LUISS

Degree Program in International Relations

Course of Crisis Communication

Fashion as Political Text: Punk Fashion and the Communicative Power of Aesthetics

Prof. Emiliana de Blasio

SUPERVISOR

Prof. Donatella Selva

CO-SUPERVISOR

Laura Mayumi Sato

CANDIDATE

Acknowledgements

To my parents, who have, many times, given up their own dreams for me to pursue mine. Thank you for all the faith you have in me.

To my grandparents, who have dealt with so many adversities throughout their lives. I dedicate and celebrate this milestone with you.

To my friends Betina and Raul, who have been by my side throughout my entire journey in Rome and at Luiss. These two years were much easier to navigate thanks to you.

Table of Contents

Fashion as Political Text: Punk Fashion and the Communicative Power of Aesthetics

Abstract

Although punk fashion has been pivotal for punk as a countercultural movement and its clothing one of the most commodified items out of this subculture, it is still often perceived as a background for punk bands and the music they released. The fact that punk clothing possessed as much political substance as punk music and still has been successfully commodified, however, enables reflection on whether fashion can also drive subcultural movements and shape political discourses. This dissertation's goals are to examine how punk designs functioned as vehicles for anti-establishment during the 1970s in Britain and how they were exported internationally. Employing a qualitative case study and iconographic content analysis methodology, this research conducts material analysis of a few punk pieces composed by one of the movement's main designers: Vivienne Westwood. The assumptions used here were that these objects can be treated as primary political texts and that material objects can communicate politically through visual symbolism. Conclusively, it finds that political communication can operate through multiple registers, be it institutional or material, but future research would be needed to investigate how political meanings survive the commodification process as politically charged designs enter international markets.

Keywords: punk fashion; political communication; subcultural movements

1. Introduction

During the past decades, the punk movement has been embedded into pop culture through its aggressive music and rebellious style (Dunn, 2008). However, when it first emerged in England during the 1970s, it aspired to become a reactive political movement, challenging beliefs that were structured into British culture and mocking its elite society (Dunn, 2008). In the international setting, punk's rapid diffusion of aesthetics during the 1970s illustrates how cultural movements play a role in global political processes by shaping perceptions and creating forms of identification. This can be observed in the case of Japanese punk, which originated from the British movement and borrowed its rebellious principle, but applied it into a different political context instead (Kurokawa, 2013), which will be discussed in the following chapters. The reason why Japan was chosen is due to the fact that the country has a different historical background and cultural nuances than Britain, and yet it embraced punk fashion (but did not fully adhere to its social symbolism). In this context, punk emerges as an example of communication through informal networks, given it started spreading internationally from young travelers fond of Western culture (Kociołek, 2017; Kurokawa, 2013). Thus, this dissertation pursues a critical analysis on the role of punk as an autonomous form of political communication, focusing specifically on its fashion as a tool for political expression. Here, punk fashion is considered a primary medium of anti-establishment messaging that circulated across borders and the designer chosen for analysis was the movement's most famous one: Vivienne Westwood. In doing so, I attempt to contribute to IR scholarship on non-state actors' roles in global politics, while making use of methodological approaches to analyzing material culture as political text. To achieve this, a methodological approach of two complementary mechanisms have been used. The first one is a case study, divided into the original movement (British) and its reinterpretations internationally; the second one is an Iconographic Content Analysis, based on Bengtsson's (2016) model, linking it to Hall's (1981) 'encode/ decode' theoretical framework.

1.1. Aims and Objectives

This dissertation investigated the role of punk fashion subculture in producing an international communication tool, as I seek to answer the following research question: *How did punk fashion contribute to the international circulation of resistance narratives during the 1970s and 1980s?* This thesis is grounded in the recognition that fashion can operate as a source of communication in the political field, capable of influencing international perceptions and circulating defiance narratives. Punk here is used as a case to illustrate how fashion behaves as a political

communication instrument, not to limit it generally as being the only fashion movement capable of doing so. While extensive scholarship has examined punk as a cultural or musical phenomenon (Hebdige, 1979; Hall & Jefferson, 1976), punk fashion and style have been acknowledged as both a consequence and a backdrop to the movement. This research, however, argues that it actually functioned as visual backing for the movement's expansion and an instrument of communication in the international arena, suggesting that clothing contributed to the international circulation of countercultural narratives during the 1970s. By exploring the punk movement with a focus on apparel, this study aims to highlight the role of fashion as a mediating practice of international cultural communication. It argues that punk fashion functioned as a communicative network that challenged dominant discourses, both political and social, through a mechanism of symbolic encoding. In doing so, it tries to expand the analytical boundaries of International Relations, attempting to include cultural forms of agency as operating beyond formal diplomacy. Thus, the main hypothesis is:

***H**: The political and social activism attached to certain types of fashion (in this case, Punk) are exported with its products internationally.*

This will be tested through a combination of a case study and an iconographic content analysis on these punk fashion products, which will inquire the meanings the pieces were originally intended to have and how they were exported internationally (in this case, to Japan). Thus, this paper is divided into five main chapters, which are (I) Introduction and Objectives, (II) Literature Review, (III) Methodology, (IV) Data Analysis and (V) Conclusion. The introductory chapter has presented the subject of the dissertation and justifies why this study is relevant to the contemporary discussion on political communication, as well as identifying a gap in the existing scholarship. Given that I consider fashion and clothing as a pivotal communication tool regarding the British punk scene, which is something often overlooked or contemplated as a secondary factor to the movement, the literature review chapter will begin by covering the Punk Movement in general, followed by punk fashion and political communication. To corroborate this dissertation, the research method will be presented in chapter three and an analysis will be conducted on how specific designs from the movement embodied cultural challenges in chapter four. To conclude, the last chapter will address and debate the results found from the methodology segment, as well as allude to the implications of this research paper. It will also introduce this study's limitations, while identifying missing factors for further research possibilities

2. Literature Review

This chapter will begin by presenting the Punk Movement and its relevance in the decade of 1970s, focusing on how (or if) the authors discuss the role of attire for the movement in that period. It will also be responsible for amplifying the debate on political communication, considering how they transmit symbols and ideas, influenced by context and interpretation. My idea while conducting research for this section was aiming to find if there were papers that analysed how fashion encodes social meanings and how they reach different audiences internationally, as that is what I claim to be the gap explored by this dissertation. Considering my belief in fashion being a communication form, I also explore if cultural communication can occur from informal initiatives, rather than exclusively through institutional ones. A section of this chapter covers literature on soft power, given one of my initial ideas was that fashion (a non-state initiative) could maybe work as an attraction tool for states. Ultimately, it is noted in the reviewed papers that literature on popular culture applied to IR exists to a certain level, but fashion (especially subcultural fashion like punk clothing) remains underexplored when discussing communication actors.

2.1 The Politics of the Punk Movement in the 70s

The punk movement emerged in the United Kingdom in the mid-1970s amid a period of economic decline, rising unemployment and political disillusionment. Scholars such as Hall and Jefferson (1976) and Hebdige (1979) situate punk within the broader context of post-industrial Britain, where working-class youth sought to articulate their frustration with the collapse of traditional class structures and the failure of political institutions. Punk, in this sense, was not merely a musical or aesthetic trend, but a political statement grounded in elements such as alienation, anger and repudiation of authority. At its core, punk was a form of cultural resistance that challenged mainstream values and social conformity through its confrontational style and nihilistic lyrics (Hall and Jefferson, 1976). As Clarke et al. (1976) argued in the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) framework, subcultures like punk used symbolic practices (fashion, linguistic elements and music) to resist dominant ideologies while creating alternative modes of belonging. According to him, new styles that emerged from subcultures were not merely culturally significant, but relevant for changing infrastructures of economic institutions as well (Clarke et al., 1976).

For Hebdige (1979), the changing of economic institutions can be perceived in the case of fashion, given subcultures are neither high nor mainstream fashion, but were still commodified and sold as a product. In the political realm, then, the impact of this new movement was gradually felt by society, with eventual state-led attempts to recuperate social order through two main strategies: the commodification of subcultural artefacts and the suppression of the movement by dominant social groups (Hebdige, 1979). By turning subcultural items into a commodity, its original value of challenging the system is lost and replaced by the banalisation of their symbolic meaning. Given punk artefacts should be personalized (in line with its 'Do-it-yourself' singularity), amplifying their access to the general public as a commodity, then, works as a way to detach and neutralize its original ideological message (Hebdige, 1979). In the case of punk, this attributed artefact is most often associated with the music scene, an assumption that I intend to challenge here.

Considering that these artefacts worked not only as arbitrary subverted aesthetic choices, but as semiotic acts encoding resistance, irony and a strong anti-establishment sentiment amongst British youth (Hebdige, 1979), I see how clothing could emerge as a pivotal driving force within the movement. Through such visual symbols, it is illustrated how fashion communicates dissent as effectively as speech or political protest, positioning the body itself as a site of expression and ideological struggle. As Hebdige (1979) also argues, punk's provocative visual language embodied a form of resistance that operated through everyday aesthetic practices rather than formal ordinary political engagement. Thus, when addressing subcultural movements, such as 1970s punk and its global social influence, the artefacts they produce and employ play a central role in enabling identification by the wider public (Hebdige, 1979).

When shifting the focus to more recent literature, the Punk movement has been dissected within cultural studies research throughout the years, but their object of study was mainly the bands that emerged from that period in history (Dunn, 2008). Punk's political character was expressed through what Dunn (2008) determined to be one element for articulating counter-hegemony within the field of global communication: a refusal to be assimilated into established social norms, communicated through musical and visual transgression. The author briefly mentions the dominant groups' role in silencing the movement, with the episodes involving the 'God Save the Queen' single (by the Sex Pistols) being banned from radio stations illustrating how punk's satire was perceived as a threat by upper classes (Dunn, 2008). As a consequence of this new movement's

anti-establishment nature highlighted by the author is that outside concerts and/ or gatherings were constantly reprimanded by police violence (Dunn, 2008). Punk then constituted an alternative mode of global communication that bypassed state structures and elite-controlled media by circulating political messages through diverse networks (Dunn, 2008). Fanzines, informal distribution circuits and transnational music scenes facilitated what is described by the scholar as a "global punk public sphere", enabling marginalized voices to communicate internationally through shared aesthetic and ideological vocabularies (Dunn, 2008).

2.1.1 Defying the Status Quo

Referring to the practical consequences of punk, in their study of elite reactions to British punk between 1976 and 1978, Street, Worley and Wilkinson (2018) posit an important question: did punk's cultural insurgency genuinely threaten the status quo? If so, to what extent did it penetrate the institutions it ostensibly attacked? Their archival research, based on governmental, police, media and local authority documents, reveals a nuanced picture of punk's political impact of meaningful disruption in symbolic and institutional discourses. Street et al. (2018) argue that punk's challenge to authority was most visible in the rhetoric employed by the popular media and local governmental institutions. Newspapers framed punk as a social problem, often associating it with youth violence or public disorder, which lent legitimacy to punk's image as radical, even as they sought to contain its threat by pathologizing it rather than engaging with its underlying political content (Street et al., 2018). In doing so, elites acknowledged punk's symbolic potency by treating it as a phenomenon demanding institutional response, rather than simply dismissing it as noise.

According to Street, Worley, and Wilkinson (2018), punk did elicit practical reactions from some elite structures. Using archival sources from metropolitan police forces and local governments, they trace how authorities struggled to manage punk-related disorder, public gatherings and performances. These responses suggest a reactive mode of engagement that punk was not fully assimilated, but neither was it completely marginalized. Elites' attempts to regulate punk behavior with strategies and arguments of policing and public order's disturbance demonstrate a grudging recognition of its disruptive capacity.

Despite these symbolic and institutional disruptions, the authors find insufficient evidence that punk rock fundamentally unsettled more entrenched elites, such as the central government or the monarchy (Street et al., 2018). In archival records of royal events, for instance, there appears to be no significant acknowledgment of punk's cultural critiques even in moments explicitly challenging national identity, like the Sex Pistols' "God Save the Queen" single release during jubilee (Street et al., 2018). The monarchy and central institutions (apparently) remained largely impermeable to punk's most provocative messages, which underscores the limits of its political impact.

The Sex Pistols band in particular is often perceived as the embodiment of punk due to its controversial songs that incite rioting while criticizing and denying society norms, claiming them to be alienating (Guerra and Figueiredo, 2019). Nonetheless, given that what set the punk movement apart was a combination of factors beyond its soundtrack exclusively, it is crucial to include fashion and the role of clothing in this political process. If bands were the main icon of the movement, the way its members dressed specifically functioned as cultural resistance and a communication tool.

2.1.2 Contemporary Analysis on Punk Fashion and Communication

Fashion has long transcended its role in society as a subject previously deemed as restricted to shallow aesthetics or consumer preferences of textiles (Barnard, 1996). As a visual and communicative system, it operates as a language through which societies construct, express and, in determined times, contest identities. Barnard (1996) states that fashion is able to either defy or endorse what is offered by the mainstream standards, using punk as example. In the case of punk's opposition to what was considered aesthetically pleasing at the time through the use of cheap and uneven accessories that complemented "vulgar" clothing went against the elite dominant classes by reversing what was considered of "good taste" for them (Barnard, 1996).

Punk fashion exemplifies the communicative function of clothes and style through its translation of social discontent into visual form, making use of rebellion symbols to achieve its goal. The emphasis on the aesthetic factor of the movement can be resonated with Bleiker's (2001) notion of the 'aesthetic turn' in international political theory, which posits that aesthetic practices carry forms of political expression that operate outside traditional institutional channels.

Guerra and Figueredo (2019) extend this view by demonstrating how punk's visual strategies conveyed dissent and collective identity through stylization and recontextualization. In times of social tension, it is common to note that designers and brands can translate social tensions into symbolic forms of dress, enabling fashion to become a vehicle for both conformity or dissent (Guerra and Figueredo, 2019). Emerging in the 1970s as a reaction to economic stagnation and generational discontent (Guerra and Figueiredo, 2019), punk's fashion and music forged a language of resistance. While punk did not pursue formal diplomacy, its cultural exports articulated a powerful critique of Western consumerism and authority, embodying a form of grassroots international communication (Guerra and Figueiredo, 2019). In this way, punk's diffusion demonstrates how non-state, oppositional cultures can operate as informal agents of transnational influence, expanding the soft power framework beyond state-sponsored narratives of culture and identity.

Through ripped shirts, safety pins, bondage trousers and even defaced national symbols, emerging designer Vivienne Westwood transformed garments into acts of defiance, communicating disillusionment with authority and, more specifically, the British establishment (Guerra and Figueiredo, 2019). Punk's fusion of rebellious music with rebellious style positioned it as an international movement, one whose imagery and messages travelled swiftly through their zines and media, all the way through popular culture (Guerra and Figueiredo, 2019). In this context, Westwood introduced an unprecedented rupture in the fashion scene at the time, detaching her works from the ready-to-wear market and introducing shocking Do It Yourself (DIY) customizations to plain black t-shirts (Guerra and Figueiredo, 2019). Here, fashion was used as ideological provocation instead of a neutral commodified product (Guerra and Figueiredo, 2019). The relevance of this rupture is given mainly because of the economic context in which it happened. In a moment of monetary crisis for the United Kingdom, punk attempted to visually shift the focus from middle classes to the one who was being impacted the most by the turmoil: the working class.

However, this dynamic and fashion's influence in political matters remains under-theorized in the field of International Relations, which continues to privilege state-centric analyses of culture and diplomacy (Ang et al., 2015). Dubé-Sénécal and Goubau (2023) argue that this may be due to the fact that there is a traditional division in academic research impeding topics from becoming interdisciplinary and that fashion is, most times, perceived as a frivolous study field. Although there are examples of

interdisciplinary studies of fashion and diplomacy (Dubé-Sénécal, 2014; Dubé-Sénécal and Goubau, 2023), as well as fashion and politics in general (Behnke, 2016), fashion as a soft power tool itself, without state sponsorship, is not usually addressed in literature.

Within this broader landscape, designer Vivienne Westwood stands as a pivotal figure in reconfiguring fashion as a medium of political expression due to her provocative designs, which questioned not only the British government, but British society as well. Her work in the 1970s, inspired by the London youth and particularly through her collaboration with Sex Pistols' manager Malcolm McLaren in London's boutique *SEX*, catalyzed the visual identity of the UK punk movement (Clarke and Holt, 2015).

Beyond the runway and retail scope, fashion functions as a form of cultural communication, capable of encoding values, ideologies and even power relations (Lundén, 2020). In a globalized world, the influence of fashion can be noted amongst many factors within the shaping of cultural norms, such as mediating collective identities, or often serving as a political expression tool (Lundén, 2020 and Rana, 2024). However, it is important to differentiate fashion as a means of expression and clothes as objects in order to really analyse its impact. Guerra and Figueredo (2019) argue that the mere act of wearing clothing does not inherently constitute a form of style, but rather it emerges through a process of stylization. This process often encompasses the repositioning and recontextualization of objects from their original social or cultural settings, allowing them to acquire new symbolic meanings and subversive potential. Through acts of stylization, subcultural groups convert ordinary items into communicative tools that articulate collective identities and convey messages of opposition to prevailing cultural norms (Guerra and Figueiredo, 2019).

In this sense, Westwood's creations touch an important point of the 1970s fashion scene in the United Kingdom. Amidst an economic crisis, the British working class and marginalized society had no access to personalized designer items and were at the mercy of mass clothing, which does not emit style nor ideals (Alderson, 2017 and Guerra and Figueiredo, 2019). Vivienne Westwood, then, changed that rigid elite-focused market through the punk ethos of Do-It-Yourself, customizing and deconstructing mass t-shirts with pins, bleach and bones to fit the imaginary of authenticity for ordinary customers (Guerra and Figueiredo, 2019). When questioned about her motivations at the time, Westwood stated in her biography, that:

“I made clothes that looked like ruins. I created something new by destroying the old one. This was not fashion as commodity, it was fashion as an idea.” (WESTWOOD & KELLY, 2016, p.160)

In contemporary society, then, fashion can be described as a subject that evolved from attire pieces only into a nuanced communicative system, which generates meaning beyond the plain material dressing choices or aesthetic function. The question of whether fashion can work as communication reflects the idea that fashion, like language, is able to transmit cultural codes and mediate social interactions. As Guerra and Figueiredo (2019), Lundén (2020) and Rana (2024) note, clothing operates as a form of non-verbal communication, articulating identity, status, ideology and belonging. Within this perspective, fashion becomes not only a reflection of social structures but also one of the tools through which individuals and groups construct and contest them (Guerra and Figueiredo, 2019). When thinking of fashion as a communication tool, then, this perspective can analyse the use of clothing as semiotic acts that encode non-rethorical messages. Employed specially in political movements, this tool can be adopted to visually engage with a movement, symbolizing discontent and even rebellion.

2.2 The Concept of Communication Applied to this Research

In general terms, mass communication has been perceived as the exchange of information and meaning as a dissemination circuit. This definition, however, has been the target of academic criticism (Hall, 1981) due to the fact that it would represent a superficial linear exchange of sender/ message/ receiver and that communication is strictly linked to global cultures, which are susceptible to recurring changes amidst external or internal influences. This general perception of communication, then, neglects that one same message can be received by individuals within different backgrounds, which could impact the message’s original intended content. In 1973, British scholar Stuart Hall created a theoretical communication model of “encoding and decoding”, which postulates that media messages are not to be treated as a matter that will be passively received by its audience, but rather actively interpreted according to individual frameworks of knowledge and experiences. Developed firstly for the media studies field and with televised means of communication as its subject of study, Hall’s (1981) theory can be borrowed and applied to this research when considering the codification and decodification of fashion statements during the punk scene. Here, ‘encoding’ would refer

to the meanings intentionally inscribed into garments by designers, while 'decoding' refers to how audiences (media outlets or youth cultures) interpret these meanings in ways that may align with or oppose the encoded message. As the author states, in order for a discourse to influence and persuade the general audiences, it must possess a meaningful content as to induce a relevant reaction on the recipients: when meaning is attributed to a message, recipients are able to attribute their own consciousness into it (Hall, 1981).

While searching for contribution to this model through different lenses, Malcolm Barnard (1996), in his book 'Fashion and Communication', focuses specifically on how fashion and clothing are always means of communication (even if unintentionally), capable of creating statements by themselves. The author emphasizes how fashion is inherently context-dependent, with meanings that are not precisely intrinsic, but that emerge through cultural interpretation and social positioning. In this aspect, Barnard's point of view aligns with the one of Hall's, who argues that social and economic backgrounds affect the way in which communication targets interpret different messages (Hall, 1981). Therefore, fashion communication involves a dynamic process in which meanings are continually produced and reinterpreted, something of great significance when studying subcultures.

When approaching the case of punk applied to Hall (1981) and Barnard's (1996) theories, it becomes clear that it was a successful movement mainly because it resonated with the working class, as well as the fraction of the population that was unsatisfied with the political context they were inserted to. Punk's visual and stylistic vocabulary encoded sentiments of frustration and marginalization in ways that were immediately legible to audiences who shared these anguishes (Guerra and Figueiredo, 2019). Through the deliberate use of provocative symbols and distressed garments, punk achieved an innovative way to communicate a critique of authority that aligned with the lived experiences of these groups (Guerra and Figueiredo, 2019). This alignment between encoded meaning and audience interpretation underscores Hall's (1981) argument that communication is successful when receivers possess the cultural frameworks necessary to decode messages as intended. Likewise, it confirms Barnard's (1996) claim that fashion functions as a meaningful social language capable of articulating collective identity and political discontent. In this sense, punk's communicative power derived not only from its stylistic innovation, but from its capacity to transform clothing into a symbolic medium through which social frustration and resistance could be visually shared and collectively understood.

2.2.1 Punk's International Impact

Beyond British national borders, Westwood emerged as a relevant designer in other parts of the globe as well, and it was during the 1980s in Japan that her punk sense of style started to integrate the Japanese imaginary through a fashion magazine called 'Cutie' (Kurokawa, 2013). Through the experiences of Japanese musicians in London searching to absorb punk musical influences into those of their own country, Vivienne Westwood transitioned from a British designer who owned a London shop to an international punk fashion icon. Kurokawa (2013) finds in her research that a Japanese music producer named Hiroshi Fujiwara, while living in London, worked with both Westwood and McLaren on a personal level when their boutique was called 'World's End' (1982-1983). Upon the producer's return to Japan, then, Westwood's designs he brought back home started to gain popularity, bringing modernity and shaping a new era for fashion in Japan, which was promptly embraced by the country's youth (Kurokawa, 2013).

Even though by the 1980s Westwood started to distance herself from the punk scene and clothing to become a versatile couture name (Clarke and Holt, 2015), the clothes she designed during the later half of 1970s in her 'Seditionaries' shop were the entry door to reach Japanese youth. As Kurokawa (2013) explores, the brand's military attire caught most of the attention of young men due to the previous American force occupation by the end of World War II. Through her provocative army garments composed of straps, bondage trousers and parachute suits, Westwood produced clothing items that were not only of the liking of Japanese boys, but were considered enthusiastic collectable items (Kurokawa, 2013). By the end of 1980s and beginning of 1990s, women encouraged by Japanese media, started to become enthusiastic of the military surplus style as well. Kurokawa (2013) argues that this acceptance shift was due partially to the fact that the clothes contained the tartan check pattern, which was very popular in Japan and long associated with Britain as a "cute British attire" (Kurokawa, 2013, p. 71).

In an exhibition held at the luxurious Ginza shopping district in 1993 by Japanese oldest cosmetics household Shiseido, punk's wardrobe was examined retrospectively with Westwood's pieces as the main attraction. The Ginza district, usually frequented by Japan's older elite, became a space for curious young women and young couples to explore a movement that exploded in England 13 years before, with an average of 850 people visiting the exhibition on a daily basis (Kurokawa, 2013). Westwood's pieces,

then, were relevant for Japanese subculture and emergence of a new fashion street style in Japan, as well as for a rebranding regarding women's style trends - which started to dissociate from the opinions of the opposite sex and became an open space for self-expression (Kurokawa, 2013). From the Japanese case, it is possible to conclude that Westwood as a designer was successful in exporting British cultural imagery to the country, but not so much in exporting her revolutionary values that accompanied her clothes. Considering that, as Britain, Japan was under a constitutional monarchy and similar government regime, punk's effects in the country could have been similar as they were originally intended.

When circling back to the previous communication section and considering Hall's theory of 'encoding' and 'decoding' in this case, it is possible to notice some interesting factors. The fact that the Japanese youth were first enthusiastic about Vivienne Westwood's military garments because they had historically perceived it as something exotic is a practical case of how background affects a receiver's reaction to a certain message. Even if the American occupation in Japan was not perceived as something positive by the population, their apparel was something intriguing. As for acceptance amongst women, the revolutionary pieces that were able to allow themselves to discover new aspects of their personalities were of extreme importance, even if they arrived to the land of the rising sun almost 15 years after they were first released. Vivienne Westwood and her designs, then, through her punk-era breakthrough, exemplifies how private actors are also able to propagate a country's imagery without relying on official declarations.

2.3 Could Fashion Communication be Considered a Soft Power Tool?

Traditionally, soft power's influence has been attributed to states, which deploy culture, values and foreign policy to enhance their legitimacy and global appeal. The concept of soft power used here was introduced by Joseph Nye (1990) and refers to the ability of an actor to influence others through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or force. Within this Soft Power framework, cultural diplomacy has been discussed in early 2000s literature that it can make use of art, film and education as instruments of persuasion to promote and cultivate favorable international perceptions (Weldes, 2003). Bleiker (2001), on the other hand, contributes to the discussion by arguing that aesthetic forms do possess political force that often escapes formal diplomatic structures. When placed alongside Nye's original formulation from 1990, Bleiker's (2001) perspective broadens the

understanding of Soft Power by highlighting how cultural expression can produce political resonance that is diffuse and decentralized, not always aligned with state interests. This expanded view underscores that cultural influence in global politics emerges not only through state-designed diplomatic programs but also through the spontaneous, transnational circulation of aesthetic practices that shape perceptions in subtle, yet powerful ways.

More recent scholarship has thus begun to challenge this state-centric conception of soft power, arguing that cultural influence could originate from non-state actors as well. Ang, Isar, and Mar (2015), for example, emphasize that global cultural flows are increasingly shaped by transnational networks and grassroots movements. While governments often attempt to instrumentalize culture through official programs of cultural diplomacy, the authors contend that cultural meaning and influence cannot be fully controlled by state agendas. In this context, subcultures can be understood as alternative sources of soft power that circulate counter-narratives through cultural production and communication (Ang, Isar, and Mar, 2015). Cultural flows frequently emerge from civil society and these non-state actors exert what the authors resonate with shaping international imaginaries through practices that resonate with global audiences independent of state endorsement (Ang, Isar, and Mar, 2015). Soft power would then become a negotiated process, in which this expanded view provides an important conceptual foundation for analysing phenomena like punk fashion.

When considering its part in foreign affairs, fashion could be increasingly recognized as a medium of soft power, given that it has the ability to shape perceptions and project cultural influence without the direct use of coercive or economic forces (Frans and Aryani, 2020; Nye, 2004). Nations can deploy fashion industries to cultivate global prestige and articulate cultural identity, as seen in the global branding of "Made in Italy" or the "Parisian chicness" (Frans and Aryani, 2020). However, beyond state-driven diplomacy, non-state actors and subcultural movements have also harnessed fashion's communicative potential to circulate resistance narratives across borders. Such forms of countercultural soft power demonstrate that fashion's positioning as a tool could emerge from below, challenging rather than reinforcing dominant ideologies (Alderson, 2017; Lundén, 2020).

Despite lacking institutional backing, punk fashion circulated potent countercultural messages that travelled across borders and contributed to alternative forms of cultural influence within international society during the 1970s. Its aesthetic of rebellion spread

mainly through music and media, influencing youth cultures beyond borders, in Europe, North America, and Japan (Kociołek, 2017; Kurokawa, 2013). This demonstrates how countercultural aesthetics can operate as informal instruments of soft power, circling back to previous literature on shaping global discourses of identity and resistance outside state frameworks (Bleiker, 2001; Weldes, 2003).

From an IR perspective, this rapid diffusion across borders illustrates how political meaning travels through cultural channels as well, rather than formal diplomacy only. Worley's (2015) analysis of British punk fanzines further demonstrates how these grassroots media platforms transmitted political critique across borders, linking local frustrations to broader narratives of global injustice and shaping a transnational community of readers who interpreted punk as a form of cultural dissent. At the same time, Street, Worley, and Wilkinson (2018) show that while British elites largely perceived punk as a domestic threat to social order, they underestimated the movement's capacity to influence political imaginaries internationally. This tension between local elite anxiety and global cultural resonance underscores punk's significance as a form of cultural internationalism from below: a decentralized, aestheticized form of communication that articulated political discontent in ways that travelled far beyond Britain's national context (Street, Worley, and Wilkinson, 2018). This challenges conventional IR models that restrict political communication to formal institutions or elite actors. Instead, the movement demonstrates how cultural production rooted in emotion, aesthetics and/or collective identity can serve as a form of non-state political communication with global resonance.

Ultimately, the politics of the punk movement allow subcultural actors to contest dominant narratives while influencing international imaginaries of identity and authenticity. This process supports broader arguments within cultural IR theory (Bleiker, 2001) that aesthetic practices can articulate political meanings inaccessible through conventional diplomatic discourse. Taken together, these perspectives illustrate that punk's transnational spread was not merely a musical or stylistic trend, but a significant example of how countercultural movements generate political communication with global reach, reshaping international cultural politics from the bottom up.

2.3.1 Countercultural Soft Power

Traditional International Relations scholars have long centred on the state as the primary agent of power and influence, be it regarding Hard or Soft Power (Nye, 2021). However, as global cultural flows become increasingly decentralized, the analytical boundaries of IR have expanded to include non-state actors in the past years, specially multinational corporations, NGOs and social movements. These actors operate within what Nye (2004) calls the "soft power spectrum," exerting influence not through coercion, but through attraction and cultural production, culminating in the shaping of non-enforced meaning.

Moreover, recent scholarship has sought to reframe soft power as a diffuse and networked phenomenon rather than a top-down mechanism of state control. Melissen (2005) argues that the globalization of communication and culture has given rise to public diplomacy from below, where civil society, artists and even subcultural communities become carriers of international image-making. Within this expanded understanding, countercultural movements can be read as non-state soft power actors that challenge dominant ideologies and circulate alternative worldviews, once their influence lies in their capacity to contest symbolic hegemony (Melissen, 2005). As Bleiker (2001) notes, cultural aesthetics such as art, film and music are increasingly recognized as part of the "aesthetic turn" in IR, through which visual and symbolic practices shape political understanding and affective engagement.

That being said, when placed in dialogue with Nye's (2004) conceptualizations of soft power, punk's cultural expression can thus be interpreted as a form of non-state political influence, given that it was neither a governmental initiative nor was it supported or funded by the government. Through this context, it can be argued that punk was transmitting counter-hegemonic narratives across borders and shaping international perceptions through cultural attraction and resonance rather than institutional authority. The punk movement's politics would then emerge not only through its explicit critique of the status quo, but also through its capacity to mobilize aesthetic communication as a vehicle of cultural and ideological contestation within international society.

3. Methodology

This dissertation focuses on the political meanings embedded in material objects, therefore, the methodology chosen was qualitative, using case studies and iconographic content analysis to investigate the nuanced nature of the research question. This chapter begins by justifying the decision to uptake content analysis as a method, describing the theories that were combined in order to produce the final research design. Additionally, it explains why the punk garments analysed below were selected as the empirical material for this research, followed by a detailed framework for which encoding analysis will be applied to the selected primary material (Hall, 1981). Furthermore, the choice of methodology for this dissertation attempts to contribute to International Relations scholarship, considering semiotical analysis is not traditionally used in this field of research. Equally important to mention, this chapter also reflects on the methodological limitations inherent within a qualitative research design such as the type adopted here, as well as the possible ethical considerations that the interpretation of cultural artefacts can face.

3.1 Research Design

This research adopts a qualitative methodological framework in order to examine how punk fashion contributed to the transnational circulation of countercultural resistance narratives during the 1970s. Data analysis will be based mainly on primary sources, such as Westwood's interviews, manifestos, design sketches and media coverage from the later half of 1970s decade. Secondary external literature will also be consulted, mainly related to scholarly works on subcultural theory and communication studies, as well as an analysis of punk's global diffusion in the US and Japan are essential for backing this method.

The choice for data analysis was due to the fact that it combines case study analysis, semiotic interpretation and document analysis, grounded in the theoretical perspectives of Stuart Hall's (1981) encoding/decoding model (presented below) and Barnard's (1996) theory of fashion as communication. By using the encoding/ decoding model, it allows this thesis to investigate how Westwood and McLaren encoded political resistance into specific garments (e.g. Westwood's "God Save the Queen" designs), as well as how audiences decoded these symbols as an anti-establishment statement. It is also relevant to observe how international audiences decoded these statements as they spread with

globalization, enabling a transnational subcultural diffusion. Hall (1981), examines the interesting duality of understanding/ misunderstanding. For the purposes of this research, I will focus on the share of his theory that conveys the relevance of how a discourse is perceived by the general audience.

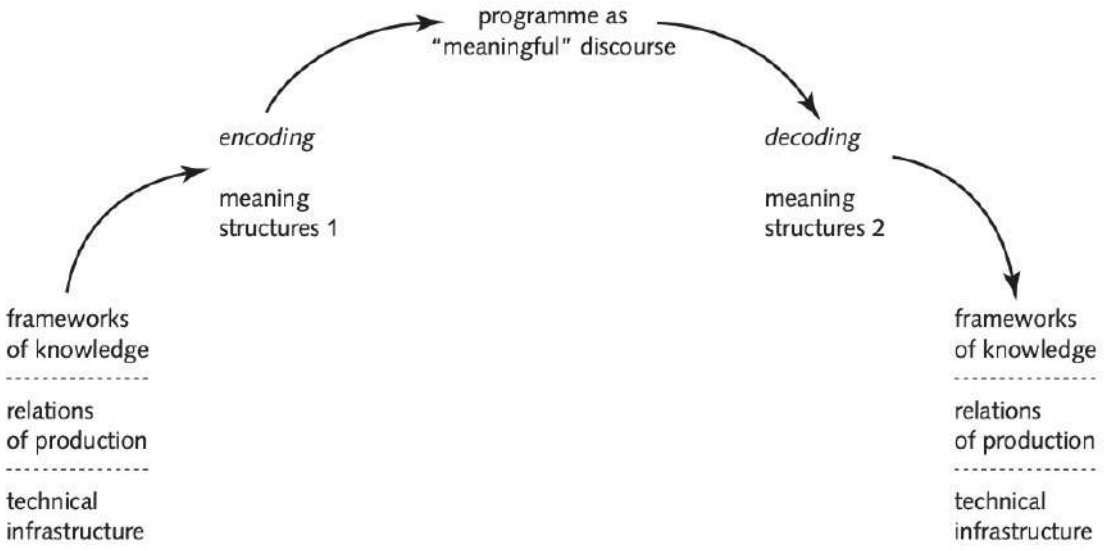

Image 1. Encoding and decoding of broadcast structures. Hall, S. (1981), "Encoding/decoding", in S. Hall et al. (eds.), Culture, Media, Language, London: Hutchinson.

Hall's model provides the primary interpretive structure for analyzing punk fashion as a communicative process. It is particularly relevant to this research because it conceptualizes communication as a dynamic and contested process that can be shaped by ideologies and cultural contexts (Hall, 1981). Barnard's (1996) theory complements this model by framing fashion as a semiotic system, capable of communicating identity and offering social meanings. According to the scholar, clothing functions as a non-verbal language and a text that communicates through culturally encoded symbols (Barnard, 1996). This theoretical foundation justifies the use of semiotic analysis as a key methodological tool for this research. By treating punk garments as communicative artefacts, it can be systematically identified as the visual disruptions and re-signified objects that construct punk's countercultural rhetoric.

In order to illustrate these non-verbal roles garments can acquire, as well as how the punk movement was influential in other spheres besides the musical scene, this case study is centred on designer Vivienne Westwood and how her clothes communicated anti-establishment messages visually in the United Kingdom during the 1970s. To establish the differences between public perception both nationally and internationally,

Japan will be used to demonstrate contrasts with England. This choice was essential to enriching the research, given that it incorporates perspective on how different political backgrounds and regimes affect subcultural meanings. Supplementary to the Case Studies presented below, this research implements an iconographic content analysis following the four-stage model described by Bengtsson (2016). The author's model follows the steps of i) decontextualization, ii) recontextualization, iii) categorization and iv) compilation.

Concerning this method, empirical material from the Punk exhibitions archive that the New York Metropolitan Museum's website[1] disposed of, are treated as a semiotic text whose visual and material elements encode ideological meaning. A semiotic analysis is relevant here because it refers to how signs are able to grant meaning to objects or events, which can be interpreted differently through the understandings of different people (Chandler, 2022). Subsequent coding and thematic analysis reveal how these meanings are successful in operating as non-state political communication, given they were endorsed by private actors in punk's case.

Data collection for this section consists of three complementary sources amongst themselves: primary sources, visual materials and secondary scholarship. The primary sources consist mainly of interviews with Westwood herself, contained in her biographies 'Vivienne Westwood', written by Claire Wilcox in 2004 and by herself with Ian Kelly in 2016, as well as archives from Vivienne Westwood's current website. As for the visual materials that will be analysed in this research, they were picked due to the relevance of their messages and public reaction. Through the Metropolitan Museum's website, I was able to select four clothing pieces from Westwood and McLaren's boutiques 'Seditionaires' and 'SEX', which allows us to cover the later half of the 1970s decade punk visuals.

The selection criteria was curated firstly through visibility, considering garments that were widely circulated and remain talked about in contemporary media vehicles, such as the 'God Save the Queen' shirt that appeared on Vogue in the year of 2017, remaining relevant even forty years after its release (Yaeger, 2017). In this sense, shirts with visuals used by the Sex Pistols were considered a main criteria targeted by my analysis, with the 'God Save the Queen' shirt itself being named after the band's second single (Beaumont-Thomas, 2022) and appearing in their videoclip from 1977[2]. Logically, the shirt 'Anarchy in the UK' named after their first single (Beaumont-Thomas, 2022) that possesses the same visuals as their infamous tour from 1976 (Welch, 2016), which carries

[1] The Met Art Collection: https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/185220.
[2] Sex Pistols "God Save the Queen". Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g-38GX2YQig.

the same name as both shirt and single, was also chosen for the analysis. Regarding the 'Only Anarchists are Pretty' shirt, it was chosen not only because Johnny Rotten (Sex Pistols' vocalist) wore it to the stage, but because it encapsulates the 'Do it Yourself' ethos the movement tried to develop, as it was a piece manually crafted by Westwood with dye and homemade patches (Westwood, 2013). The 'You're Gonna Wake Up One Morning' shirt, on the other hand, was chosen because of its particularity of having a full body of text as its print, encoding anti-establishment messages into a piece of clothing that could be worn by regular citizens.

A fifth piece was selected from Kurokawa's (2013) paper, to deepen the case study developed for Japan, inserting a visual representation of what kind of clothing was meaningful to that particular audience. The choice for only analysing one piece of garment for the Japanese case was due to the fact that the bondage collection is the most popular one for that audience in that period of time (Kurokawa, 2013). I understand that can be considered a limitation, as four pieces are analysed in the British context and only one is analysed in the Japanese context, but I believe that is aligned to the finding that there are adversities when exporting symbolism, which will be addressed in the analysis section. Finally, the secondary scholarship selected for analysing the case study draws on cultural studies and fashion theory, which is important to compare Westwood's work and her early impact in Britain (and later on, internationally) within broader debates on subculture movements and how they may impact International Relations.

The main finding expected to be proven by this analysis can be that of fashion artefacts not being limited to speak in isolation, but of interpretation depending on cultural context as well. It is important to consider how meaning can evolve and be interpreted differently as the pieces circulate internationally. As I have pointed out with the case of Japan, interpretation may vary across cultural settings depending on the social and political backgrounds that the location being studied has been subjected to.

3.2 Limitations of the Research Method

Even though the analysis of material culture can offer valuable and innovative insights into the national and international dimensions of fashion as a political tool, it is also important to acknowledge its limitations. The first evident limitation regarding a visual analysis is that it is often perceived to be more subjective, given that, unlike manifestos that explicitly express what they stand for, garments are open for the receiver's

interpretation (Chandler, 2022). To mitigate this limitation here was to use contextualisation in every clothing piece's analysis driven in the next section. Still, it is not possible to say I have eliminated this completely. Secondly, while the items selected have been documented through museum curated collections, not all aspects of their original circulation and reception can be fully described for the sake of this dissertation. It would be interesting to address how these clothing items were worn in practice and received by the audiences in a more in-depth approach, but these would require ethnographic methods that are beyond the scope of this research. Additionally, the fact that the designs used as data all belonged to Vivienne Westwood does necessarily exclude other punk designers, even if their contributions were not as equally archived and documented. Westwood's designs, as we will see below, are essential when researching punk's original British context, but they cannot define how/if their meanings travelled internationally through new audiences without additional comparative research across different national contexts.

3.3 Analysis of Data

The main analytical process employed in this research is based on an interpretivist framework that reads material objects as political texts, relying on contextual interpretation from the researcher. The first step was to examine each of the selected designs within its formal properties, such as their material choices, constructions techniques and the graphic elements they possessed. The archival photographs from The Met, among published works on Vivienne Westwood's pieces (Mulvagh, 2013; Westwood & Kelly, 2016), were used as a cornerstone for the descriptive stage. The semiotic analysis, on the other hand, used principles from Hall's encoding/ decoding method (Hall, 1981), looking into each design's symbolic political content, as the garments present appropriation of existing symbols and encoded political messages. At this stage, the identification of which signs were present (denotation) and what cultural associations they carried within 1970s Britain (connotation) was essential. Lastly, the contextual interpretation is what situates these pieces in 1970s Britain, a decade characterised by economic crisis and heightened tensions around national and class identity (Morgan, 2017). Throughout this process, my analysis works from the material object into its symbolic codes and social context, recognising that meaning emerges from

the intersection between text and context rather than depending inherently on the object itself.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

Even though this research did not involve human subjects for the conventional sense of qualitative research, which would require an institutional review board approval, some ethical considerations should be raised and addressed. Regarding the primary sources analysed in this dissertation, the archival museum Vivienne Westwood collections, are either held in public websites from an institution such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art (The Met) or have been documented in published sources (Mulvagh, 2013; Westwood & Kelly, 2016). An ethical research practice, then, would require that these materials are cited appropriately and interpretations of visual and material evidence are presented transparently. That being said, all archival images and museum collection items have been properly referenced, as well as direct quotations have been cited in accordance with academic standards to ensure intellectual property rights have been respected.

A relevant ethical consideration I believe is worth highlighting is that this research interprets cultural artefacts through my lenses, with a potential for imposing meanings onto objects that their creator(s) may neither endorse or recognise due to arbitrary assets (e.g. nationality, gender). Even though Westwood has been very vocal about her political intentions throughout her career (Westwood & Kelly, 2016; Vivienne Westwood, 2026[3]) and I have attempted to ground her interpretations to my analysis, the iconographic content analysis presented here may involve scholarly interpretations that go beyond authorial original intent. In order to mitigate the risk of misinterpretation, then, this dissertation commits to contextualisation in its method, supported by evidence from the 1970s (Hebdige, 1979), instead of relying solely on my own assumptions about the political meaning behind the chosen pieces.

Ultimately, ethical considerations must also acknowledge the researcher's own position in relation to the subject matter. When examining punk fashion from a contemporary point of view, I may inevitably interpret the clothing pieces differently than they would have been in the 1970s. As a non-British national and non-native English speaker, I acknowledge that my cultural and linguistic background may shape my reading of these designs in ways that differ from those of a native British observer. Moreover, my

[3] Pointing out a caveat that whenever (Vivienne Westwood, 2026) is mentioned in this dissertation, I am referring to her website, as the designer herself has passed away by late 2022.

analytical categories themselves, as the fact that I attempt to link punk fashion with international political communication, are research constructs that may not align with how punks originally perceived their movement. While this research does not try to discover a new meaning for the punk movement and fashion, it does try to offer an interpretation grounded in historical and political events.

4. Data Analysis

For the data analysis section, there will first be a discussion on the case of punk both nationally and internationally. Secondly, an iconographic content analysis is displayed to demonstrate my argument of clothing disposing of political meaning. Through discussing this dissertation's findings in the following section, I will attempt to coordinate what has been found with the answer to my initial research question. In this section, communication strategies will be treated as a means to media amplification globally, exploring how meaning can be shifted in new contexts. Punk gained traction in London and spread through the UK's borders, but was interpreted differently in different countries and cultures, as presented below through Japan's case.

4.1 Case Studies

For this dissertation's sake, I will apply the case study research method as a qualitative inquiry, aiming to understand the social phenomena mentioned beforehand applied to real world cases. I begin by analysing punk's source, England, as to better understand its role on a domestic level and, afterwards, follow into the case of Japan. These cases, already presented in the literature review section, will demonstrate how the same movement can produce different reactions depending on its audiences, which is relevant to my argument that punk fashion worked as a communication tool.

4.1.1 British Punk Fashion

The 1970s in England were marked by a period of political turmoil not seen since World War II, both on a national and international level. Politically and economically, the Labour government from the late 1960s had already been experiencing financial issues (including a strategy for the pound devaluation in 1967), that were frequently overturned with bailouts from the US Treasury (Morgan, 2017). Globally, however, the outcomes of the Arab-Israeli war generated a spike on oil prices from 1973, in a context in which the balance of payments was already performing unsustainably poorly in the country (Morgan, 2017; Mulvagh, 2013). During this decade, the British government had to deal with a phenomenon called 'stagflation' that referred to inflation and unemployment rates rising simultaneously, which ultimately led to a scenario of political polarization in the country (Morgan, 2017). Related to the economic decline of Britain, it was also during

the 1970s that unions called for strikes while demanding better wages from employers and, according to Morgan (2017), 29,474,000 working days were lost only in the year of 1979 due to class conflicts combined with frustration and disillusionment. Thus, a combination of these previous factors is what allowed a subcultural movement rooted in public revolt to erupt and gain strength throughout the decade.

The 1970s decade, as well as the 1960s, are considered to have originated the so-called 'new social movements' (Hellema, 2018), unrelated to political parties and institutions, organized by regular civilians who wanted to express their right to demand social justice. In an international political context of a bipolarized world, the ongoing Vietnam War and the second wave of feminism emerged as important highlights of the 1970s. By the late 1960s, the Vietnam war became morally controversial on a worldwide level (Hellema, 2018), evoking protests calling for the end of war both in national and international levels during the first half of the decade, until its official end in the year of 1975. According to Hellema (2018), the war, combined with the political framework at the time, was responsible for creating a sense of discontent with society in general. On the other hand, it was during the 1970s that the feminist movement gained traction with its second wave, with Women's Liberation protests in London demanding equal working and educational rights, as well as a woman's complete right to her own body through contraception methods and abortion on demand (Bruley, 2017). In the year of 1970, the first women's equality march (Women's Strike for Equality) also happened in New York City. During the decade, a spike in feminist literature was noticed amongst American women, essential for disseminating the movement's ideals. Mainly contesting gender roles in society and demanding more liberties, the articles and books published succeeded in taking the movement to a mainstream level, which is a practical example of how communication means are successful in propagating social movements (McBean, 2018).

Regarding fashion trends, even though there was a rise in searches for sportswear and denim clothing, the dominant influence at the beginning of the decade was still the hippie dresswear (Ramzi, 2024). Considering women were beginning to join the workplace due to their feminist victories, tailoring was also a trend, moved by practicality and composed with comfortable fabrics (Ramzi, 2024). In the same context, polyester items became famous for their practicality, allowing women to buy office clothing that would not need to be ironed (Ramzi, 2024). Couture, on the other hand, experienced a decline in sales percentage and within the fashion scene spotlight, with classic Paris having to divide its attention with modern London and New York (Ramzi, 2024). Fashion trends at the

beginning of the decade, then, shifted towards a feminist approach of women joining the workforce, influenced by the United States, with traces from the 1960s fashion still to be noticed in the vivid and colorful outfits displayed on magazines. Later, the style would shift again, influenced by the musical references of disco and punk. Below, it is possible to see a comparison between the Vogue US front covers during the years of 1973 and 1979:

Image 2. '1970s: 1973'. From the Vogue Archive.
Available at: https://archive.vogue.com/issues/1973.

Image 3. '1970s: 1979'. From the Vogue Archive.
Available at: https://archive.vogue.com/issues/1979.

Amidst this context, Vivienne Westwood opened her first shop 'Let it Rock' in 1971, a partnership with Malcolm McLaren (for whom she started designing rock 'teddy bear' clothes in the first place), located on 430 King's Road (Vivienne Westwood, 2026). Hers and McLaren's first works as a designer, then, were based on the 1950s rock style revival, disposing of an innuendo more reactionary to what was trending at the time rather than progressive. At first, the intention was to confront national values, as well the advance of American popular culture by visually emphasizing how the British working class stood in opposition (Mulvagh, 2013). Considering that the term "punk" would originate only a few years later in the city of New York (not London), and that the New York punk style would inspire McLaren to later reinvent it in a British context with the Sex Pistols, Vivienne Westwood designs preceded the movement itself (Mulvagh, 2013).

In 1972, the shop went through a rebranding due to Westwood's fast-paced dynamic regarding her designs and trends, shifting focus to biker apparel. It was during the 'Too Fast to Live Too Young to Die' era that Westwood and McLaren started to produce regular t-shirts composed with coarse, challenging prints, which led them to be prosecuted by UK's 1959 Obscene Publications Act[4]. They reacted by continuing to produce "obscene" pieces and rebranding the shop once again as 'SEX'. During this period of time, Westwood was put on the spotlight for dressing the Sex Pistols, whose manager was McLaren, and popularized for their anarchistic single 'God Save the Queen' that went to number one on the charts in a jubilee year.

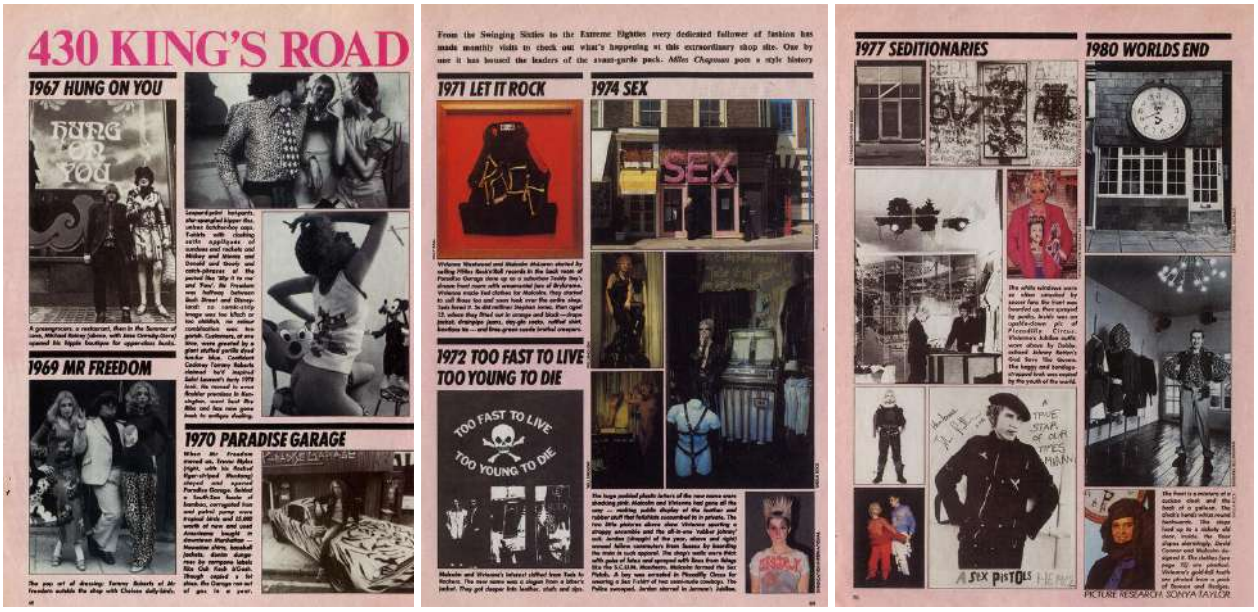

Image 4. '430 Kings Road 1971 – 1980'. From the official Vivienne Westwood website. Available at: https://www.viviennewestwood.com/westwood-world/the-story-so-far/#collection-filter.

According to Mulvagh (2013), these shops were deliberately curated environments in which provocative garments were presented as part of a broader challenge to conventional norms and authority, reflecting Westwood's own radical sensibilities and historical interests. Thus, Westwood did not see herself simply as a designer of clothes, using fashion to interrogate and disrupt dominant cultural narratives. Instead, she has embedded political and social commentary in garments that were then circulated through the punk scene, particularly among youth seeking alternatives to mainstream culture.

[4] This act criminalizes the publishing of obscene articles, which tend to "corrupt and deprave" those who interact with said articles. Obscene Publications Act 1959, c. 66. https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Eliz2/7-8/66/contents/1991-02-01.

Her designs (some of which will be analysed in section 3.3), operated as political texts that conveyed dissent through imagery and rhetoric, transforming clothing into communicative artefacts that articulated anti-establishment sentiments and questioned national identity through visual disruption. This semiotic approach was amplified through the DIY culture that surrounded punk, given that her pieces were often hand-printed and/or inscribed with text, inviting wearers not only to adopt a style, but to participate in the act of meaning-making by circulating these garments within informal networks. Relating to the DIY aspect of the clothes, it is important to highlight that up until the 1960s the fashion system was sustained mostly by two pillars of either *haute couture* or *confection* (Dubé-Sénécal and Goubau, 2023). Vivienne Westwood was groundbreaking for personalizing her pieces, as in that way they did not fit neither societal norms or fashion norms. As her designs were worn by the Sex Pistols, mass media attention followed, further disseminating punk's visual language beyond subcultural spaces.

Furthermore, Westwood's fashion became an influential communicative network as a non-state cultural production soft power tool, shaping political discourse through aesthetics rather than traditional institutional channels. The reason why it is argued that her work is a non-state tool of soft power lays mainly on the fact that her boutique operated independently of state institutions, not being sponsored or regulated by the British government. Instead, they emerged from subcultural spaces, such as the music scene, that functioned autonomously. Despite this, her work profoundly influenced how Britain was perceived both domestically and abroad (Kurokawa, 2013), demonstrating that political meaning can be generated by actors beyond the state.

The designer's impact on British punk illustrates how cultural influence can operate as a form of soft power without state sponsorship. Through aesthetic attraction and symbolic political resonance, her designs generated the sort of influence that enabled civilians to identify with a countercultural vision of British identity that challenged the dominant narratives of respectful traditions. Punk fashion was then able to reappropriate national symbols and control how they circulated to an international level, reshaping Britain's cultural image from that of a monarchic heritage to one of subculture rebellion. In doing so, her work contributed to the international perception of Britain not through diplomacy, but through cultural identification rooted in rebellion and stylistic autonomy.

4.1.2 Punk Fashion Internationally

Postwar pacifism and Japan's deep ambivalence toward militarism profoundly shaped the outlook of Japanese youth, which found a way to express itself within cultural and fashion practices (Kurokawa, 2013). Following the country's defeat in World War II, a postwar Constitution was published, with Article 9 being a highlight here, given it renounced war and the maintenance of armed forces (Faure and Schwab, 2008), leading militarism to become a kind of taboo subject in public discourse. Nonetheless, the American presence was somewhat still perceived in Japan amidst the Cold War disputes happening worldwide, which was a sign of how Japan banished its national armed forces from the country, but not the American ones (Faure and Schwab, 2008). It was amidst this historical context that the youth culture emerged in the country, collectively allowing the younger share of the population to express and define themselves, supported by different types of countercultures. Daliot-Bul (2014), argues that the counterculture's importance in the 1970s was big enough to categorize 'youth' as a social category in Japan. Although at first the countercultures did not possess a political goal, the constitutional pacifism predicted by the new constitution started to foster skepticism towards authorities for many young people (Daliot-Bul, 2014). From the end of 1950s, then, this ambivalence began to translate into youth subcultures that rejected traditional symbols of discipline and showed signs of concern for governmental decisions (Daliot-Bul, 2014). It is in contexts like this that fashion becomes a tool for resistance, demonstrating power struggles through imagery.

However, it must be considered that, the fact that Japan became an 'enterprise society' by the 1970s, added to the youth cultures' incapability to reach the masses, resulted in no political changes caused by counterculture (Daliot-Bul, 2014). This can be due to the fact that countercultures were very niche and general audiences were creating a culture of consumption, eager to adopt American styles, but only for the aesthetics (Daliot-Bul, 2014). Considering that the American movements entering Japan at the time were void of their intended political meaning because of the different backgrounds both countries possessed, the same could be observed with the British movements penetrating Japan, with Vivienne Westwood's case as an example.

Even though Vivienne Westwood emerged as a popular designer amongst Japanese youth, with her first store in Japan opening at Laforet Harajuku[5] in 1978 (Kawamura,

[5] Department store in the city of Tokyo.

2013), her clothes' original intended political message was lost with this new audience. Kawamura (2013) describes how Vivienne Westwood was fully embraced by Japanese girls mainly in the 1990s due to the increasing popularity of the newfound 'Lolita' style, based on lots of laces and femininity for young girls. This style's intent was to be extravagantly charming, with its pastel colours and vivid dresses, differing from what Vivienne Westwood's clothes meant in Britain, where they were perceived as aggressive and unpleasant (Alderson, 2017). This is supported by Kurokawa's (2013) argument that the Japanese market was open for Westwood's designs because the population considered elements produced by Britain to be 'kawaii' (cute), and she used the Britishness factor as an essential characteristic in her pieces. Considering that, it is possible to take away that punk fashion was perceived in Japan as an aesthetic choice, rather than a political movement with strong critiques to the system.

In the Japanese context, Vivienne Westwood's influence demonstrates a distinct form of soft power exercised through selective adoption and reinterpretation, particularly within the girls' fashion movements. As Daliot-Bul (2014) notes, Japanese youth cultures of the 1950s and 1960s were largely male-dominated, with political and subcultural expression often centered on masculine spaces, such as student activism and protest movements. Against this historical backdrop, the reception of punk fashion in Japan among young women in the late 1970s and 1980s marked a significant shift in the gendered dynamics of cultural resistance (Kurokawa, 2013). Westwood's designs here were not primarily decoded as expressions of anger or nihilism, as they often were in the British punk context, but rather as symbols of personal freedom and individuality. Through the appropriation of Westwood's aesthetic (especially the bondage elements), Japanese girls transformed punk fashion into a means of asserting agency over their bodies and public identities. This slight feminized reinterpretation highlights how punk's political meaning was reframed through dress practices that emphasized self-expression rather than confrontation. From an IR perspective, this process exemplifies how a non-state soft power tool behaves, considering that British countercultural symbols did generate attraction abroad, just not in the originally intended way. Thus, Westwood's fashion facilitated a form of cultural influence that resonated locally, while subtly advancing feminist undertones through embodied autonomy.

Westwood's influence exemplifies a form of international soft power exercised without state sponsorship, in which British counterculture circulated globally through cultural attraction rather than formal diplomacy. Her fashion reframed British cultural exports in a

positive and compelling manner, generating influence through aesthetics rather than policy or persuasion. Crucially, this mode of soft power allowed for local reinterpretation, enabling diverse audiences to engage with punk's visual language in ways that resonated with their own social and political contexts. The comparison between the British and Japanese cases, then, reinforces the argument that soft power depends not on uniform political messages but on the capacity of cultural forms to be reworked meaningfully across contexts.

4.2 Iconographic Content Analysis

For a broader and more robust approach of the case study present in this research, an iconographic content analysis will be employed as a complementary method. This methodology is particularly suited to unpacking the symbolic and communicative dimensions of visual artefacts, allowing the researcher to interpret how meaning is encoded in fashion items and how such meanings circulate nationally and/ or internationally. The decision to conduct this analysis was mainly made due to the fact that when addressing subcultural movements, such as 1970s punk and its global social influence, the artefacts they produce and employ play a central role in enabling identification by the wider public (Hebdige, 1979). Aligned with Hall's (1973) encoding/decoding model and Barnard's (1996) understanding of fashion as a semiotic system, this method enables systematic examination of the political and cultural messages embedded in punk clothing. The primary materials selected for the iconographic content analysis are Vivienne Westwood and Malcolm McLaren's pieces from their shops 'SEX' and 'Seditionaires', which ran during the mid to late 1970s in the Chelsea neighborhood, in London (Guerra and Figueredo, 2019).

The choices regarding the clothing pieces were due to them not only being central artefacts in the visual and political lexicon of British punk, but also because they function as a condensed ideological text. By analysing historical pieces of clothing, the symbolic layers of disruption contained in them can be better understood. For this research, I consider fashion items as communicative texts, in which designs function not only as clothing, but as semiotic artefacts that can encode political meaning. Additionally, punk aesthetics relied mostly on symbolic disruption and by analysing symbols it can be clarified how punk communicated its dissent visually, rather than only audible. The selection of designs was based on archive availability, added to their political messages for the first and second shirts. Regarding the third and fourth designs, popularity was the reason behind the choice, considering they are both iconic pieces (Yaeger, 2017) and they both allude to Sex Pistols' songs. The latest designs analysed are from a specific collection and were chosen because of their success with the Japanese audience (Kurokawa, 2013).

Finally, considering Bengtsson's (2016) model that outlines a four-stage process for content analysis in this methodological section, the visual analytical process has been separated as:

i) Decontextualization: This stage consists of identifying meaning units. Applied to this case, it can begin by extracting the relevant data from pre-determined sources (e.g. taking photographs or scans from the selected pieces and cataloguing its visual elements like imagery, text, layout, signs and typography). Contextual data such as provenance, related media, production notes or interviews should be collected for this step as well. During this phase, "code-units" (visual elements or textual signs) will be identified and, for the sake of the analysis, the researcher must bracket their preconceptions of the topic to minimize bias.

ii) Recontextualization: This stage consists of the inclusion of content. The extracted data must be returned to its broader social, cultural and historical context in this step. The item will be compared to contemporaneous media responses and public reaction to help establish how encoded meaning could have been interpreted or contested when it first circulated.

iii) Categorization: This stage consists of identifying homogeneous groups. By obtaining these similar codes, they can be grouped into categories that reflect broader topics, such as the subversion of national symbols and social critiques. For the purposes of this research, Bengtsson's (2016) manifest analysis will be used to focus on explicit and surface elements of what has been directly said.

iv) Compilation: This stage consists of drawing (or attempting to) realistic conclusions. After the coding and categorization steps, it must be interpreted how the categories articulate a coherent meaning. If a shirt is being analysed, it must be questioned if it successfully makes a political or ideological statement. These findings ought to be situated within the theoretical framework of fashion working as communication and soft power, dialoguing with scholarship on punk and subculture. Finally, it will be reflected how this meaning can be decoded differently through the lenses of diverse audiences.

In sum, Bengtsson's approach fits because it provides clear steps that safeguard credibility and transparency while allowing interpretive depth. On another note, considering researcher bias is a known risk, Bengtsson demands reflection on internal resources and pre-understanding, which is a critical step when analysing politically charged, aesthetic artefacts like punk apparel.

'Only Anarchists Are Pretty' Shirt, 1976

This piece of clothing is a button-up shirt constructed from coarse fabric, treated with uneven washes and stains that evoke industrial residue. Its surface appears purposely distressed, with irregular coloration that undermines uniformity or cleanliness. On the shirt's left side, the phrase "Only Anarchists Are Pretty" is printed in bold and uneven letters, which are neither centered nor polished, generating an aesthetic of visual disruption. Other graphic elements are collaged across the shirt, including hand-written slogans and a printed portrait of Karl Marx, known for his ideals contrary to the capitalist system. An armband can be seen on the sleeve, reinforcing an association with uniforms while subverting them through asymmetry and irony. When looking into the shirt as a whole instead of individual elements, however, it is noticeable that the juxtaposition of ideological imagery with corporate branding fragments introduces some visual contradiction.

Image 5. 'Only Anarchists Are Pretty': 'SEX' Shirt, London, 1976. From: The Metropolitan Museum of Art. "PUNK: Chaos to Couture," May 9–August 14, 2013. Available at: https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/82566.

Launched in the mid 1970s, this piece was produced in a context in which punk had already established itself as a subculture. Apart from the initial visual shock one had when perceiving the shirt for the first time, it also engages with controversies of beauty

and power. The writing stating that "Only Anarchists Are Pretty" could be interpreted (and this is how I interpret it) as confronting conventional beauty ideals by associating attractiveness not with an external aesthetic conformity, but with political rebellion. This shirt implies that beauty comes from one's ideology and political views instead of outside visuals. By presenting revolutionary images in the garment within a broader intellectual frame of anti-authoritarian thought, the incorporation of commercial logos functions as a critique tool rather than endorsement. In placing an ideological figure and anti-capitalist slogans amongst symbols present in the consumer culture, the shirt emphasizes the contradictions of a capitalist society.

Image 6. 'Johnny Rotten in Anarchy Shirt'. From: Worlds End - Anarchy Shirt 2013. Available at: https://www.viviennewestwood.com/westwood-world/worlds-end/anarchy-shirts-2013/.

Furthermore, while following Bengtsson's model for the third step of a content analysis, four thematic categories can be highlighted. The first one would be the "aestheticization of ideology", which captures how the shirt reframes political beliefs as a marker of appeal, collapsing the boundary between a good appearance and political conviction. The concept of "collage as political critique" also reflects the garment's assemblage of contradictory, as well as complementary, symbols, disrupting orderly narratives of identity and exposes ideological disputes. The topic of "anti-consumerist irony" also emerges from the appropriation of a fashion business imagery in a context that undermines its original promotional intent. Vivienne Westwood constantly promoted the 'Do It Yourself' (DIY) agenda, expecting her clothes to manifest social messages, which was the opposite of what other brands in the market were doing (Guerra and Figueredo,

2019). In her 2016 biography, the designer stated that the finality of her fashion was not to become a commodity, but rather an idea (Westwood and Kelly, 2016, p.160). Finally, “subversion of uniformity” surfaces as the theme that describes how armband patterns and shirt structures are able to evoke authority, while simultaneously destabilizing it through visual disorder and asymmetry.

In sum, when synthesizing these categories above, this shirt can be interpreted as a politically reflective artefact, presenting ironic elements through juxtaposition. The shirt is not explicitly confrontative, but it gives fashion the aesthetic value of identity beyond appearances through irony. Through Bengtsson’s framework, this garment emerges as a layered communicative text that attempts to challenge the dominant constructed notions of beauty and governmental regime. Thus, when choosing to wear this shirt, one publicly performs an embodied critique, turning appearance into an ideological alignment declaration.

'You're Gonna Wake Up One Morning' Shirt, 1976

The 'You're Gonna Wake Up One Morning' shirt could be considered a tank top, given that it is a sleeveless piece. Made from a lightweight fabric and dyed in a bright red tone, it immediately suggests urgency and emotional intensity. As well as the previous and following garments, its edges are designed to appear unfinished, which is consistent with punk's rejection of conventional tailoring and refinement. The predominant feature here is the extensive use of text, starting with a statement in the upper part that reads "You're gonna wake up one morning and know what side of the bed you've been lying on!". The sentence can be interpreted as confrontational and accusatory and is completed by the dense, tightly packed blocks of text that behave overwhelmingly in such a small piece. These texts resemble manifestos or political tracts, written in a non-legible way, partially covering a shadowed photographic image of a human figure that blends into the background.

Image 7. 'You're Gonna Wake Up One Morning': 'SEX' T-Shirt, London, 1976. From: The Metropolitan Museum of Art. "PUNK: Chaos to Couture," May 9–August 14, 2013. Available at: https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/185213.

Like the previous piece analysed, this one has its release situated during the second half of the 1970s, a period marked by youth disillusionment and growing ideological polarization. The phrase present in the top produces a moral ultimatum, implying that political neutrality has consequences and is not perceived as acceptable. The phrase does

not imply an invitation for one to reflect on their actions, but rather demands self-positioning. The quantity of written text within the shirt is a direct reflection of punk's turn towards explicit political articulation towards ideological exposition. Moreover, the forced confrontation to excessive information can be interpreted as an exhaustion from political discourses during the decade, with the hazy photographic silhouette suggesting an erasure of one's individual identity under ideological struggles (reinforcing the dilemma of ideals and morality). The acquisition of meaning, then, is given by punk's growing engagement with political critique, and acknowledging this is necessary for the second step (recontextualization) of Bengtsson's (2016) theory.

Regarding the thematic categories present in this piece of clothing, the first one would be that of using text as confrontation, capturing how words can replace images to generate provocation as well and turning the piece into a type of manifesto. The deliberate use of visual overload is also relevant by displaying how written text is able to resist passive consumption, once it requires effort and engagement from the viewer. Additionally, the erasure of the individual, portrayed by the defaced silhouette sustains the interpretation that personal identity could be subordinated to ideological struggle. These categories demonstrate how the shirt communicates not exclusively through singular visual symbols, but equally through textual pressure. Unlike most designs that attacked authority through explicit visual desecration, this garment confronts the wearer and viewer with a protest on ethical responsibility. Its emphasis on a provocative phrase transforms fashion into a medium of direct political address, forcing the audience to contemplate their roles in society. The shirt emerges as a communicative object that demands ideological self-awareness, reinforcing punk fashion's role as a form of embodied political tool of communication and, most of all, demanding resistance.

Finally, when synthesizing these categories, there is a political artefact that chooses another path to criticize the status quo. While the next two pieces analysed in this research focus on blaming governmental figures for the country's decay, this one confronts whoever is wearing the piece and its viewers instead. The ethical approach the piece has is able to emphasize how fashion is relevant as a medium of political address, collapsing a boundary between clothing and political manifestos. This shirt, when analysed as a communicative object, reinforces punk's relevance in society, as it were pieces as the below that were essential in provoking self-awareness in regular civilians.

'God Save the Queen' Shirt, 1977

Complementary to the Sex Pistols song that carries the same name, the T-shirt seen in figures 7 and 8 is one of the most emblematic Vivienne Westwood archival pieces today when looking back into her punk era. In 2017, American fashion magazine Vogue recalled, for the t-shirt's 40th anniversary, how the shirt (as well as Sex Pistols' music) was perceived as treasonous towards England (Yaeger, 2017). Made of loosely woven and semi-transparent fabric with deliberate irregularities, such as frayed edges and cut slashes along the neckline and sleeves, these alterations in the piece appear intentional rather than accidental, foregrounding material instability and disorder. The central visual element is a screen-printed portrait of the British monarch at the time, Queen Elizabeth II, heavily modified through graphic interventions. The figure's eyes and mouth are obscured by textual overlays, while the face is additionally marked with a defacing gesture reminiscent of a moustache. Hand-drawn, anarchic lettering surrounds the image and, beneath the portrait, faint reproductions of lyrics are inscribed in uneven, almost illegible lines.

Image 8. 'God Save the Queen': 'Seditionaries' T-Shirt, London, 1977. From: The Metropolitan Museum of Art. "PUNK: Chaos to Couture," May 9–August 14, 2013. Available at: https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/185220.

Produced in late 1970s Britain, the shirt appeared during a period previously presented as marked by economic crisis, labour unrest, youth unemployment and pervasive distrust toward political institutions. Punk emerged precisely within this climate of social disillusionment and the boutique run by Westwood and McLaren acted as pivotal for the movement's visual and ideological production. In the year of 1977 in particular, the release of "God Save the Queen" as a single and the use of Queen Elizabeth's image in defaced t-shirts was supposed to be a bold statement, considering it was the year in which the Queen's Silver Jubilee was celebrated.

Thus, recontextualizing the portrait's defacement reveals its significance: disfiguring a national symbol challenged cultural reverence and state authority, reflecting punk's rejection of deference, hierarchy and the sanctity of national icons. The distressed fabric and exposed seams parallel the punk DIY ethos, signalling resistance to mass-produced fashion and commercial aesthetics. Moreover, the handwritten, almost aggressive typography communicates immediacy and anti-institutional sentiment, aligning with punk's broader critique of British sociopolitical conditions. Bengtsson emphasises that recontextualization ensures no meaning-bearing unit is misunderstood or removed from its interpretive environment, and in this case the garment gains full meaning only when situated in 1970s Britain's political tensions.

Image 9. Vivienne Westwood and Malcolm McLaren. From: Vivienne Westwood's Controversial Sex Pistols Shirt Was the Ultimate in Protest Fashion. Vogue, 2017. Available at: https://www.vogue.com/article/vivienne-westwood-god-save-the-queen-shirt-40th-anniversary.

'Anarchy in the UK' Shirt, 1977

Similarly as the previous shirt, this piece contains a distressed textile construction, with rough edges, uneven sleeves and visible unraveling. The shirt is constructed from loosely woven and off-white fabric with visible fraying along the edges, which signal deliberate sabotage rather than accidental wear. The central visual element is a large and fragmented print of the British national flag that appears torn, distorted and partially obscured by the overlay of text. Superimposed upon the flag, in a rough cut-and-paste typographic style, are the phrases "Anarchy in the U.K." and the logo for the 'Sex Pistols' band. The lettering resembles newspaper ransom notes or hastily assembled agitational posters, similar to the D.I.Y. fanzine style encouraged by the punks. The presence of scattered stains, smudges and burn-like marks also visually contribute to the aesthetic of disorder and rupture.

Image 10. 'Anarchy in the UK': 'Seditionaries' T-Shirt, London, 1977. From: The Metropolitan Museum of Art. "PUNK: Chaos to Couture," May 9–August 14, 2013. Available at: https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/185219.

Equally produced during the period of economic decline, widespread industrial strikes and growing disillusionment amongst British youth, the shirt must be understood within the broader crisis of national identity in the 1970s. The Union Jack, long associated with imperial continuity, national unity and traditional patriotism, is rendered as unstable and wrecked. This can be interpreted as a reflection to the perceived disintegration of social coherence during this period of political uncertainty. Furthermore, the shirt's deliberately distressed textile communicates a rejection of consumerist fashion norms and parallels

the DIY ethos central to punk culture. The cut-and-paste lettering evokes the visual language of underground print culture, including fanzines, protest leaflets and the very own poster for the Sex Pistols' 'Anarchy in the UK' tour from 1976. This aesthetic choice positions the shirt as an artefact of grassroots communication rather than commercial production, considering that it visually expresses the belief that British structures have lost their legitimacy and coherence.

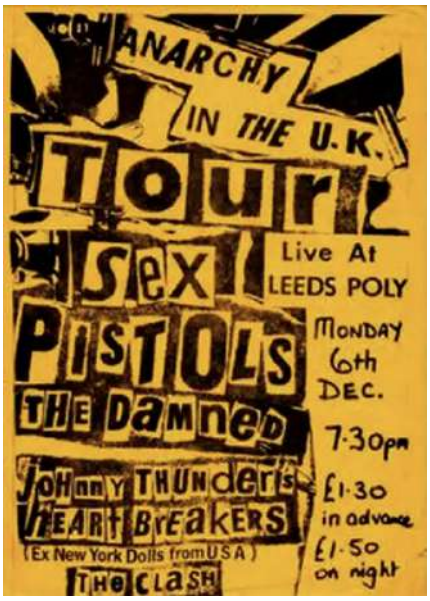

Image 11. 'Anarchy in the UK' Tour Poster, 1976. Available at: https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-norfolk-38165091.

Regarding the categories that the meaning units can be grouped into, there is firstly, the thematic of "national symbolism destabilized" emerges from the torn and distorted Union Jack. This implies a rejection of imposed national unity and challenges the sanctity of established state symbols, such as England's own flag. Additionally, the DIY-type communicative aesthetics are able to characterize the ransom-note typography and rough graphic construction, signalling anti-corporate values and aligning with punk's broader refusal of mass production and loss of individuality. Equally, the embodiment of political provocation identifies the garment's capacity to transform the wearer into a moving signifier of dissent, making confrontation portable and public. The purpose of Westwood's creations of generating social inconvenience, however, was being fulfilled, given people were being arrested for wearing t-shirts considered obscene and dangerous (Alderson, 2017 and Street et al, 2018)[6].

[6] Both Maggie Anderson, former editor of Elle magazine (Anderson, 2017), and Alan Jones, who worked in the 'Seditionaries' shop (Street et al. 2018), recall being arrested for wearing a Vivienne Westwood design during the 1970s.

To synthesize the thematic categories present in the ‘Anarchy in the UK’ shirt, it is implied that its visual attack on the Union Jack operates as an aesthetic rejection of the nation-state and its ideological foundations. The deliberate degradation of material fabric mirrors the perceived collapse of social cohesion and political authority in 1970s Britain. Similarly, the DIY graphic language transforms the shirt into a communicative tool that bypasses institutional channels, conveying mostly feelings of frustration, rebellion and alienation. Through Bengtsson’s framework, the shirt emerges not merely as a fashion item but as a performative embodiment of punk’s political imagination.

The Bondage Collection, Applied to Japan’s Context

The main element present in both pieces illustrated below is that they are structured with multiple straps and fastenings across the torso, arms and legs. These elements resemble military equipment, which restrict bodily movement and fragment the silhouette, affixed with some design modifications chosen by Westwood. Overall, the message delivered by the clothes are those of control and confinement, when analysing its visual narratives. On another hand, the outfit’s tailoring can be interpreted as anti-fashion, given it has oversized proportions and works as a functional piece of clothing, rather than pursuing an aesthetic focused finality.

Image 12. ‘Ideal for combining with army surplus gear’: ‘Seditionaries’ bondage pants, Takarajima, December 1987, p. 22. From: https://doi.org/10.1179/0590887612Z.00000000015.

Image 13. Bondage Shirt and Trousers: 'Seditionaries' T-Shirt, London, 1978. From: The Metropolitan Museum of Art. "PUNK: Chaos to Couture," May 9–August 14, 2013. Available at: https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/185231

Furthermore, the context in which these garments were first seen relate to the punk context of state power critique in the UK, but can also be recontextualized with a focus on the link between bondage pieces and militarism in Japan. Kurokawa (2013) notes that the bondage equipment firstly referenced images of military oppression and the violence of the Vietnam War, which had come to symbolize imperial aggression and institutional brutality in Western countercultural imaginaries. The restrained body, then, operated as a metaphor for citizens constrained by authoritarian structures. However, when the same garments entered Japan in the late 1980s, their political resonance shifted. According to Kurokawa (2013), a share of Japanese youth (mainly young women) did not primarily decode the bondage elements as references to war or Western imperialism. Instead, the outfit was reinterpreted through Japan's emerging "cute" (*kawaii*) fashion culture, combined with the Japanese perception on British fashion. This is an interesting example of Stuart Hall's (1981) encoding/ decoding model, in which meaning is not fixed, but reassembled when perceived within new cultural frameworks.

When considering the recurring themes on the bondage collection, a militarized restraint appears as a means to capture the outfits' symbolism of discipline and violence, rooted in

Western critiques of war and state power. Additionally, Westwood was also successful in visualizing constraint, given her designs reflect how bondage structures work as a limitary tool. While applying the analysed garments to the Japanese context, cultural re-signification emerges as a topic that identifies the shift from political criticism perceived in the UK into a finality of stylization in Japan. Through the appropriation of Japanese girls, the garments ceased to be a symbol of oppression, but a means for self-expression and rebellious identity experimentations (Kurokawa, 2013).

Synthesizing these categories reveals the bondage outfits sold by Seditionaries as a highly mobile political artefact whose meaning changes across borders. In Britain, the garment encoded resistance to militarism and authoritarian control. In Japan, even if it draws on imagery associated with the Vietnam War and Western protest culture at first, these same visual cues were later decoded through a different cultural lens. Through Bengtsson's (2016) framework and Hall's (1981) model, the outfit emerges as an example of how punk fashion operates as international political communication: its symbols do not travel unchanged, but are reinterpreted according to local aesthetics, political background and social concerns. This case demonstrates that fashion's political power lies not only in its original intent, but in its capacity to generate new meanings across cultural contexts.

Recurring Thematics and Implications

In sum, the garments discussed previously all share the same textile materials and sense of visual degradation, which functions as common meaning units signalling disorder and fuelling the anti-establishment sentiment. The "God Save the Queen" shirt specifically could be considered a direct confrontation to institutional power, while the "Anarchy in the UK" shirt targets a more abstract version of the nation-state it is criticizing. With "God Save the Queen", there is an explicit defacement of a national figure, symbolic during a period of economic crisis, that challenges ideals of respect and political hierarchy. "Anarchy in the UK", in contrast, by tackling the Union Jack manages to visually symbolize that the British nation was under fragmentation, echoing punk's message that the existing political order lacks legitimacy. The 'Only Anarchists are Pretty' and 'You're Gonna Wake Up One Morning' shirts, on the other hand, are directed towards society rather than institutions, bringing up dilemmas of politics and morality to the debate.

5. Conclusion

Through the qualitative analysis of imagery, this dissertation examined punk fashion as a primary form of political designs, rather than just a support to the music scene. It tackled the fact that punk fashion was not merely an aesthetic accessory to the mainstream bands at the time, but a source of political communication as well. Furthermore, it also questioned how International Relations scholarship is able to understand global political procedures considering that culture can play a part in the process outside statal frameworks. This dissertation's main contribution is that it opens theoretical and methodological questions about how we understand political communication and the actors who shape international perceptions of dissent. Concerning the chosen methodology, I would argue that, even though it might have been a bold choice to run an iconographic content analysis in an International Relations dissertation, it still brought a contribution to this research field. In this concluding chapter I will mainly synthesize the empirical findings of this research, as well as reflecting on possible limitations and, consequently, directions for future research.

Concerning my initial argument that punk fashion was one of the movement's pillars to the same level as music, it can be concluded that even though bands, such as the Sex Pistols, were the movement's main representatives, their style was manufactured and supported by clothing items. I argue that punk fashion's role as a pillar for the movement has been noticed in how the visual aspect is essential for shaping subcultural facets. The analysis presented in the previous chapter, focusing on Vivienne Westwood's designs during the British punk era, was used to demonstrate in which ways pieces of clothing can function as vehicles for political messaging. As I have mentioned in the methodology chapter, the pieces of clothing analysed were chosen due to their proximity to the Sex Pistols, supporting the argument that fashion was just as relevant for shaping punk style as music.

By appropriating national symbols as a visual strategy for criticism, Westwood was able to encapsulate which British values were being condemned by the movement. The 'God Save the Queen' shirt, for example, enclosed this by transforming Queen Elizabeth's image into an illustrated anti-monarchy statement. On the other hand, when incorporating DIY items into punk, fashion also became a means of resisting mass consumption and capitalism, taking pieces previously owned and personalizing them as an alternative way of consumption. Regarding this latest point, however, it could be instigated that Vivienne Westwood's designs, at first anti-establishment and anti-capitalism, had its intended purpose shifted as it began to be exported. Even if she originally planned them to stand for resistance against mass consumption

and the dominant elites, this meaning was dissolved once it became what it criticised: a commodity. As seen in the case of Japan, Westwood's designs did not gain popularity in the country due to its political meanings, but for its style being aesthetically appealing to youth audiences (Kurokawa, 2013). The clothes, then, by having lost its political innuendo, became an accessory chosen because of aesthetic preferences rather than ideological ones.

From an International Relations perspective, these findings complicate potential romantic narratives of punk as a revolutionary force. Rather than functioning as a direct form of insurgent political power, punk seems to have operated as a symbolic provocateur, creating discursive pressure on elites without producing structural transformation. Its influence was felt most strongly in cultural and local political arenas, rather than in executive decision-making or national institutional change. The elite responses to punk suggests that its power lay in its platform communication potential, once punk's aesthetics and rhetoric generated enough symbolic anxiety among power-holders to provoke reaction (yet, it was not sufficient to force fundamental policy shifts). For this dissertation's purposes, this underscores a key point that punk fashion, as an extension of punk culture, should be understood not only as subcultural resistance, but as part of a broader cultural communication network.

Furthermore, this dissertation's theoretical contribution for International Relations relates mainly through the demonstration that fashion designs operating outside the reach of state sponsorship could shape political discourse through material culture as well. At first, my idea was that integrating fashion and soft power into IR scholarship would expand our understanding of global influence. I believe fashion can become a form of cultural diplomacy from below and, even though there were no indications of punk intentionally wanting to reach an international level, as Melissen (2005) states is a crucial step for cultural diplomacy, it was still able to generate commotion beyond British borders. In examining punk fashion's contribution to these circulations, this dissertation positions fashion not as a strict peripheral phenomenon, but as a field that could add to international communication and cultural politics. It participates in the transnational circulation of meanings by mobilizing symbolic expressions that resonate across borders and, by doing so, is capable of articulating dissent while generating new forms of non-state communication.

Through its ability to encode political narratives and transmit them internationally, fashion becomes a crucial vector through which cultural influence is exercised and within the broader landscape of international relations. One thing to reflect upon is that, in the case of punk when analysed through traditional Soft Power lenses from Nye (1990), it cannot be considered a soft power tool, as it did not benefit the state and was not used by the government to promote the

country. However, when considering my literature review chapter on Soft Power, under some scholars' theories, in particular Bleiker (2001), it could be argued that Punk as an aesthetic outcome could be considered Soft Power as it did produce political resonance, even if not aligned to a state agenda.

Regardless of what is interpreted as the ultimate result of fashion working as a soft power tool or not, it can still behave as a political actor in the international scenery, being able to shape discourses without engaging formal political institutions. In sum, the most relevant implication of this research is that objects can be charged with political meaning and they matter when analysing how a movement spreads, as well as how the audiences perceive these initiatives. Nevertheless, finally addressing my hypothesis, I conclude that it has been disproven considering my case study on Japan. The main counterargument regarding the hypothesis would be that punk fashion designed by Vivienne Westwood was created specifically to fit the British narrative and, once you remove it from that context turning these fashion products into plain clothing internationally, their meaning is detached. This is a combination of background sensibilities concerning where this fashion is being distributed and the commodification of it as a product, paradoxically losing its meaning just by being exported.

5.1 Implications and Future Research

When examining the outcomes of this dissertation, its limitations must also be highlighted as future research suggestions. While I have established that punk fashion and, more specifically, Vivienne Westwood's designs functioned as political communication means in England, a more in-depth analysis would be needed concerning the international level. The circulation of punk across borders raises a fundamental question on whether subcultural resistance can survive exportation once it is commodified or if its meaning becomes diluted instead. Given that punk aesthetics have been reproduced and mass-produced within the international market throughout the past decades, a new research could focus on how these garments and accessories operated (or rather failed to operate) politically once they started to be exported. Moreover, comparative reception studies would be interesting in investigating why punk's anti-establishment fashion was unsuccessful in communicating its message to audiences with different political backgrounds. It has been demonstrated here that subcultural aesthetics can function as criticism to dominant elites and narratives, but it was also understood that these aesthetics' values can simply be dismissed and incorporated by

capitalism. The case of Japan was essential to exemplify how exportation is able to remove oppositional content from objects, transforming them into depoliticised stylistic choices. Future research focusing on this aspect would not only trace punk's international influence, but interrogate the very possibility of transnational political communication through material culture (when that culture becomes a commodity within the capitalist system).

Differently from both Britain and Japan, the case of Polish punk, for example, could be used as an antagonistic political scenario for rebellion to bloom in a future research. British punk was originally intended to become a movement against capitalist class divisions and mass production in systems under it, but understanding its presence in a different political context may be interesting. Kociołek (2017) presents the case of punk applied into the different governmental regime in Poland, with the movement being appropriated by the Polish youth as a defiance method to this current regime, which was communism. Kociołek (2017) explores the belief that the same discourses can cause different reactions in different countries, arguing that the idea of punk in Poland became known first from the elites that were able to travel abroad and absorb cultural rites from all over. In this sense, punk's origins in Poland differ from its origins in Britain, considering punk had different economic and social audiences in both countries: while in Britain punk gained strength through the working class, in Poland it seemed appealing to a "privileged youth" that emerged against the uniformity present in the socialist regime (Kociołek, 2017). Because the Polish regime was very strict regarding matters that came from outside the country, Kociołek (2017) gives an example on how mundane topics, such as Western European clothing was repudiated by the authorities. Thus, this movement could be interestingly borrowed for a comparative research of commodified items that carry political symbolism[7].

Moreover, beyond centering punk as a specific case, this dissertation creates room for a broader theoretical inquiry within International Relations scholarship when considering fashion as a non-state political tool. Even though cultural topics such as fashion remain largely absent from IR literature, the question on whether they are capable of shaping discourse outside the traditional institutional frameworks remains. Future research, then, could examine how contemporary designers deploy fashion politically, dealing with a

[7] When looking into how Poland embraced punk around the 1970s, it is possible to retrieve a nuanced analysis on how the same movement can influence audiences from different political regimes. According to Komornicka (2020), the socialist regime in Poland was blooming during the first half of the 1970s, with rising wages and somewhat domestic stability. The foreign trade Poland had with Western Europe was accompanied by political relations in good terms, which ended up being beneficial for the country at the beginning of the decade Komornicka (2020).

question raised by this dissertation, but not completely tackled, which would be to under which conditions fashion can function as meaningful political communication and at which point of its commodification process this meaning is neutralized. In order to answer this question, IR scholars would need to develop an analytical framework that considers aesthetic matters and visual communication as political tools. Recognising that political power operates not only through institutions, but through the images and aesthetics that shape how people understand themselves and their relation to authority could broach a very interesting discussion.

Bibliography

Alderson, M. "Wearing a T-shirt Got Me Arrested: Wearing Punk Clothes in 1970s London Was Dangerous, but Now British Teenagers Can Wear Anything." *Index on Censorship* 45, no. 4 (2017): 14-17. https://doi.org/10.1177/0306422016685968.

Ang, Ien, Yudhishthir Raj Isar, and Phillip Mar. "Cultural Diplomacy: Beyond the National Interest?" *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 21, no. 4 (2015): 365–81. https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2015.1042474.

Aspers, Patrik, and Frédéric Godart. "Sociology of Fashion: Order and Change." *Annual Review of Sociology* 39 (2013): 171–92. http://www.jstor.org/stable/43049631.

Barnard, Malcolm. *Fashion as Communication*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 1996. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315013084.

Beaumont-Thomas, Ben. "Still a Fascist Regime: Sex Pistols' God Save the Queen Reissued to Mark Platinum Jubilee." The Guardian, May 3, 2022. https://www.theguardian.com/music/2022/may/03/still-a-fascist-regime-sex-pistols-god-save-the-queen-reissued-to-mark-platinum-jubilee.

Behnke, Andreas. *The International Politics of Fashion*. London: Routledge, 2016. https://www.perlego.com/book/714976.

Bengtsson, Mariette. "How to Plan and Perform a Qualitative Study Using Content Analysis." NursingPlus Open 2 (2016): 8-14. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.npls.2016.01.001.

Bleiker, Roland. "The Aesthetic Turn in International Political Theory." *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 30, no. 3 (2001): 509-33. https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298010300031001.

Brenk, Mikołaj. “Punk Subculture in Poland - from Rebellion to Stylization.” Threat to the Individual in the Contemporary Society, 2019.

Breward, Christopher. Review of *The Politics of Fashion: The Politics of Fashion Studies*, by Irene Guenther, Eugenia Paulicelli, and Juliette Peers. *Journal of Contemporary History* 42, no. 4 (2007): 673–81. http://www.jstor.org/stable/30036477.

Bruley, Sue. "'It Didn't Just Come out of Nowhere Did It?': The Origins of the Women's Liberation Movement in 1960s Britain." *Oral History* 45, no. 1 (2017): 67–78. http://www.jstor.org/stable/26382544.

Chandler, Daniel. *Semiotics: The Basics*. 4th ed. London: Routledge, 2022. https://www.perlego.com/book/3473814.

Choi, Kyung Hee. "Vivienne Westwood in Context and Englishness in Her Work." *IJCC* 8, no. 2 (2005): 61–70.

Clarke, John, Stuart Hall, Tony Jefferson, and Brian Roberts. "Subcultures, Cultures and Class: A Theoretical Overview." In Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain, edited by Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson, 9-74. London: HarperCollins, 1976.

Clarke, J. S., and R. Holt. "Vivienne Westwood and the Ethics of Consuming Fashion." *Journal of Management Inquiry* 25, no. 2 (2016): 199-213. https://doi.org/10.1177/1056492615592969.

Daliot-Bul, Michal. "The Formation of 'Youth' as a Social Category in Pre-1970s Japan: A Forgotten Chapter of Japanese Postwar Youth Countercultures." *Social Science Japan Journal* 17, no. 1 (2014): 41–58. https://doi.org/10.1093/ssjj/jyt025.

Dubé-Sénécal, Vincent. "Fashion's Diplomatic Role: An Instrument of French Prestige-Based Commercial Diplomacy, 1960s–1970s." *International Relations* 38, no. 4 (2024): 567–88. https://doi.org/10.1177/00471178221123506.

Dubé-Sénécal, Vincent, and Madeleine Goubau. "Fashion and Diplomacy." In *The Routledge History of Fashion and Dress, 1800 to the Present*, edited by Véronique Pouillard and Vincent Dubé-Sénécal, 227–43. Abingdon: Routledge, 2023. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429295607-15.

Dunn, Kevin C. "Never Mind the Bollocks: The Punk Rock Politics of Global Communication." *Review of International Studies* 34 (2008): 193–210. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20542757.

Faure, Guy, and Laurent Schwab. "The Vietnam War As Seen from Tokyo." In *Japan-Vietnam*. Bangkok: Institut de recherche sur l'Asie du Sud-Est contemporaine, 2008. https://doi.org/10.4000/12ee5.

Frans, Riris Parada Elisa, and Maria Indira Aryani. "The Influences of Fashion as a Soft Power towards France's Economic Growth." *WIMAYA* 1, no. 2 (2020): 31-39.

Garber-Paul, Elisabeth. "How London Punks Changed Fashion Forever." *Rolling Stone*, May 24, 2022. https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/sex-pistols-fashion-punk-legacy-1355610/.

Guerra, Paula, and Henrique Grimaldi Figueredo. "Today Your Style, Tomorrow the World: Punk, Fashion and Visual Imaginary." *ModaPalavra e-periódico* 12, no. 23 (2019): 112-47.

Hall, Stuart. "Encoding/Decoding." In *Culture, Media, Language*, edited by Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe, and Paul Willis, 128-38. London: Hutchinson, 1981.

Hall, Stuart, and Tony Jefferson, eds. *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*. London: Hutchinson, 1976.

Hebdige, Dick. Subculture: The Meaning of Style. London: Routledge, 1979.

Hebdige, Dick. Subculture. 1st ed. 2012. Reprint, Routledge, 2012. https://www.perlego.com/book/1617323.

Hellema, Duco. *The Global 1970s*. London: Routledge, 2018. https://www.perlego.com/book/1515404.

Heywood, Andrew. *Global Politics*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

Kawamura, Yuniya. *Fashioning Japanese Subcultures*. 1st ed. London: Berg Publishers, 2013. https://www.perlego.com/book/804687.

Kociołek, Katarzyna. "Punk Fashion as a Metaphor in 1980s Britain and Poland." *Acta Philologica* (2017). https://repozytorium.uw.edu.pl/server/api/core/bitstreams/87ed5ef4-98c3-4769-b45a-7f8ad2de3770/content.

Kurokawa, Yuko. "Vivienne Westwood's 'Seditionaries' Clothes and the Change in Japanese Girls' Cute Fashions in the Early 1990s." *Costume* 47, no. 1 (2013): 77-93. https://doi.org/10.1179/0590887612Z.00000000015.

Lundén Castaldo, Elizabeth. "Exploring Fashion as Communication: The Search for a New Fashion History against the Grain." Popular Communication 18, no. 4 (2020): 249–58. https://doi.org/10.1080/15405702.2020.1854952.

McBean, Sam. "The Feminist 1970s." In *American Literature in Transition, 1970–1980*, edited by Kirk Curnutt, 352–64. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018.

Meinhold, Roman, and John Irons. "A Critical Inquiry into Fashion." In *Fashion Myths: A Cultural Critique*, translated by John Irons, 9–36. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2013. http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1xxspz.3.

Melissen, Jan, ed. *The New Public Diplomacy: Soft Power in International Relations*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

Morgan, Kenneth O. "Britain in the Seventies – Our Unfinest Hour?" *Revue Française de Civilisation Britannique* 22 (2017). https://doi.org/10.4000/rfcb.1662.

Mulvagh, Jane. *Vivienne Westwood*. London: HarperCollins, 2013. https://www.perlego.com/book/688523.

Nye, Joseph S. "Soft Power." *Foreign Policy*, no. 80 (1990): 153–71. https://doi.org/10.2307/1148580.

Nye, Joseph S. *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. New York: Public Affairs, 2004.

Nye, Joseph S. "Soft Power: The Evolution of a Concept." *Journal of Political Power* 14, no. 1 (2021): 196–208. https://doi.org/10.1080/2158379X.2021.1879572.

Obscene Publications Act 1959, c. 66. https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Eliz2/7-8/66/contents/1991-02-01.

Olive, Colette. "Value, Virtue, and Vivienne Westwood: On the Philosophical Importance of Fashion." *Open Philosophy* 6, no. 1 (2023): 20220250. https://doi.org/10.1515/opphil-2022-0250.

Onessimo, Gabriella. "Vivienne Westwood, Sex Pistols, and the Origins of Punk Fashion - Pistol Hulu TV Show." *L'Officiel USA*, April 8, 2023. https://www.lofficielusa.com/fashion/vivienne-westwood-sex-pistols-punk-fashion-history.

Ramzi, Lilah. "A 1970s Fashion History Lesson: Disco, Designer Denim, and the Liberated Woman." *Vogue*, May 15, 2024. https://www.vogue.com/article/1970s-fashion-history-lesson.

Rana, Nirbhay. "Fashion Diplomacy: The Role of Fashion in Cultural Exchange." *International Journal For Innovative Research in Multidisciplinary Field* (2024): 1-5.

Street, John, Matthew Worley, and David Wilkinson. "'Does It Threaten the Status Quo?' Elite Responses to British Punk, 1976–1978." *Popular Music* 37, no. 2 (2018): 271–89. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26861752.

Tillman, Robert H. "Punk Rock and the Construction of 'Pseudo‐political' Movements." *Popular Music and Society* 7, no. 3 (1980): 165–75. https://doi.org/10.1080/03007768008591160.

Vivienne Westwood. "The Story so Far." Westwood World, VivienneWestwood.com. Accessed January 22, 2026. https://www.viviennewestwood.com/westwood-world/the-story-so-far/.

Vogue. 1973. Condé Nast Archive. https://archive.vogue.com/issues/1973.

Vogue. 1979. Condé Nast Archive. https://archive.vogue.com/issues/1979.

Welch, Jon. "Sex Pistols: Anarchy in the UK and the tour they tried to ban". BBC News, December 3, 2016. https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-norfolk-38165091.

Weldes, Jutta, ed. *To Seek Out New Worlds: Science Fiction and World Politics*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

Westwood, Ben. "Anarchy Shirts 2013." Westwood World, Vivienne Westwood, November 20, 2013. https://www.viviennewestwood.com/westwood-world/worlds-end/anarchy-shirts-2013/.

Westwood, Vivienne. "Only Anarchists Are Pretty" Shirt. 1976. Cotton. The Costume Institute, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Gift of Barbara and Gregory Reynolds, 1985. Accession number 1985.375.6. https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/82566.

Westwood, Vivienne. "You're Gonna Wake Up One Morning" T-shirt. 1976. Cotton. The Costume Institute, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Purchase, Friends of The Costume Institute Gifts, 2018. Accession number 2018.797. https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/185213.

Westwood, Vivienne, Malcolm McLaren, and Jamie Reid. "Anarchy in the UK" T-shirt. 1977. Cotton and metal. The Costume Institute, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Purchase, Friends of The Costume Institute Gifts, 2018. Accession number 2018.812. https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/185219.

Westwood, Vivienne, Malcolm McLaren, and Jamie Reid. "God Save the Queen" T-shirt. 1977. Cotton. The Costume Institute, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Purchase, Friends of The Costume Institute Gifts, 2018. Accession number 2018.802. https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/185220.

Westwood, Vivienne, and Ian Kelly. *Vivienne Westwood*. London: Picador, 2016.

Wilcox, Claire. Vivienne Westwood. London: V&A Publications, 2004.

Worley, Matthew. "Punk, Politics and British (Fan)Zines, 1976-84: 'While the World Was Dying, Did You Wonder Why?'" *History Workshop Journal*, no. 79 (2015): 76–106. http://www.jstor.org/stable/43917310.

Xie, Yuting, Megat Al Imran Yasin, Syed Agil Alsagoff, and Lay Hoon Ang. "An Overview of Stuart Hall's Encoding and Decoding Theory with Film Communication." *Multicultural Education* 1 (2022): 190-98. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.5894796.

Yaeger, Lynn. "Vivienne Westwood's Controversial Sex Pistols Shirt Was the Ultimate in Protest Fashion." *Vogue*, June 12, 2017. https://www.vogue.com/article/vivienne-westwood-god-save-the-queen-shirt-40th-anniversary.

Executive Summary

Existing scholarship on the 1970s British Punk movement has consistently privileged the music scene as a research topic, treating fashion as a secondary element of Punk. This music-centric framework obscures the possibility that clothing itself functioned as a primary medium of political communication. Simultaneously, within International Relations, fashion's capacity to shape political discourse outside state frameworks remains under-theorised, as the discipline continues to privilege institutional actors and conventional forms of diplomatic communication. Thus, this research aims to inquire if there is relevant evidence that fashion can behave as a political actor when communicated and exported beyond its original borders. As the research question asks "*How did punk fashion contribute to the international circulation of resistance narratives during the 1970s and 1980s?*", I treat punk fashion as an anti-establishment vehicle for political messaging, reflecting if its circulation enabled non-state actors to shape perceptions of resistance movements.

In 1974, Vivienne Westwood and Malcolm McLaren's designs at their boutique SEX transformed these elements into performative statements of dissent with the emergence of the Sex Pistols, who were fully styled by Westwood (Clarke and Holt, 2015). Westwood's use of historical references and subversive imagery, like the appropriation of British symbols (more specifically defacing the British flag), embodied a critique of nationalism and cultural hypocrisy (Guerra & Figueredo, 2019). Through fashion, punk made politics visible on the body, turning everyday appearance into a site of ideological struggle. Importantly, due to globalization, the politics of punk were not confined to national borders. Instead, Punk's ethos of DIY production and radical self-expression resonated with global audiences facing similar disillusionment with modernity and governance.

The role of Vivienne Westwood in the UK punk movement illustrates how fashion can operate as an ideological medium as well. Her designs reappropriated traditional British symbols, such as the tartan, the Union Jack, royal insignia and subverted them into statements of dissent (Clarke and Holt, 2015). In doing so, Westwood's fashion blurred the boundaries between aesthetics and politics, demonstrating that garments (as well as music) can be of use in moments of turmoil by the population, resisting alienation in modern society (Dunn, 2008). The dissemination of punk' DIY imagery through magazines, album covers and performances further amplified its communicative reach, offering resources for sympathizers to transform a local subculture into a global aesthetic of rebellion (Dunn, 2008 and Worley, 2015).

This dissertation employs a qualitative case study methodology, conducting material culture analysis of five key Westwood garments from the punk era. The analysis draws on visual

semiotics, close reading of material construction and design elements, and contextualisation within the political and cultural landscape of late 1970s Britain. Evidence is drawn from museum collections, archival photographs, contemporary fashion press coverage, and existing scholarship on punk subculture. Here, I treat material objects as political texts that communicate through visual symbolism and aesthetic provocation.

Regarding the contributions made to scholarship, I have empirically centered fashion as a primary object of analysis rather than treating it as background to the music scene, challenging the music-centric framework that has dominated subcultural studies. Theoretically, I have attempted to expand International Relations scholarship by demonstrating that cultural producers operating outside state frameworks can also shape political discourse, thus broadening the discipline's understanding of non-state actors beyond traditional use of NGOs, corporations, and advocacy networks to include designers and artists. Methodologically, this dissertation establishes material culture analysis as a valuable approach for IR scholarship, showing how attention to objects and visual codes can reveal forms of political communication that text-based approaches may miss.

I conclude by mapping directions for future research, particularly the need for comparative transnational reception studies that investigate whether punk fashion's political meanings survived commodification as designs crossed borders and entered global fashion markets. It also calls for broader theoretical work on fashion designers as non-state political actors in contexts beyond British Punk and encourages methodological innovation that uses materiality and symbolic communication for new analytical investigations, as conventional IR literature does with diplomatic cables. Ultimately, this research demonstrates that political communication operates through multiple registers simultaneously, and that understanding resistance requires attending to what people wore as seriously as what they verbally protested about.