22 29 22 597", the Aborcja Bez Granic hotline, is depicted. Many Poles fear legal ramifications stemming from the ambiguity surrounding abortion legislation. However, it is important to note that under medical and abortion legislation, personally ordering, financing, or obtaining abortions pills does not carry legal consequences in Poland. Moreover, the dissemination of abortion-related information, and informing others on how to access abortion procedures, is legal. Yet, accessing this crucial information is often challenging. Therefore, the depiction of the hotline serves as a vehicle for awareness-raising.

4.2 UMBRELLA

The black umbrella is a reference to the protests of Polish feminists during the interwar period (1918-1933). On November 29th, 1918, a group of suffragettes gathered outside of Chief of State's Józef Piłsudski's residence and utilized their umbrellas as a metaphorical weapon by striking the pavement and windows as a form of protest (Chałupnik & Brookes, 2022, p.314; Zakrzewski, 2015, para.36). The constitution was amended to grant women the right to vote and the umbrella became imbued with symbolic meaning, embodying protest and resistance. Thus, the black umbrella symbol has become part of the *collective memory* (Awad & Wagoner, 2020, p.6; Goodnow, 2006, p.175). Its depiction is a symbolic gesture that unites activists across generations and events, signaling a feminist stance and the continuity of the struggle for women's rights. In addition, on the day of the Black Protest, October 3rd, 2016, it rained (Korolczuk, 2020b, p.165). Open umbrellas unintentionally created the illusion of a larger crowd, amplifying the protest's collective body and visual impact. In Figure 13, the phrase "Nie Składamy Parasolek" [*We Do Not Fold Umbrellas*] is depicted, signifying movement participants' determination and refusal to back down, cease their protests, or give up.

Figure 12

Umbrella Symbol

Figure 13

Nie Składamy Parasolek

4.3 VULGAR LANGUAGE

Language functions as a form of action; protest is not merely depicted or represented through discourse, but is actively carried out through it (Austin, 1962, p.6). In other words, it is through multimodal speech acts, or communicative acts, that protests are constructed and enacted (Van Leeuwen, 2004, p.14). This notion suggests that language can not only describe reality but also actively evoke change, and forms a fundamental aspect of how protests are constructed. In the discursive layer, demands have transformed into deliberate vulgarity; the escalating tension arising from the abortion debate, coupled with women's growing impatience, has resulted in a linguistic shift, exemplified by emotionally-charged expressions and imperatives. Discursively, these slogans mirror protestors' determination and highlight the so-called *demoralization of language*.

One of the movement's main slogans, the forceful, unambiguous directive "Wypierdalać" [*Get the fuck out*] / "Wypier****ć" / "#wypierdalać", "Jedno Zdanie Wypierdalać Od Nas" [*One Sentence, Fuck Off*] was displayed prominently across the artworks. The intended outgroup recipient can be deduced from the phrase's semantic content and linguistic form - it represents a demand to the PiS (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość) party and
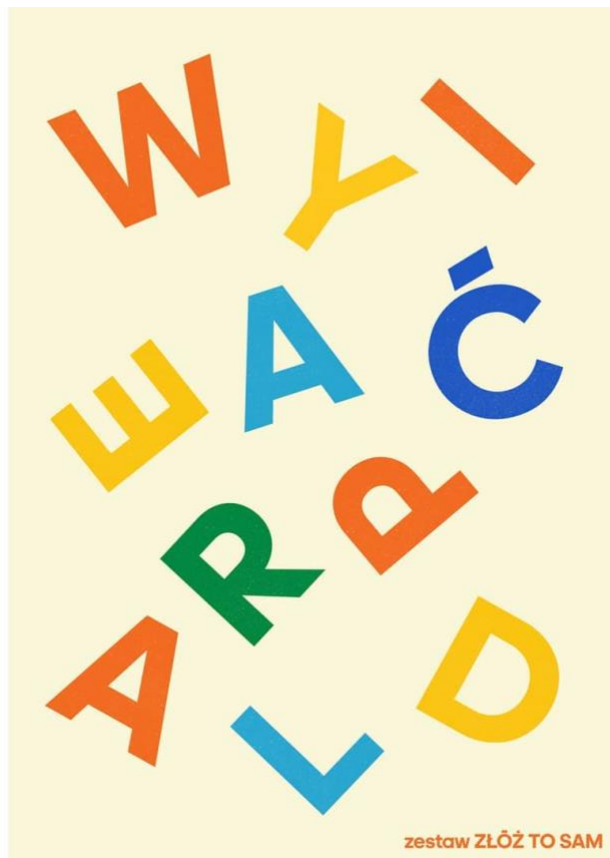
Figure 14

Wypierdalać

Figure 15

Wypierdalać Puzzle

the Catholic Church to cease interference in another's affairs, and advocates for the resignation of political elites. Commonly used in the form of a chant by football hooligans against an outgroup, the vulgar imperative's effectiveness as a protest symbol lies in its ability to provoke reactions and amplify movement participants' message of dissent.

This directive is also realized through accompanying visual imagery, such as the display of the middle finger. The meaning the latter extends beyond rudeness or disrespect. Reinforcing the message of defiance, the middle finger symbol is utilized as a deliberate expression of dissent towards the Polish government's political decisions, serves as a bold assertion of agency, and symbolizes women's refusal to be silenced or marginalized.

Figure 16

Middle Finger Symbol #1


Figure 17

Middle Finger Symbol #2

Another vulgar expression of opposition directed at the PiS party is "Jebać PiS" [*Fuck PiS*], as well as various variants thereof (e.g., "JBC*PIS" and "J'b'ac PiS"). The phrase "Jebać PiS" reflects a broader sentiment of anger among Poles with the party's regressive and populist policies, particularly regarding living costs, the judicial system, the politicization of public media, and women's reproductive rights.

Figure 18

Jebać PiS
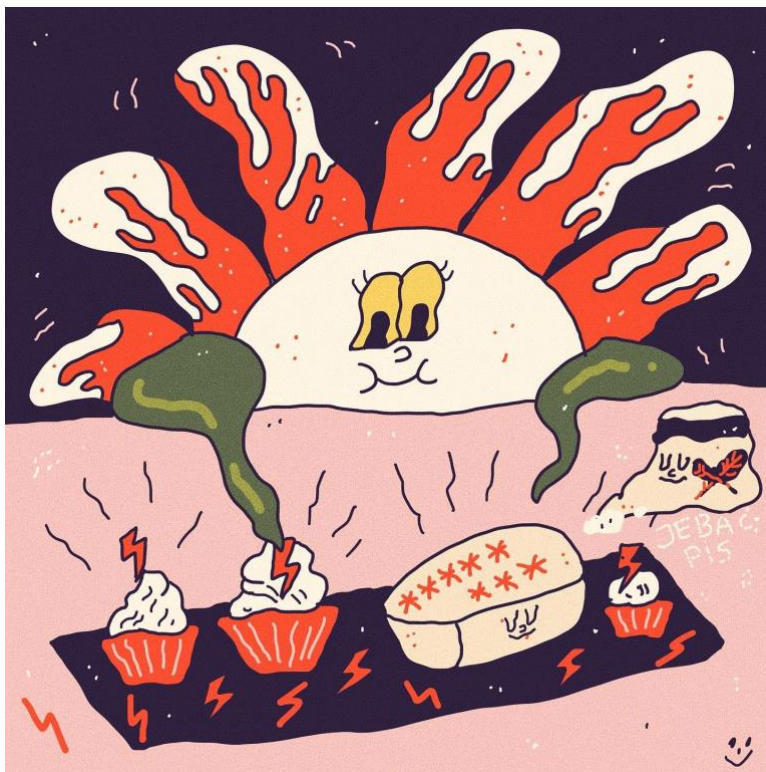
The symbol "***** ***", i.e., five asterisks followed by a space and then three asterisks, is frequently used to censor "Jebać PiS". This expression became popular across social media as a way to avoid facing algorithmic bans. As a tongue-in-cheek form of coded language, "***** ***" functions as an inside joke or easter egg among opponents of PiS, enabling them to covertly express their disrespect for the party while bypassing media censorship.
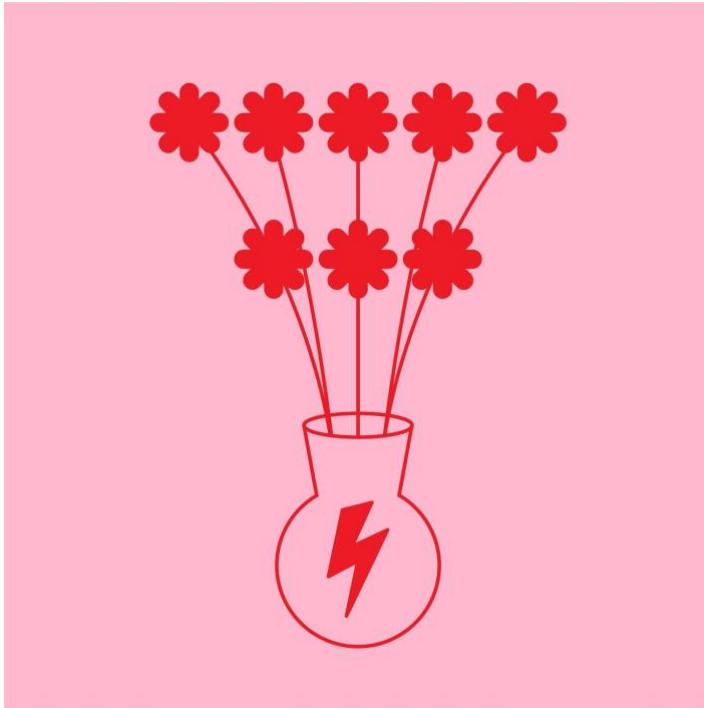
Figure 19

***** *** *Symbol #1*

Figure 20

***** *** *Symbol #2*

Lastly, "PiS Off" is a creative, linguistic fusion that merges the English phrase "to piss off" with the Polish acronym "PiS", denoting the ruling party. The clever wordplay carries connotations of anger, frustration, and rudeness, and conveys protestors' dismissal of the PiS party's authority.

Figure 21

PiS Off

The vulgar and provocative language employed across the artworks reflects a strong emotional response to the Constitutional Tribunal's ruling, and demonstrates a collective expression of anger and frustration. Pupavac (2022, p.4) uses the term *radical rudeness* to refer to the use of vulgarisms, which serve not only as an expression of rage but also as a means to demand attention from those in positions of power. The brutalization and use of vulgarized, accusatory speech signals to opponents that there is no room left for nuanced, constructive dialogue or compromise; the fundamental rights of women are non-negotiable. Moreover, considering the cultural underpinnings of Poland's gender-based social norms, the deliberate choice of vulgar language symbolizes a concerted effort to reshape the traditional gender contract and challenge preconceived notions of female propriety in public space (Szczepańska & Marchlewska, 2023, p.61).

4.4 ANGRY WOMEN

Vulgarity serves as an intentional, performative linguistic strategy that redefines the role of women, shifting them from a traditionally silent, well-mannered, and somewhat passive demeanor - often positioned as mere recipients of political decisions - towards becoming assertive, determined individuals capable of directly articulating needs, demands, and emotions, thereby assuming an active and politically engaged role. This is in line with the new collectivity entity observed in the collective imagination: *angry women*. Across the visual works, female faces are depicted with narrowed eyes, furrowed brows, and wide, open mouths. Slogans such as "Wkurwiasz Mnie" [*You're pissing me off*] and "Jestem Wkurwiona" [*I am pissed off*] reflect the collective outrage, frustration, and anger among the movement participants' towards the oppressive policies and infringements on women's rights. Emotions are significant motivational drivers for socio-political activism. Zieliński (2020, para.2) posits that pleasure and anger emerge as powerful forms of resistance when sexual freedoms become policed or are rendered taboo. Anger, as a cultural practice, is one of

Figure 22

Angry Women #1

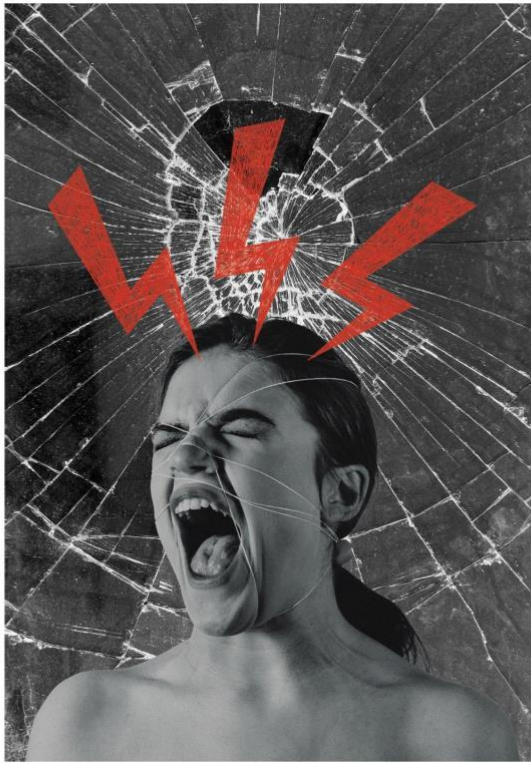**Figure 23**

Angry Women #2

Figure 24

Wkurwiasz Mnie

the leading emotions of protest activism. According to Britt and Heise (20020), emotions such as anger and shame, stemming from both objective and subjective perceptions of social injustices, serve as catalysts for initiating and sustaining movement participation.

Fear often elicits feelings of vulnerability, prompting participants to choose flight over fight (Britt & Heise, 2000, p3). However, a core tenet of identity politics is to motivate political participation (Britt & Heise, 2000, p.1). By transforming vulnerability into dominance, movement agents strategically evoke the sense of power necessary to shift the emotional response from fear to anger (Britt & Heise, 2000, p.3). These negative sentiments can evolve into positive emotional states such as solidarity, pride, cooperation, and compassion through collective actions. Thus, the emotional capital of a social movement has the capacity to mobilize and propel participants towards collective actions (Britt & Heise, 2000, p.4; Lawler et al., 2014, p.78). The production and dissemination of affective and emotionally charged posters, slogans, and protest imageries, which take the function collective action framing tools or *material anchors*, consolidates and reinforces collective actions. Therefore, anger as a reaction to the Constitutional Court's ruling provides opportunities for affective bonds, loyalties, and motivations to develop. Similarly, the aforementioned vulgar language employed in the works not only reflects movement participants' anger, but also contributes to fostering a sense of solidarity and empowerment. As such, the visual framing of the Polish feminist movement itself becomes an emotional community - a community that holds shared norms and values regarding emotional behavior and feelings (Rosenwein 2006, p.26). Manifested through depictions of angry women shouting, a united, feminist rebellion, represented as audacious, shameless, and loud, is causing an uproar across Poland that cannot be silenced nor drowned. Other slogans employed in visuals to unapologetically state that women have had enough are "Dość" [*Enough*], "Już Dość" [*Already Enough*], "Mam Dość" [*I Have Had Enough*], and "Mamy Dość" [*We Have Had Enough*].

4.5 THE COAT HANGER

The wire coat hanger - a curved, horizontal bar with a hook for hanging clothing on a rail, is a hermetic symbol across the designs. It is a feminist symbol used for symbolizing the practices undertaken in the illegal, abortion underground, and the dangers of pregnancy terminations

conducted in unsafe conditions (Rohlinger & Klein, 2012, p.172). Its graphic depiction serves to evoke visceral reactions, and functions as a warning of the risks that women will face as a result of the Constitutional Tribunal's ruling. Whereas economically privileged women can seek medical treatments abroad, economically underprivileged women will perform self-induced or underground, back-alley abortions with wires and hangers.

Figure 25

The Coat Hanger Symbol #1

Figure 26

The Coat Hanger Symbol #2

4.6 THE WAR METAPHOR

Among the rich discursive repertoire, "To Jest Wojna" [*This is War*], expressed in the imperative mood, functions a metaphorical war cry. This war metaphor is reinforced through signal slogans such as "Rewolucja Jest Kobietą" [*Revolution is a Woman*], referencing women as agents of revolution, and "Walcz, niech niosą Cię nogi!" [*Fight, let your legs carry you!*]. In Figure 28, the sword symbolizes victory, justice and strength, signifying defiance and the need to defend women's rights, and the shield represents protection and defense against such attacks. According to Greek symbolism, a dove with an olive leaf or branch in the beak is regarded as symbolic expression of peace and innocence (Gevaryahu, 2015, p.172; Herda-Rapp & Marotz, 2005, p.82). However, in Figure 29, white doves are depicted holding red lightning bolts in their beaks; they have become war birds instead, ready to strike. Thus, protest posters become representations of war, emphasizing the political struggle over abortion as a form of attack and reflecting protestors' resolute determination. Moreover, it reflects how the bodies of women become battlegrounds that do not belong to themselves, but rather to the state and the Catholic Church.

Figure 27

To Jest Wojna

Figure 28

Sword & Shield

Figure 29

The War Metaphor

4.7 SISTERHOOD

The construction and portrayal of an outgroup fosters and strengthens a sense of ingroup collective identity and mutual support among movement participants, with discursive references to "siostrzeństwo" [*sisterhood*] (e.g., Figure 30) evidencing protest solidarity.

Figure 30

Sisterhood

In addition, solidarity, unity, and collective strength among Polish women is conveyed through phrases like "Nigdy nie będziesz szła sama" / "#niejesteśsama" [*You will never walk alone / #youarenotalone*], "Ochronię Cię" [*I will protect you*], and "Potrzebujesz aborcji? Nie jesteś Sama!" [*Do you need an abortion? You are not alone!*]. Moreover, they convey archetypal motives of resilience embedded in our human consciousness, and evoke the collective action and mutual support needed to adapt to, withstand, or overcome,

adversity. Specifically, the expression "szła sama" [*to walk alone*] is articulated in its feminine form, a linguistic choice that underscores a nuanced engagement with gendered experiences and makes explicit assertions regarding the identity of the posts' recipients. The phrase became particularly popular after the death of Izabela. It says: We will not let you fall, we will not let you go through this alone.

Figure 31

Nigdy nie będziesz szła sama

In addition, the depiction of the LGBTQ+ flag (see Figure 32) exemplifies the principles of *coalition building*, *solidarity*, and *allyship*, highlighting the intersectional resistance strategies employed by the Polish feminist movement to address overlapping and interconnected forms of oppression.

Figure 32

LGBTQ+ Flag

4.8 THE FEMALE BODY

Across the visual works, the female body, through the process of deconstruction, fragmentation, and appropriation, becomes a site of ideological struggle and political contention. The depiction of women's bodies being fragmented and scrutinized (e.g., in Figures 33 and 34) signifies a firm rejection of biopolitical strategies, as well as religious institutions' and state interference. These depictions serve as a means to critique prevailing power dynamics and question who has control over women's bodies. Who does the female body belongs to, and who has the right to decide about it? Direct assertions of bodily autonomy such as "Moje Ciało Należy Tylko Do Mnie" [*My Body Belongs Only to Me],* "Moj Wybór Nie Twój" [*My Choice Not Yours*], and "Moje Ciało, Mój Wybór" [*My Body My Choice*], are made.

Figure 33

The Female Body

Figure 34

The Female Body

Lastly, as observed in Figures 35 and 36, female body parts such as uteruses, wombs, and vaginas are transformed into symbols of resistance. For instance, the non-verbal symbol "Won od łon" [*Stay away/ Back off from the wombs*], whereby "won" is a command to stay away and "łon" is the plural of łono [*womb*] is a command directed at the Catholic Church and the PiS party to not interfere with matters related to reproduction or childbirth. It is particularly clever in Polish because it rhymes, taking away the heaviness that accompanies the statement. In addition, the design of the vowel "O" is assuming the shape of the vagina, thereby serving as an allegory for reproductive rights.
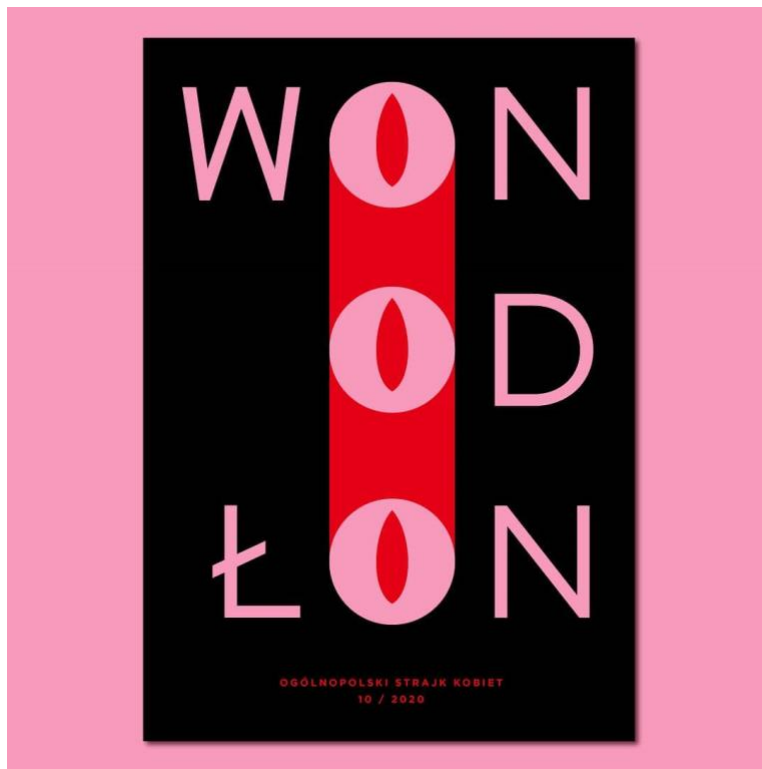
Figure 35

Vagina Symbol #1

Figure 36

Vagina Symbol #2

4.9 NATIONAL EMBLEMS

A *myth* is a fabricated narrative constructed by a specific social collective to embody
fundamental truths and values, presented as natural and accepted without question
(Zubrzycki, 2022, p.26). National myths are integral in delineating the identity of a collective,
demarcating its boundaries, facilitating socialization among members, and fostering a sense
of community (Zubrzycki, 2022, p.22). Encoded in symbols, *national myths* serve as conduits
through which national identity is formed (Zubrzycki, 2022, p.22). These mythologies, which
embody the nation's identity and ideals, become visually depicted and embodied in visual
and material culture which, in turn, creates a *national sensorium*, i.e., a collective sensory
experience that renders the nation tangible and real (Zubrzycki, 2022, p.22). Across the
works, Polish artists boldly reimage, reinterpret, and reframe national iconography and
culturally significant visual aesthetics in a subversive, emancipatory manner (Ramme, 2019,
p.474), appropriating them as powerful emblems of feminism.

In Figure 37, the nominative, singular form "Polska" [*Poland*] is changed into the noun "Polka" [*a Polish woman*]. The modification within the lexeme, through the removal of a single vowel, alters the syntactic structure of the word and, in turn, its semantic meaning. It suggests a reclamation of space and recognition; the word *Polska* itself is made up of the female body. Similarly, the phrase "Polska Jest Kobietą" [*Poland is a Woman*], depicted in Figure 38, linguistically anthropomorphizes Poland and underscores women's integral role in shaping the nation's history, identity, and future trajectory. According to Graff (2019), the "(en)gendering of patriotic symbols as a feminist strategy of choice" (p.481) serves as both an aesthetic manifestation or expression of patriotic feminism and an anti-patriotic provocation.

Figure 37

Polka

Figure 38

Polska Jest Kobietą

In addition, the affirmative, yet creative and ridiculing, appropriation of national symbols was evident across the protest's visual repertoire. Figure 39, depicts a strong woman on horseback, wielding the red lightning bolt, poised for action against a black background signifying grief and anger. The rearing horse, standing with its forelegs off the ground, symbolizes battle readiness. The young Polish woman is portrayed as an *Amazon*, i.e., a mythical Greek female warrior known for her physical prowess and strength. She is adorned in a floral-patterned top and a red bead necklace, elements which stand as a testament to Polish folklore art and folk attire. Notably, the anchor symbol of "Polska Walcząca" [*Fighting Poland*] is transformed into a feminist emblem by substituting "Polska" [*Poland*] with "Polka" [*Polish woman*]. This directly references the *kotwica* [*anchor*], a profoundly contested national symbol associated with the Home Army and the 1944 Warsaw Uprising.

Figure 39

Polska Walcząca

The kotwica emblem, visually resembling an anchor, integrates the letters "PW" for "Polska Walcząca" and was created in 1942 by underground resistance member Anna Smoleńska to symbolize the struggle against Nazi occupation. By naming the female figure "Polka Walcząca", the artwork asserts a claim to independence for women rather than the nation-state. Subject to legal protections due to its status as a national symbol, the artists' appropriation was deemed a violation of 'patriotic' decorum. Nonetheless, "Polka Walcząca" serves as an emotional unifier and powerful aesthetic intervention that promotes a sense of solidarity. These artistic works, depicting symbols related to Polish traditional patriotism, indicate ambivalence regarding how nation(ality) is understood.

Figure 40 depicts a significant emblem of Polish national resistance: the logo of the Polish, democratic, Solidarność [*Solidarity*] trade union. Solidarność was instrumental in Poland's revolutionary struggle against communism in the 1980s, and is a national symbol of resistance (Banaś & Saduov, 2023, p.120). The artistic work an adaptation of Tomasz Sarnecki's famous 1980 campaign poster (see Figure 41), incorporating the iconic all-caps Solidarność logotype, known as *solidaryca*. This logotype features the Polish flag waving
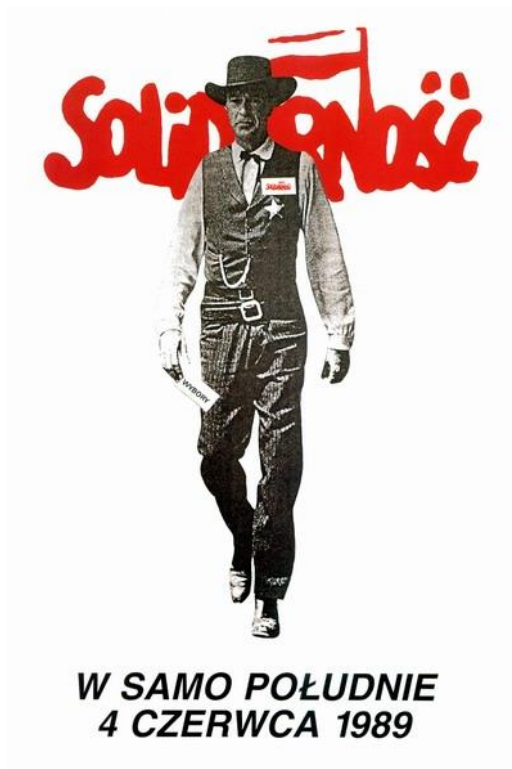
Figure 40

Solidarność

Figure 41

Tomasz, S. (1999). 'Solidarność 4 czerwca 1989 W samo południe' [Solidarność 4 June 1989
High Noon]

from the letter *N*, symbolizing national unity. However, the artist substitutes the depiction of Gary Cooper from the American Western 'High Noon' with Ellen Ripley from 'Alien', and replaces the union's logo with the slogan "Wypierdalać!".

The strategic use of national imagery across protest imageries serves as an aesthetic act of resistance, conveying a clear counternarrative: Polish women are entitled to use symbols rooted in Poland's cultural legacy. This approach challenges the far-right's monopolization of national and patriotic symbols, and contests masculinized, anti-liberal, ethnonationalist, and religiously homogenous constructs of national identity, national belonging, and nationhood.

4.9.1 The Nation

Across the movement's visual repertoire, verbal symbols "Poland", "Polska", and "PL", as well as representations of Poland's geographical contours, borders, and flag, serve as potent visual markers of national identity. Figure 42 depicts Poland's borders alongside a verbal

Figure 42

Szwy puszczają ją

symbol composed of two distinct phrases: 1) "Szwy puszczają" [*The stitches are coming loose*] and 2) "Puszczaj ją" [*let her go/release her*]. "Szwy puszczają" serves as a metaphorical depiction of the ruptures in Poland's social fabric exacerbated by escalating polarization, authoritarianism, and the erosion of democratic values, while "Puszczaj ją" embodies the movement's call to emancipate women from oppressive legislation.

Despite the emotional response they elicit, national symbols such as flags or anthems are not naturally occurring; rather, they acquire meaning from historical memory and require constant reinforcement to retain significance (Geisler, 2005, p.5). The Polish flag is often integrated into artistic compositions or peripheral elements to subtly acknowledge national identity (see Figure 43), or prominently displayed to underscore Polish patriotism (see Figure 44).

Figure 43

Subtle Polish Flag

Figure 44

Prominent Polish Flag

4.9.2 Local Symbols

Within the broader national narrative, local imagery and city symbols anchor protest visuals within specific regional contexts, identities, and histories. For instance, Figure 45 depicts the Pałac Kultury i Nauki [*The Palace of Culture and Science*], an architectural edifice renowned for its monumental scale and imposing stature, the most iconic landmark in Warsaw. Commissioned by Joseph Stalin, the building is widely perceived as a symbol of Soviet dominance and ideological imposition over the Polish nation. Moreover, the text "Warszawa Jest Kobieta" [*Warsaw is a Woman*] provides another illustration of the (en)gendering of patriotic symbols. In Figure 46, the depiction of a mythological human-animal figure, Syrenka Warszawska [*The Mermaid of Warsaw*], stands as another symbol of the Polish capital, having adorned Warsaw's coat of arms since the 16th century (Wasilewski &

Figure 45

Pałac Kultury i Nauki

Kostrzewa, 2018, p.144). According to legend, the warrior Mermaid, equipped with sword and shield, made it her life's mission to safeguard the city and its residents following her release by a young fisherman. Consequently, the mermaid embodies the concept of formidable, mythic entity rising to defend or protect (Wasilewski & Kostrzewa, 2018, p.147). These depictions of the city's emblems may be interpreted as manifestations of the artists' individual commitments to their metropolitan locale and a sentimental bond with the Warsaw community (Wasilewski & Kostrzewa, 2018, p.151).

Lastly, Figure 47 portrays the Pomnik Bojownikom o Polskość Śląska Opolskiego [*Monument Dedicated to Fighters for the Polishness of Opole Silesia*], an emblem dedicated to the liberation of the city of Opole. The depicted figure is the Goddess of Nike, symbolizing glory and victory. Here, "Opolka Walcząca" [*Fighting Pole [Feminine] from Opole*] serves as a clever linguistic play on the previously mentioned "Polka Walcząca" slogan. By substituting the word "Polka" with "Opolka", the phrase is localized to specifically address the women residing in Opole. Holding a lightning bolt, the visual work symbolizes the contemporary struggle of Opole's women for reproductive rights, and conveys a resolute message of determination: we will win.
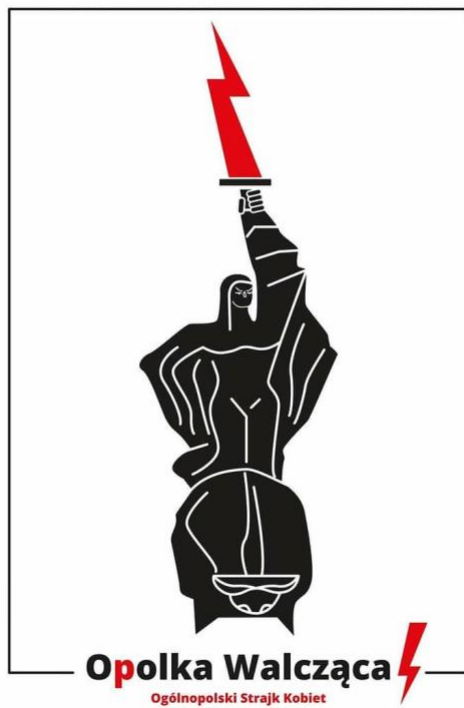
Figure 46

Syrenka Warszawska

Figure 47

Pomnik Bojownikom o Polskość Śląska Opolskiego

4.10 COLORS

The colors red, white, and black are prominently featured in the movement's protest
repertoire, offering stark contrasts and clear, legible messages. The Polish flag consists of two
horizontal bands of equal width: white, symbolizing spiritual purity and nobility, and crimson
(i.e., a deep red color), representing the *szlachta* [*nobility*] due to its high price, as well as
fire, power, and blood shed for Poland's freedom (The Polish Flag, n.d., para.4). Red also
functions as a sign of caution, frequently associated with energy, passion, anger, and
aggression. The use of red and white across the visuals connects the protest imagery to
Poland's broader cultural and political context; it is a flirtation with patriotic discourses and
evokes a sense of unity and solidarity among protestors by signaling "we are Poles".
Moreover, the theme of darkness is strikingly present across the feminist artworks. In Eastern
European cultures, black symbolizes anger, evil, grief, unbelief, sinfulness, and sadness

Figure 48

Red

(Ruzieva, 2022, p.2721). Beyond its emotional allure, symbolizing anger and grievance, black holds deep cultural significance and symbolic power. The color is directly linked to Poland's historical narrative: Polish women adopted black attire to mourn the nation's partition and loss of sovereignty during the 19th century. This thematic illustrates the time of darkness and defiance Polish women are living in, and expresses dark, collective emotions.

Figure 49

Red, White, Black

4.11 THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

Throughout the corpus of visuals, various religious symbols are depicted, including representations of the church, the cross emblematic of Christ's crucifixion (Liro et al., 2023, p.7), the Crown of Thorns, anti-abortion activist Kaja Godek, and Jesus Christ, bearing the cross on the path to Golgotha. The Constitutional Tribunal's ruling, justified by so-called

religious virtues, exemplifies the Catholic and conservative elite's commitment to advancing an ultra-conservative agenda and advocating for a strong anti-abortion stance (Szwed & Zielińska, 2016, p.125). Polish artists direct strong criticism opposing the excessive interference of the Catholic Church, regarded as the guardian of national tradition, in matters concerning gender- and sexuality-related rights (Szwed & Zielińska, 2016, p.123). Slogans such as "Polskie Piekło" [*Polish Hell*], "Piekło Kobiet" / "#piekłokobiet" [*Women's Hell*] and "Dość Piekła" [*Enough Hell*] highlight the suffering endured by women under the abortion ban, and suggest that the current situation in Poland is akin to a living hell. Moreover, by depicting the Catholic Church on fire (see Figure 50), Polish artists challenge the Church's moral influence and historical complicity in perpetuating systemic oppression and patriarchal power structures (Chałupnik & Brookes, 2022, p.329).
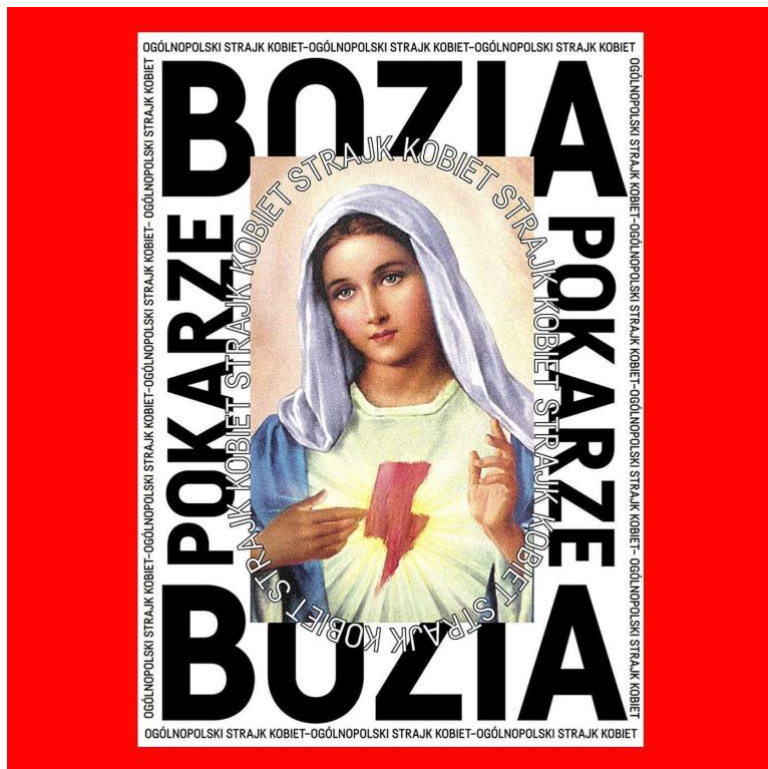
Figure 50

Catholic Church

Additionally, By replacing masculine titles with feminine ones, the slogan critiques the Church's traditional, male-dominated hierarchy. For instance, the slogan "W Imię Matki, Córki, Siostry!" [*In the Name of Mothers, Daughters, Sisters*] serves as a provocative expression that subverts the deeply religious Trinitarian formula (i.e., "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit"), rendered in Polish as "W imię Ojca i Syna i Ducha Świętego". Another example of the (re)appropriation of religious symbols is the depiction of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, shown in Figure 51. This symbolic representation of Matka Boska's [*Virgin Mary*] spiritual devotion, compassion, and virginal love is reinterpreted by replacing the divine heart with the red lightning bolt symbol. Here, the phrase "Bozia Pokarze" [*God will Show/God Will Punish*], an expression of religious belief and moral admonition, is redirected towards the Catholic Church and the PiS party, functioning as a warning sign; reconsider your actions, or impending divine justice will follow.

Figure 51

Bozia Pokarze

4.12 THE DOMINANT POWERS

The *dominant powers,* i.e., the Polish government and authority figures, are objects of negatively valanced expressions of affect. For instance, the slogan "Lepiej byłoby bez was" [*It would be better without you*] implies that the current situation in Poland would significantly improve if members of the Sejm's legislative body were no longer in power. In Figure 52, the Sejm is depicted being struck by a lightning bolt.

Figure 52

Sejm
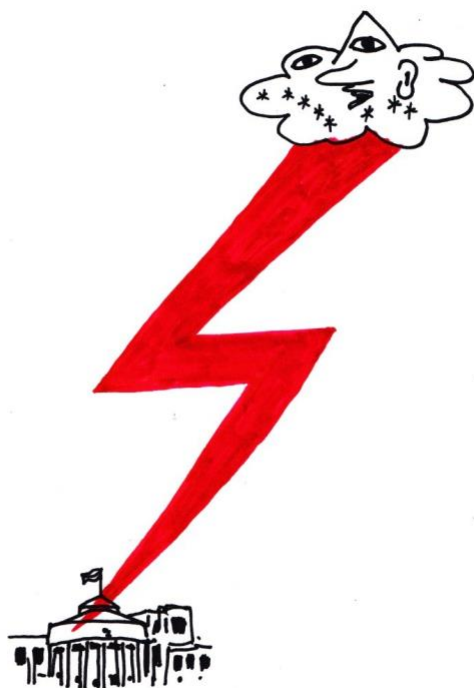
Particular ire is directed against the PiS party. Various puns and intertexual allusions aimed at Jarosław Kaczyński function as humorous and satirical critiques of his personality and behavior, illustrating how Kaczyński is widely subjected to public mockery. For instance, the visual depiction of Kaczyński as a duck in Figure 53 cleverly references his nickname 'kaczor' [*duck*]; derived from semantic derivation, this nickname originates from the stem 'kacz-" in Kaczyński's surname. Another depiction in Figure 54, where Kaczyński is portrayed as a whining child, serves to undermine his power and authority.
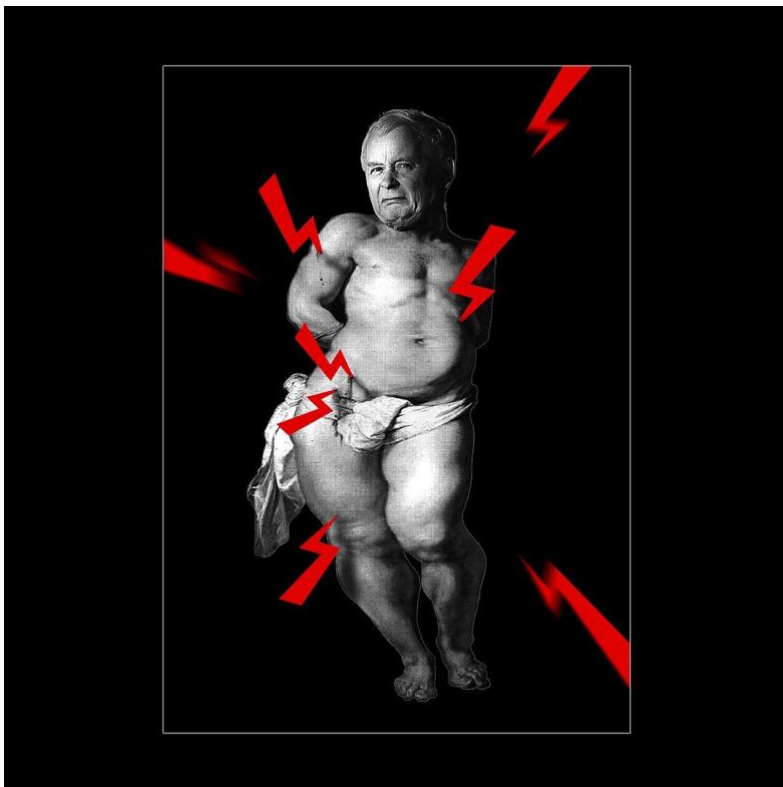
Figure 53

Kaczyński as a Duck

Figure 54

Kaczyński as a Whining Child

By taking away women's rights, the government and religious fanatics turn women into prisoners of a violent system. Similar to references likening Poland to a living hell, references of feelings of imprisonment are made using slogans such as "Wyrok na Kobiety" / #wyroknakobiety [*Ruling / Verdict on Women*]. In a judicial context, "wyrok" denotes a verdict or sentence given to a criminal (Chałupnik & Brookes, 2022, p.309), implying that a verdict against women has been made. Moreover, slogans such as "Mój Kraj to Więzienie" [*My Country is a Prison*] (see Figure 55) and depictions of jail bars across the works articulate a perception of being imprisoned by the Polish nation. In a similar vein, "Wolność" [*Freedom*] epitomizes a rejection of authoritarian policies and signifies an effort to break free from a state of captivity.

Figure 55

Mój Kraj to Więzienie

Depictions of police cars, riot police helmets, tonfas, and telescopic batons symbolize the authority and control exercised by the state, illustrating the excessive use of force to suppress dissent during the Strajk Kobiet protests (Tilles, 2020, para.1). In Figure 56 and Figure 57,
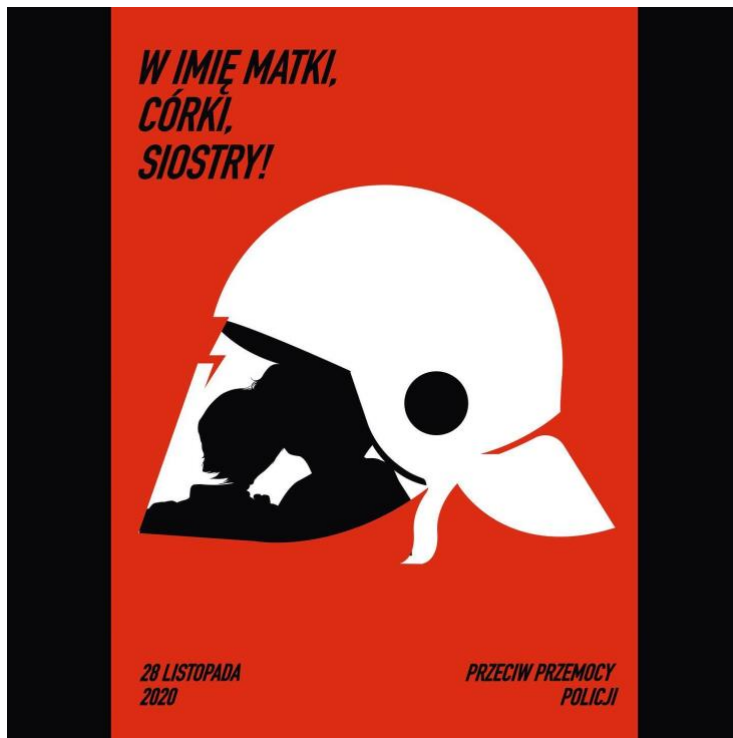
Figure 56

Przeciw Przemocy Policji

Figure 57

Police State

verbal symbols such as "Przeciw Przemocy Policji" [*Against Police Violence*] and "Police State" critique the increase in police intervention and state surveillance (Korolczuk, 2020a, p.3).

Lastly, as political elite relegates women to mere vessels of procreation and objects of ownership, posters become sites of resistance against the objectification of the female body. In Figure 58, a marionette puppet with jointed limbs illustrates how women's bodies are dictated by the Polish government, the latter symbolized by the man in the suit. The slogans "Nie Jestem Naczyniem" [*I am not a vessel/container*] (see Figure 59) and "Kobieta Nie Jest Inkubatorem" [*A Woman is Not an Incubator*] reject the traditional role of women as primarily childbearers and caregivers, as embodied by the Matka Polka archetype.
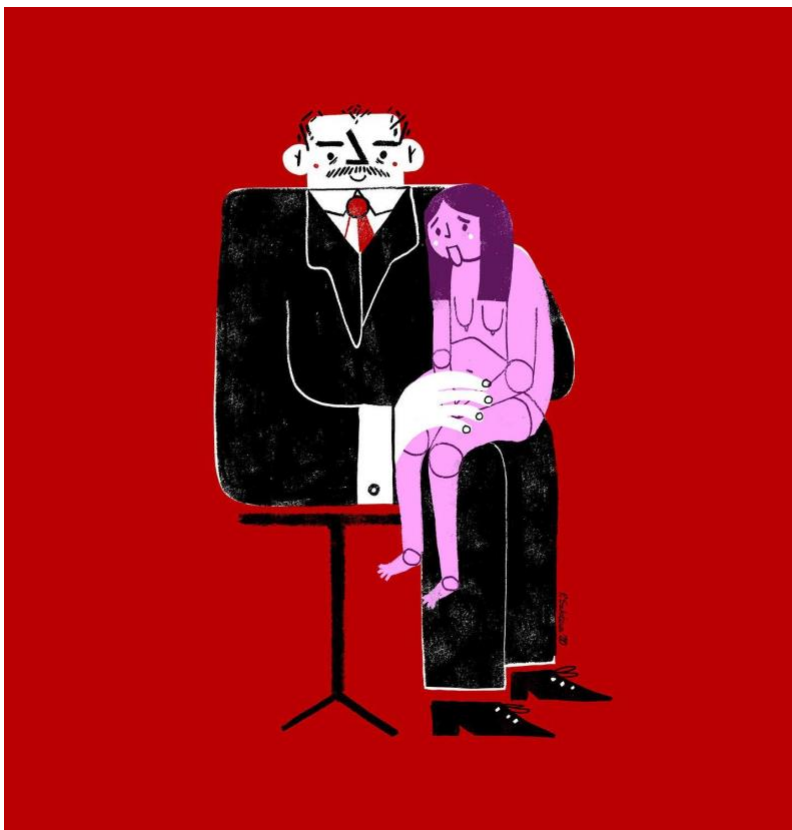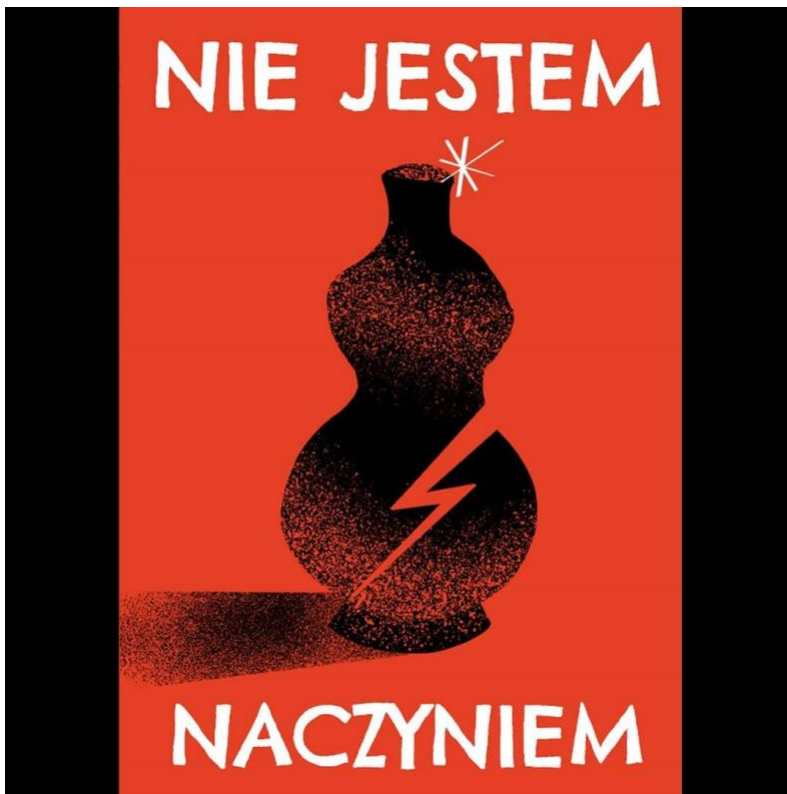
Figure 58

Marionette

Figure 59

Nie Jestem Naczyniem

4.13 POP CULTURE SYMBOLS

Visuals and slogans in the movement's repertoire skillfully reference paintings, literary works, and music, thereby reinforcing the spectacle of protest and imbuing its visual and rhetorical expression with multiple layers of meaning and cultural significance. For instance, the phrase "Piekło Kobiet" (see Figure 60) references a collection of radical essays by Tadeusz Boy Żeleński, critiquing the punishment of women for abortions and warning against oppressive legislation on contraception and abortion. Additionally, the aforementioned "To Jest Wojna" [*This is War*] slogan refers to Klementyna Suchanow's book, titled *To Jest Wojna. Kobiety Fundamentaliści i Nowe Średniowiecze* [*This is War. Women, Fundamentalists, and the New Middle Ages*], illustrating that Polish feminism is both an artistic and literary movement.

　　Imagery referencing the Handmaid character from Margaret Atwood's novel, 'The Handmaid's Tale', is evoked (see Figures 60 and 61). The emblematic handmaid motif and

Figure 60

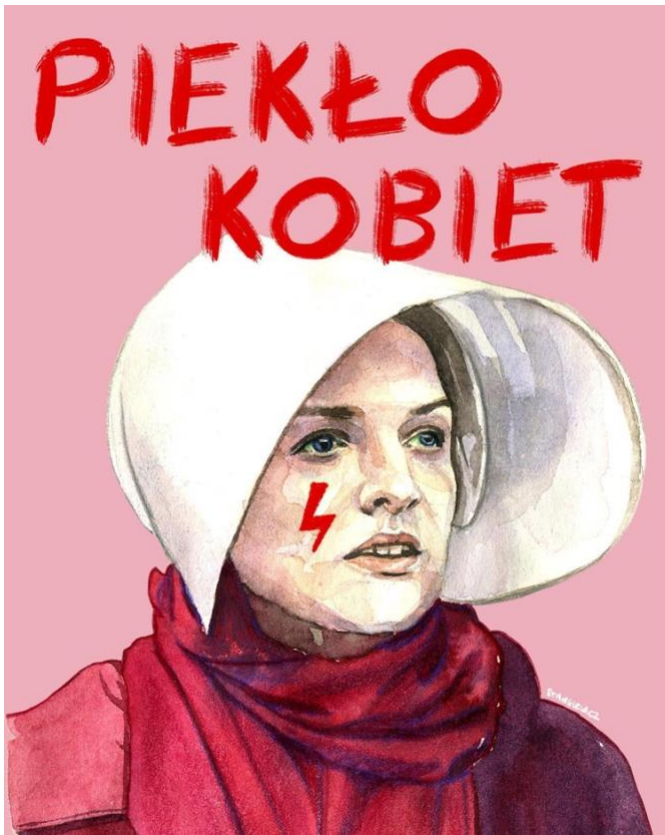*The Handmaid's Tale #1*

Figure 61

The Handmaid's Tale #2

the dystopian society of Gilead function as a frame of reference; they symbolize the prioritization of religious doctrine over women's rights, the erosion of women's autonomy, the exploitation of women under the ruling government, and the subjugation of women's individuality to the imagined community. Additionally, the distinct color scheme of the Handmaid's iconic outfit - a crimson-colored gown and white bonnet - directly alludes to Poland's colors and the national flag. These visuals pose the question: how far will the ruling party go if we do not take a stance now?

The slogan "Girls Just Want to Have Fun(Damental Human Rights" (see Figure 11) is a popular feminist paraphrase of Cindi Lauper's "Girls Just Want to Have Fun", and denotes the reproductive rights demanded by Polish women. The slogan "Niech Wyją Syreny" [*Let the Sirens/Mermaids Howl*] is a wordplay; "Syreny" is a linguistic cognate with siren and, thus, takes on the meaning as sirens and/or mermaids. This slogan invokes the lyrics of Taco Hemingway's song 'Polskie Tango' [*Polish Tango*]: "Te syreny ciągle wyją, te syreny oszalały" [*These sirens keep wailing, these sirens have gone mad*]. By invoking the sirens, the phrase functions as a call to action, conveying a sense of urgency or alarm. Figure 62 also

Figure 62

Walcz, niech niosą Cię nogi!

walcz, niech niosą Cię nogi!

cleverly references the song "Szarpany" [*Torn/Jerked*] by Golec Uorkiestra. *Szarpany* is a traditional Polish dance characterized by energetic, tugging movements. The artwork engages in a wordplay on the song's lyrics, changing the original phrase "Tańcz niech niosą Cię nogi" [*Dance, let your legs carry you*] to "Walcz [*Fight*], niech niosą Cię nogi!". This signifies a shift from the passive act of dancing to active resistance; women do not want to dance anymore, rather, women need to fight for their rights.

The slogan in Figure 63, "No Women, No Kraj" [*No Women, No Country*], references Bob Marley and the Wailers' song "No Woman, No Cry". The original text, "No Woman, No Cry", functions as reassurance; find strength in the face of adversity. For the purposes of the strike, "No Women, No Kraj" signifies that the "Kraj"[*country*] or national identity cannot thrive without women; they are a constitutive entity of the motherland.

Figure 63

No Women, No Kraj
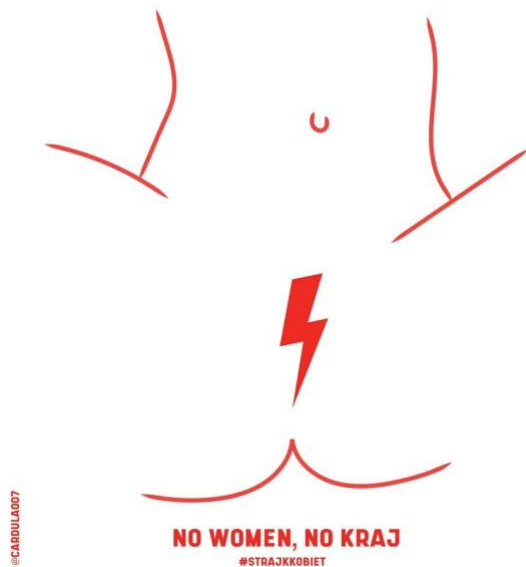
Figure 64 closely resembles Edward Hopper's 'Nighthawks'(1942) painting, a quintessential work of American Realism depicting a late-night diner scene. This painting, capturing four individuals who are physically and emotionally isolated, reflects themes of urban loneliness, contemplation, detachment, and alienation (Lesso, 2022, para.1).

Figure 64

Paintings

Figure 65

Nighthawks by Edward Hopper, 1942 (Lesso, 2022)

Lastly, Figure 66 depicts Little My, an independent, brave, and mischievous character from the Moomin series.

Figure 66

Little My

5. DISCUSSION

The present study sought to examine the use of art circulated online as a means for digital activism and mobilization, as well as how Polish feminist artivism functions as a form of movement branding. Based on insights gathered through a visual analysis of 163 images created and circulated by Polish graphic design artists on the social networking platform Instagram, this final chapter presents an answer to the following research question: *How do Polish artists employ symbols to visualize and mobilize the Polish feminist movement?* Subsequently, limitations of the current research are explained and recommendations for future research are proposed.

5.1 MAIN FINDINGS

Through the study of the Polish feminist movement's highly expressive, metaphorically intricate, and rich-in-metaphor *protest repertoire*, a symbolic language emerges that underscores the communicative power of digitally-mediated artivism. Emotional appeal is evoked through striking visual references to the collective memory, pop culture, and the tactical use of color, while iconic symbols and symbolic mediations (e.g., ***** ***) visually support the development of a *collective identity* and fuel further *vernacular creativity* that can be adopted, modified, and recontextualized. Through the alteration and personalization of symbols, political aesthetics enable artists to express agency and control, highlighting that the act of creation is empowering in itself. Within the movement's all-encompassing symbolic packet, the lightning bolt is a semiotic formation that performs a *name recognition* or *movement branding function*; it serves as a movement marker that denotes affiliation with the movement, and functions as a point of reference for affective relationships.

With regards to the discursive construction of dissent, each verbal symbol or slogan serves as an individual expression of rebellion and disagreement with the surrounding reality. Discursively, vulgarisms (e.g., "Wypierdalać", "Jebać PiS", and "Fuck Off") breaching significant cultural taboos transform into symbols of angry collective alliances. By expressing themselves radically using obscenity and humor, artists create art that strengthens emotional

charge; it is this emotional charge that serves as a tool for mobilization and *connective action*. Moreover, the visual graphics are marked by spontaneous camaraderie; slogans such as "nigdy nie będziesz szła sama" and depictions of women holding hands reinforce rhetorical kinship and hooks' (2000, p.47) concept of *circles of women*.

The persistent marginalization of women's rights and claims, entrenched within the intricate interplay of Poland's socio-cultural fabric, the Catholic tradition, and prevailing notions of patriotism - each marked by their ideologically exclusive nature - permeats national imagery, saturating it with allegorical depictions of mother- and womanhood. Women reclaim their voice through the (re)appropriation of patriarchal signifiers (e.g., the Polish flag, Polska Walcząca, and the Solidarność logo) and iconography of deep-rooted, martyrological ideals and genotypes of femininity, e.g., Matka Boska. Fed up with a patriarchal structure wherein Catholic priests and envoys impose rules and dictate terms, the rejection of patriarchal narratives - reinforced through symbolic references to objectification and slogans metaphorically equating the Tribunal's ruling with imprisonment - illustrates that Polish women refuse to become figures of self-sacrifice, whether for the Polish nation, God, or higher fertility rates. By reappropriating nationalist symbols, and filling them in with personally meaningful associations, Poland's exclusionary, national tradition and the monopolization of national symbols by far-right actors is contested. Moreover, the (en)gendering of nationalist imagery and historically significant slogans reveals that political aesthetics function as a battleground for contested meanings, modes of usage, and belonging. In this so-called *war of symbols*, movement participants and artists emerge as active political collectives through activities such as *interpretive reframing*.

Lastly, various hashtags, such as #strajkkobiet, #piekłokobiet and #wyroknakobiety are incorporated into the movement's protest repertoire. These *affective publics*, operating as unifying codes and *personal action frames* for building diverse networks of dissent, illustrate the tactical use of hashtags by *counterpublics* for articulating arguments, sharing experiences, and expressing thoughts. Moreover, they function as a source of *narrative agency* and *collective action*, capable of catalyzing cultural interventions as well as online and offline movement work. Collectively, the dissemination of images, ideas, and emotions by Polish artists enables individual narratives to coalesce into a collective, *digital storytelling* that conveys the power structures, ideologies, and norms the movement seeks to transform. Thus, the production, circulation, and dissemination of *visual artifacts* that stand in direct opposition to the dominant order, i.e., *aesthetic protest*, becomes a legitimate weapon in the struggle for visibility.

5.2 LIMITATIONS

One of the main limitations of the current research is the subjectivity at play; the researcher has the final power of interpretation when analyzing symbols and visual media. Operating as signs, images and objects do not have inherent meanings; the meanings we attribute to images and objects are separate from their literal representation, and are largely activated by cultural convention (Curtin, 2007, p.52). Moreover, constantly changing through their reappropriation and reimaging, images are highly mutable (Rose, 2016, p.5), and said to always be subject to "contested and competing meanings and interpretations" (Hall, 1997, p.9). Symbols are equally complex and ambiguous - their fluid nature remains dynamic and ever-evolving, with meanings shaped or modified by collective memories and shared experiences over time (Banaś & Saduov, 2023, p.122). Thus, the findings of the semiotic analysis were dependent upon the researcher's competence in deciphering intertextual elements, translating Polish texts to English, and finding interrelationships between texts and symbols, as well as knowledge of entire socio-cultural contexts.

In addition, Internet ethnography, akin to traditional ethnography, is limited by our perceptual capacity. Despite the will to explore the vast and instantaneous flow of information, content, and digital media, knowing everything about the Internet is unfeasible. Nonetheless, online research can enhance our understanding of human behavior within specific digital contexts (Hine, 2020, p.16).

Lastly, as stated by Denzin and Lincoln (2011),"there are no objective observations, only observations socially situated in the worlds of - and between - the observer and the observed" (p.12). Therefore, personal bias, perspectives, and interpretations inevitably influenced the study's results. As a Polish woman, I strongly support the Strajk Kobiet movement. I participated in the protests that took place on October 26th, 2020, in Pszczyna - the village where Izabela, the first known victim of the Constitutional Tribunal's ruling, would pass months later. Having held up my own "Welcome to Gilead" cardboard sign while yelling slogans like "Jebać PiS" and "Myślę, Czuję, Decyduję" [*I think, I feel, I decide*], looking back at protest art and protest photography continues to evoke the same emotions of anger, frustration, and grief.

5.3 FUTURE RESEARCH

According to Schreier (2012, p.2), qualitative content analysis is an appropriate method for analyzing written, spoken, and visual communication messages. The digital environment can facilitate the researcher's approach, communication, and passive observation of online subjects within their natural digital setting (Chen, 2016, p.527). Contemporary protest movements demonstrate substantial variability in their collective dispositions towards and practical use of digital technologies (Treré et al., 2017, p.405). Thus, future research can employ content analysis for categorizing imageries (e.g., infographics, slideshow activism, protest photography), and rhetorical and discursive strategies (i.e., social media logic, calls to action, tone, intent, imagery) employed by Polish feminists. This would allow for a better understanding of how Instagram's technological affordances contribute to or, with regards to the lack of certain features, hinder movement progression. Moreover, how Polish feminists adopt and adapt to Instagram's affordances for activistic goals can reveal situated knowledge about Polish feminist activism, and how oppressive societal structures are contested. Future research could also employ quantitative analysis methods for examining the correlation between content features (e.g., types of posts, hashtags) and engagement metrics (e.g., likes, shares, comments) to uncover insights into the effectiveness of different digital activist strategies.

      Secondly, scholars Young et al. (2019, p.4), Choudry (2013, p.129), and George et al. (2023, p.2) have advocated for ethical, practice-oriented research on digital organizing strategies. To inquire activists' movement knowledges of social media for mobilization and how activists, in their own words, utilize social media for activism, future research could conduct dialogic interviews. Engagement in active dialogue creates narrative consciousness; we become conscious through revealing ourselves to others and actively participating in the construction of stories that make sense of participation in social life (Harvey, 2015, p.24). Thus, it is through discourse that social realities are constructed (Brennen, 2017, p.4). As movement knowledge is influenced by spatial and temporal proximity, the qualitative empirical method of dialogic interviewing would be a suitable empirical method (Casas-Cortés et al., 2008, p.28; Choudry, 2013, p.132).

      Ontologically, *dialogue* is defined as a means of relating to another (Way et al., 2015, p.2). As a discursive mode, dialogue entails engagement and non-judgmental collaboration (Way et al., 2015, p.2). Future research should approach the empirical method of interviewing as a shared experience of the co-construction of meaning within a specific

socio-cultural context (Boeije, 2010, p.205; George et al., 2023, p.4; Guest et al., 2012, p.14; Harvey, 2015, p.25; Way et al., 2015, p.2). Such an analysis of discourse would provide insights into the ways in which power is manifested or resisted (Corry & Reiner, 2021, p.201; Wigginton & Lafrance, 2019, p.5). Moreover, oral testimonies of participation of Eastern European countercultures can convey interviewee's subjective perceptions. Drawing from Marxist, feminist, and postcolonial insights into knowledge, implicit claims of participatory qualitative research are inherently emancipatory (Choudry, 2013, p.129). However, power relations between researcher and participant are embedded in research processes - there is a tendency to assume hierarchical conceptions of the relative value and significance of institutional contexts for knowledge production (Choudry, 2013, p.128). Social movements are widely reduced to commodifiable objects of knowledge to be studied and understood, rather than knowledge-producers with the capacity to construct alternative imaginaries (Chesters, 2012, p.1). Therefore, it is important to develop research designs that recognize social movement actors as active participants in the generation of knowledge, and which can serve as a counterpoint to conventional forms of knowledge production (Bevington & Dixon, 2005, p.191; Casas-Cortés et al., 2008, p.20; Orsini & Smith, 2010, p.38). This requires researchers to scrutinize the ontological and epistemological basis from which we collaborate with social movements, and to engage in an ethics of engagement that emphasizes reciprocity and relationality (Chesters, 2012, p.2).

Lastly, accounts of digital activism after movement coalescence are lacking, despite the importance of persistent action for bringing about change (Leong et al., 2019, p.173). Future research could undertake a cross-comparison of the symbols employed during the Strajk Kobiet protests, before the 2023 Polish parliamentary elections, and after October 15th to uncover the shifts in the movement's semiotic strategies and rhetorical tactics over time.

5.4 FINAL WORD

Visuals fulfill a powerful role in social movement processes. By conveying meanings and values for the viewer to contemplate, art and the image become sites of confrontation, and the locus of an oppositional voice. A single carefully crafted image serves as a mind bomb, symbolizing a movement and its respective causes, capable of capturing the minds of a broader public, even if only for a brief moment. The case of the Polish feminist movement

illustrates how social media have transformed the contexts and mechanisms of collective social action (Loader, 2008, p.1922; Pond & Lewis, 2019, p.214). Although Strajk Kobiet, as a social movement, has yet to realize its goals, I argue here that this necessitates expanding the definition of social transformation beyond the mere attainment of said goal. With younger generations increasingly rejecting the notion that Catholicism is the sole moral bedrock for Poles (Dąbrowska-Prokopowska et al., 2023, p.54), MEPs calling on member states to enshrine the right to abortion in the EU Charter of Fundamental rights, and Andrzej Duda's term ending next year, various paths for abortion liberalization emerge. For now, as Goldberg (2024, para.3) states: "In a world where liberal values seem to be in retreat almost everywhere, Poland is a rare bright spot, a place where voters - especially women and young people - rebelled against a punishing religious nationalism to demand the restoration of their rights".

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