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RHETORICAL STRATEGIES IN POLAND'S WOMEN'S STRIKE: THE DIFFUSION OF *SEMIOTIC DISOBEDIENCE* THROUGH PROTEST BANNERS AND SIGNAGE

Olga O'Toole
Institute of English Studies
Department of Linguistics
Jagiellonian University in Krakow
olga.otoole@uj.edu.pl

This paper presents an exploration of the dynamics of contemporary protest movements in the digital age, focusing specifically on the Women's Strike protests in Poland. Through its application of sociological diffusion theory, the study investigates the ways in which these movements adopt and adapt protest strategies through the lens of semiotics, language, and cultural references in the context of the Internet's influence. By drawing on various sources, including social media, the paper examines the role of hashtag activism, metaphor, profanity, and cultural tropes in shaping the discourse and symbolic expression of dissent. The globalisation of protest, particularly through the use of English as a *lingua franca*, is highlighted as a significant aspect of the evolving protest rhetoric in the Polish Women's Strikes that took place in the years 2016, 2020, and 2021. The analysis reveals a new wave of semiotic disobedience that utilises the linguistic strategies of expressions in English, pejorative language and metaphor to communicate a socially significant message, symbolizing a broader, global political discourse of equality and solidarity that transcends geographical boundaries. This study contributes to the understanding of contemporary protest formations and their diffusion in the digital age, emphasizing the transformative quality that language has in the face of national protest.

Keywords: diffusion theory, discourse, semiotic disobedience, protest

РЕТОРИЧКИ СТРАТЕГИИ ВО ТЕКОТ НА ШТРАЈКОТ НА ЖЕНИТЕ ВО ПОЛСКА: ДИФУЗИЈА НА *СЕМИОТИЧКА НЕПОСЛУШНОСТ* ПРЕКУ ПРОТЕСТНИ БАНЕРИ И ОБЕЛЕЖЈА

Олга О'Тул
Институт за англиски студии
Катедра за лингвистика
Јагелонски Универзитет во Краков
olga.otoole@uj.edu.pl

Оваа статија претставува студија на динамиката на современите протестни движења во дигиталната ера и се фокусира, поконкретно, на протестите за време на Штрајкот на жените во Полска. Со примена на социолошката теорија на дифузија, статијата ги проучува начините на кои овие движења прифаќаат и прилагодуваат протестни стратегии низ призмата на семиотиката, јазикот и културните референции, во контекст на влијанието од интернетот. Црпејќи податоци од повеќе извори, меѓу кои се и социјалните медиуми, статијата ја истражува улогата на хаштег-активизмот, метафората, вулгарноста и културните обележја во обликувањето на дискурсот и во симболичното изразување на незадоволство. Глобализацијата на протестот, особено преку употребата на англискиот јазик како *лингва франка*, е нагласена како значаен аспект на протестната реторика којашто се развива за време на Штрајкот на жените во Полска, кој зема замав во 2016, 2020 и во 2021 година. Анализата открива нов бран семиотичка непослушност, којашто применува лингвистички експресивни стратегии на англиски јазик, како и пејоративен јазик и метафора за да се пренесе општествено важна порака. Таа претставува симбол на поширокиот глобален политички дискурс на еднаквост и солидарност, коишто ги преминуваат географските граници. Оваа студија дава свој придонес за разбирање на современите протестни формации и на нивната дифузија во дигиталната ера, нагласувајќи го преобразувачкиот квалитет што го поседува јазикот во форма на национален протест.

Клучни зборови: теорија на дифузија, дискурс, семиотичка непослушност, протест

1 Introduction

Global protests as a semiotic model of civil disobedience have changed since protests began. From *my body, my choice* ('*moje ciało, mój wybór*') to *PiS*[1] *off*, *fuck off* (translation from the Polish '*wypierdalać*'), *fuck the government/Law and Justice party* (translation from the Polish '*jebać PiS*') and *Kaja the imposter*, the language of Polish protest has undergone transformation, as well, carrying with it semiotic significance. Not only has it taken on the sphere of youth language, creating a larger window of acceptance of vulgar expressions or profane language in public space, but it also draws heavily on well-known tropes and icons in pop culture to spread a message and create an inclusive culture. Although this is nothing new to social movements of protest, the particular notion of *semiotic disobedience* (Katyal 2006; Piekot 2016; Steciąg 2019) presents a field for analysis, within which the first stages of the diffusion of particular protest rhetoric is very recognizable (Chabot 2006; Chałupnik and Brookes 2002; Kloch 2022). This, in addition to the hashtag activism that has seen a natural global spread as a method of both civil rebellion and consciousness-raising (Bonilla and Rosa 2015), demonstrates a rapid-fire diffusion process, by which new means of protest are reaching Global scales, however through which it might be difficult to discern the germination point of certain protest strategies.

The concept of diffusion theory will be central to this paper, as the way that movements of public dissent take place signifies a widening berth of rhetorical protest methods entering the discourse from the West, and is indicative of a social evolution that the Internet has aided, the dissemination of discourses, as well as what has been deemed successful on the protest front. I aim to demonstrate that the Women's Strike protests in Poland (which took place in 2016, as well as between 2020 and 2021) have taken much from the American protest movements, such as The Women's March on Washington (2017) and the Black Lives Matter movement (2014 to the present) to contain the stance that has been viewed as successful in promoting equality and subjected institutionalised discrimination (in this case sexism and racism) to criticism on both local and global levels. The concept of diffusion will be used to present how Poland, as a local site, has taken from more recent protest rhetoric seen in the West, which is located within rhetoric that uses the Internet and symbols of youth culture to disseminate socially significant messages.

What is novel in the way that protest tactics and strategies have evolved is their application of different, bolder rhetorical strategies as a method of demonstrating strong disagreement with government rulings, in this case, the tightening of abortion bans. This paper aims to show the pertinence of understanding the important role of semiotics in the transnational treatment of the subject of social movement.

1.1 Theoretical considerations

In modernity, the Internet has changed what is possible for online users to achieve, providing widespread access to strategies exemplified in other national or cultural contexts. The term *diffusion* has been defined in social theory as what Simmons, Dobbin, and Garrett (2006: 787) have stated to be "[i]nternational policy diffusion occurs when government policy decisions in a given country are systematically conditioned by prior policy choices made in other countries."

The concept of transfer of an object from *transmitter* to *adopter* (in this case, of protest repertoire used) is equally important in the discussion of protest methods and diffusion.

1 PiS or PIS is an acronym for Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, ('Law and Justice'), a right-wing populist and national-conservative political party in Poland.

There is a problem with looking for cultural and structural similarities between the so-called transmitters and adopters, because it underestimates the importance of collective identity in getting movements going.

Four types of diffusion processes have been named, including *reciprocation*, *accommodation*, *adaptation*, and *contagion*, and what is known as *classical diffusion theory* assumes that diffusion proceeds from stage to stage until an innovation is either implemented or rejected, and this takes place in the following stages. Each of these stages has been described within the context of current semiotic trends, as well:

1. *The knowledge stage,* in which the potential adopter becomes aware of an innovation for the first time (such as through the mass media) (Chabot 2002). The question of whether the initial awareness motivates a potential adopter (in our case, the protesters on the Polish Women's Strikes of 2015 and 2020/2021) to seek more knowledge on the innovation that is called into question. During this stage, the formation of either a favorable or unfavorable attitude towards innovation is recognised; in the case of the use of hashtag activism and semiotic stances for movements to bring about change, the one in question has been viewed positively, for it is a tool that is readily available and ubiquitous, and also tends to breach the grasp of censorship.
2. *The persuasion stage* regards the process by which a potential adopter interacts with interpersonal networks (trustworthy opinion leaders) in order to acquire information about both the attributes and faults of the innovation as well as the processes that surround it. Here, I deem this stage as lacking necessity in the case of the strategies used during the Women's Strikes protests in Poland, as the online space leaves very little space for persuasion in the face of opposition of oppression. This can be considered to be melded with the decision stage.
3. *The decision stage,* which is the adoption or rejection of the process (Chabot 2002). Here I argue that this may be undertaken subconsciously, through the observation and adoption of a wave of trends that are linked to universal methods of discursive practice.
4. *The implementation stage*, which is the translating of a new idea into actual practice. In the case of the semiotic methods of carrying out protest and social movements, this is most visible through the hashtag activism, meme activism and utilisation of social media to spread awareness globally (Chabot 2002).
5. In *the confirmation stage,* the adopting group reassesses whether the innovation meets expectations and either decides to prolong or discontinue implementation (Chabot 2002). This is also visible in the prolonged effect of online and semiotic protest tactics that take place on the ground.

These observations have been based on what is known as classical diffusion theory, which posits that diffusion follows regular patterns. This following of regular patterns, however, is not the case when it comes to the diffusion of protest rhetoric in the Women's Strikes and women's protests of Poland, similarly to what Chabot (2002) observed when looking at the influence of the Gandhian repertoire on the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. Although what is currently observable in the public sphere, both locally and globally, constitutes something quite new as of today and presents new material on quicker diffusion that takes place from the West and transfers onto more local scenes with the help of the internet.

1.2 Diffusion in the contemporary world

The concept of diffusion, although used to illustrate the impact of the Gandhian peaceful protest movements on the civil rights movement (Chabot 2002), is still very much applicable in the 21st-century perceptions of protest and what has impacted the way that they arise and develop. Protest and social movements are seen to bring about "the emergence of new collective identities" (Della Porta 2013: 11). One may consider the globalisation of movement rhetoric as intrinsically involved in the process:

> While a traditional class discourse and an ideological vision of the Left were problematic given domestic but also transnational trends, the movements contributed to the spreading of an alternative language, bridging social and cultural concerns. In action, during the protest campaigns, a new "spirit" emerged, giving rise to a sense of empowerment that often lasted beyond the campaigns. Contentious politics contributed, in this way, to the reshuffling of political cleavages and the emergence of new norms – although with different degrees of success as latecomers rode the protest wave. (Della Porta 2013: 11)

In the current digital age, protest has taken upon itself the dispersion of ideas and manifestations of collective thought in a much different form than what has been currently known. The current state of protest is very much interdiscursive (van Dijk 1996; Wodak and Meyer 2009), referring to the various tropes and rhetorical memos that are available to the public, and understood within cultural bounds, metaphorical in their message and available to the workings towards a certain goal (Wiggins 2019).

Of course, the West has been seen to dominate in the area of pop culture, including the dominance of the English language as a cusp of authority in the field of protest discourses and semiotic types, yet the status of English as a *lingua franca*, or as a global language, also makes these discourses and actions more accessible on the global scale (Melitz 2016; Pennycook 2009). Individuals are now able to demonstrate more power than ever before, as they are equipped with social media and other communication technologies that amplify personalised messages across time and space without the assistance of organisations (Bennett and Segerberg 2012). This makes it easier for collective unification to take place and spread protest tactics.

Where diffusion in contemporary protest is concerned, the stages at which protest type is adopted occurs rather rapidly, and rather latches onto the already existing forms of manifestation, enriching them to work to the favour of the protesters, through interdiscursive practices which act to create a community and exclude the governing bodies which are seen as oppressors. I will demonstrate that this form of civil disobedience is enacted through several rhetorical means, which have been propelled into the public sphere on the example of the West.

In short, both offline and online protests, in their various forms, may be perceived as participation in the collective unity building with the social context of social movements of unrest against government acts or decisions, through pop culture (Bendyk 2012: 9–19). Diffusion also pertains to the methods of on and offline protests that have occurred within the last two decades.

1.3 Social semiotics and protest: A new civil disobedience

Social semiotics has been said to take on a social agenda and that "as society changes, new semiotic resources and new ways of using existing semiotic resources may be needed" (van Leeuwen 2005: 26). This concept is fundamental in light of the growing interdisciplinary character of research on social issues in sociolinguistics, as well as communication studies. According to van Leeuwen (2005: 2), "… social semiotics is not 'pure' theory, not a self-contained field. It only comes into its own when it is applied to specific instances and specific problems, and it always requires immersing oneself not just in semiotic concepts and methods as such but also in some other field."

The literature on social issues and semiotics is rich in its development, including work on the process and effect of protest music in creating new discourses and the dynamics surrounding social issues, including racism, sexism, and homophobia (Richardson 2017). I refer to *semiotic disobedience* as an all-encompassing term for the treatment of the subject of the various visual and discursive strategies that are present in the protest movements of the women's protests in Poland in 2016 and 2020-2021.

The social semiotics of protest have also undergone some study in the Polish context, with the anti-ACTA protests and what they entailed for a new type of protest agenda (Chałupnik and Brookes 2022; Nowak 2016), involving more social semiotic strategies through CMC. Despite this fact, the research regarding civil disobedience in the public sphere, where political turmoil is concerned, has not seen much work in the area of semiotic study in particular (DeCook 2018).

What van Leeuwen (2005) terms 'semiotic resource' is key to social semiotics, with its origins in the work of Halliday (1978: 192) who argues that language is a resource for "making meanings". Not only language is used for communicative purposes (where in the case of protest, communicating specific ideas and communicating social thought come to mind), but other signs as well, including the visual production of metaphor, the use of images, facial expressions and gestures, and the use of discourse that is specifically associated with ideas and ideologies (van Leeuwen 2005).

Semiotics, as the study of signs, including linguistic signs, acts as a harbinger of identity formation, including collective identity (DeFina 2010), thus making a very powerful tool in bringing about change after protest. This makes way for the creation of discursive transformation that has in mind the rallying against social oppression in many societies. The case of Poland and the protests against bans on abortion are examples of how semiotic discursive means are utilised to strengthen the bonds of lay citizens to take a stand for change.

As illustrated in the points regarding semiotic development in culture, a new arena has emerged; one which propels and maintains vectors of social change. As a concept, semiotic disobedience can be compared to *semiotic democracy,* which "enables the audience, to a varying degree, to 'resist', 'subvert', and 'recode' certain cultural symbols to express meanings that are different from the ones intended by their creators, thereby empowering consumers, rather than producers" (Katyal 2006: 490–491).

Semiotic disobedience encompasses various visual, discursive, and artistic practices to express opposition to political action and human injustice. Similarly to the way that previous discussions on the issue of civil disobedience have focused on the necessity to challenge laws and governing decisions, younger generations speaking out against social injustice today seek to "alter existing intellectual property by interrupting, appropriating, and then replacing the passage of information from creator to consumer" (Katyal 2006: 491). Semiotic disobedience uses the intertextual plane to deliberately recreate intellectual property and symbols through

discursive expression. This can be seen in several examples in the West, which have been illustrated in section 2 below.

1.4 Women's March on Washington, *Black Lives Matter*, and the age of the Internet

On January 21, 2017, the Women's March on Washington took place, constituting a worldwide protest on the day after Donald Trump's inauguration to presidency, protesting not only against sexist statements made by the president, but also against the misogynist ideologies that lay behind his discourse. An estimated 5 million people took part in the marches all over the globe (Weber et al. 2018). The demonstration was held in opposition to the deportment and political positions of the then-president and its goals were to protect the rights and safety of women, the LGBTQ+ community, to uphold disability rights, and maintain racial equality, among others.

In their analysis, Weber et al. (2018) observed themes of unity, resistance, sexual symbolism, defining and critiquing of feminism and criticism of Trump as leading discourses in the protest rhetoric of the 2017 protests. They state that "although the main objective of the march was ostensibly to disseminate the message 'that women's rights are human rights', many protesters arrived bearing signs that suggested personalised interpretations of the protest march and their opposition to recently inaugurated President Donald Trump" (ibid: 2290). They also discovered metaphors of war within the discourse. The patterns demonstrate a similarity and even lead-in to the types of protest strategies that are presented in the Women's Strike protests in Poland. Other studies have shown that hashtag activism was a catalyst for change in the affective discursive rhetoric (McDuffie and Ames 2021).

In arguing that the Women's Strike movement in Poland has taken from various social movements that have taken on new forms, especially with the application of digital technologies and the Internet in aiding the formation of such, it is important to keep in mind other movements that spread their cause through the digital sphere.

Although the *Black Lives Matter* (BLM) Movement demonstrated some use of profanity in its protest discourse, what might be considered a rhetoric of peace was more pervasive. References to children's book such as Dr. Seuss were present at the Women's March on Washington in March 2016. Semiotic practices were visible in the online and offline domains where the BLM movement and protests were concerned, from the year 2014 to the present. As an example, Carney (2016) investigated the prominent and significant role that social media plays in the formation of social movements. The author demonstrates the use of "Twitter as an emerging public sphere and studies the hashtags "#AllLivesMatter" and "#BlackLivesMatter" as contested signs that represent dominant ideologies" (ibid: 180). Other studies have cited the importance of the Internet and social media in spreading awareness on racial injustice, encouraging people on the ground to take action, as well as spreading news about the events surrounding the protests (Cox 2017). The use of the hashtag was essential in expanding the framing of protest movements within an online and more global environment, and in current protests, other semiotic strategies related to youth culture in Poland are visible in the rhetoric, demonstrating a rapid transnational spread. The use of the Internet has been noted as a way to advance cyber-protest rhetoric, raising awareness of movements on a global level, due to the fact that protest discourse has been broadened on the whole (Mann 2018).

2 The Women's Strike in Poland

In 2016, Poland saw some of the largest protests ever to take place on a national scale. In 2020 and 2021, yet more records were beat, even with the Covid-19 pandemic under tow and a national lockdown set in place. In the case of what led to the 2020-2021 protests, the ruling of the constitutional tribunal to ban abortion in the case of the fetus having a [severe] disability or incurable illness (often meaning immediate death after birth). The ruling was brought about by the leaders of the Law and Justice party and stated that abortions in such cases are unconstitutional and thus a 1993 Act permitting abortion in the case of deformation or severe disability of the fetus being overturned. On October 22, 2020, a decision of 11-2 announced that such a ruling was justified on the grounds that human dignity and the fetal right to life be protected, as this was considered to be in line with the Polish Constitution. On the same day, street protests began to take place in various cities across Poland and continued throughout the weekend, and this is where the discourses were introduced. With a global pandemic in full swing, other strategies of protest were also implemented, again heavily semiotic in their enactment.

To link the diffusion model with modern protest strategies, I have drawn on examples taken from the photographs of protest signs found on an Instagram page called *Transparenty z Protestów* ('*Picket signs from the protests*'). The ones chosen for the present analysis have been categorised to illustrate how semiotic disobedience takes place on various levels, including through the use of English as a global language, in part to attain a greater audience and wider global outreach, the use of metaphor to target the government as an oppressive system,[2] the use of vulgar expressions and profanity as an act of linguistic rebellion to symbolise breaking away from norms that might hold its users within the grasp of feeling socially controlled, and finally the category of cultural tropes which are representative of the large participation on the part of younger generations in the protests. The reference to cultural tropes in expression vary from the actual protest signs' reference to pop culture, to the use of memes on the internet as an act of online (computer-mediated discourse type) enactment of protest against the decisions of governing bodies.

The provided examples only offer a qualitative perspective on how a protest is being carried out in a digital age as considered by scholars in the field of computer-mediated communication and digital communication studies (Herring 2008). There were many such protest methods that would fit a semiotic model of analysis, including the strike symbol of the thunder bolt itself (hung on window panes of those in isolation during the pandemic), emblematic references to mythological figures, dance choreographies, and protest songs dispersed on various social media sites such as Instagram, Tik-Tok, and Facebook. The ones chosen for the purpose of the analysis have been categorised for their linguistic semiotic means and for what they communicate as far as expressiveness is concerned.

Semiotic examples and the incorporation of multimodal analysis to the investigation of analogous content are necessary to illustrate what I mean by the rendering of protest symbolism through linguistic and semiotic means, for one. Of course, these types of movements were not just adopted from the West, which is why it is difficult to place their advent in accordance with the linear pattern presented in the classical diffusion theory model. The anti-ACTA online

2 In sociolinguistic terms, these tactics or strategies are described as indirect, for they utilise pragmatic inference on the part of those interacting with the discourse to be interpreted in such a way that it is understood. However, as these rhetorical or discursive strategies may be described in their propensity to bring about change, they can be considered direct strategies of protest, yet novel in their presentation.

content that was published and proliferated by internet users was high on the social media agenda of the year 2012 (Nowak 2016; Szafraniec 2014).

The aim of the present paper is to investigate how the phenomenon of diffusion can be viewed as the way that current protest rhetoric takes from other movements that utilise the Internet and cultural symbolism to create a unified youth culture symbolism of uprising against oppression. This demonstrates a broader method of utilizing tactics which take from the current digital age and puts them to use in the protest environment. The examples taken into consideration for analysis have been annotated for the date that they were published on the Instagram page *Transparenty z Protestów*.

2.1 The globalisation of protest through English as a *lingua franca*

The English language is a manifestation of globalisation (Pennycook 2009). Some strategies of the use of English within the global protest repertoire occur through hashtag activism in the online sphere, or through the use of English catchphrases or slogans in the physical domain of the demonstrations on the streets. Of interest here are those examples taken from the protest signage found in the images online. Some examples of slogans in English have been enumerated in (1)– (6):

(1) *Ah, I love the smell of POSRANY RZĄD in the morning!* (6.01.2023)
'Ah, I love the smell of a SHITTY GOVERNMENT in the morning!'

Example (1) could be an indirect reference to the quote "I love the smell of napalm in the morning," which comes from the iconic 1979 film *Apocalypse Now* directed by Francis Ford Copolla. This reference could possibly denote the harm that the government has caused Polish citizens.

(2) *Boomers, go to hell* (4.01.2021)

(3) *FriEND, girlfriEND, boyfriEND, Only jebanie PiSu I Konfederacji has no END.* (2.01.2021)
'FriEND, girlfriEND, boyfriEND, only screwing PiS and The Confederation Party has no END.'

(4) *Have Sex, Hate Sexism* (31.12.2020)

(5) *Orgasms, not oppression* (31.12.2020)

Some of the choices made to use English in slogans reflect the importance of alliteration, which would not have been translatable in Polish. In other words, the alliteration would have been lost had the slogan been written in Polish, perhaps with something along the lines of *uprawiaj seks, znienawidź seksizmu* ('*have sex, hate sexism*). Example 5 also uses the rhetorical strategy of alliteration to draw attention to the problem of the sexual oppression of women in Poland.

(6) *What the PiS of shit* (25.12.2020)

The use of English as a global language in protest rhetoric is of interest in this case, as it showcases the globalisation of protest strategies, as well as a broadening of similar strategies that reflect transnational diffusion. Additionally, English protest signs (including those that incorporate code-switching between English and Polish) are symbolic of the generational divide between Millennials and Generation Z (Gen Z), and the older generations to whom more conservative rhetoric has been ascribed (Budzanowska-Drzewiecka 2010; Ożóg 2017; Przybylska 2009). It is additionally important to note that in the examples given above, the recurring themes of gender and sexuality are also expressed in English, although they refer to Polish realities of social oppression and the fall of the conservative political faction.

2.2 Metaphor and protest signage

A metaphor is "a figure of speech that implies comparison between two unlike entities, as distinguished from simile, an explicit comparison signaled by the words 'like' or 'as' " (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2024: online). Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) seminal study took the idea of the metaphor even further, applying it to a cognitive linguistic view, stating that human thought processes occur with reference to other phenomena in the world, making that metaphor is ever present in our everyday lives. They demonstrated that "metaphor is pervasive both in thought and everyday language" (Kovesces 2002: viii). This is also true of the rhetoric of protest, which utilises metaphor to illustrate social attitudes towards and evaluation of government actors. In the case of the following examples, Jarosław Kaczyński, the leader of the political faction PiS and Deputy Prime Minister at the time, and the conservative, religious organisation *Ordo Iuris* are mentioned[3]. In example (7), the term *kaczka* ('duck') refers to Kaczyński, who has been regarded as an ultra-conservative figure, as well as a symbol of the oppression of women (Marchlewska et al. 2017).

(7) *Jesteśmy w **zoo**, że słuchamy **kaczki**?* (12.01.2021)
'Are we at the zoo, and is that why we need to listen to a duck?'

(8) *Wszystkim potrzebna **szczepionka** na ORDO IURIS* (13.01.2021)
'Everyone needs a vaccine against ORDO IURIS'

Examples (7) and (8) use metaphorical references to Poland as a zoo, notably an uncomfortable, loud place and the organisation Ordo Iuris as a life-threatening virus. The reference to vaccinations could be an allusion to the scepticism towards COVID-19 vaccines that was associated more with conservative beliefs, but also reflects negative sentiment towards the organisation. These examples also illustrate the discursive tactics of protest in the context of the Women's Strike protests that were taking place all over Poland.

2.3 Profanity in protest signage

Another rhetorical strategy found to play a role in the semiotic expression of rebellion and present in the 2020- and 2021-women's protests taking place all over Poland is the novel strategy of profanity or so-called vulgar expressions as popular and marking protest slogans, which mark

3 The Ordo Iuris Institute for Legal Culture has been described as an independent legal think tank, which works to promote and protect the so-called "legal culture [in Poland] based on respect for human dignity and rights" (ordoiuris.pl).

a new strategy of rhetoric in the public sphere on such a scale, overall. Several examples of Polish slogans have been provided below as illustrations in examples (9)–(11).

(9) *Wypierdalać* (7.11.2020)
'Fuck off'

(10) ***Jebać*** *PiS* (7.11.2020)
'Fuck the Law and Justice Party'

The above examples (9) and (10) are classic examples of the rhetoric that represents the Women's Strike. This use of profanity has been noted as a strong affective response to the Law and Justice party's abortion laws, which were regarded as deeply anti-choice in their ideology. Example (11) refers to Jarosław Kaczyński's pet cat, which has been constructed by some protesters to be a hostage of the politician.

(11) *Kot może zostać, rząd może* ***wypierdalać*** (30.12.2020)
'The cat can stay, the government can get the fuck out'

There has been much criticism of the language of the movement, which from a sociolinguistic perspective demonstrates that the emotive forms of such expressive language is used to communicate stronger messages, even in itself being used metaphorically.

Research on profanity in Poland has also made a connection between the formation of youth cultures through linguistic means and the age and gender of the participants in such (sub)-cultures (Mróz and Szulc 2009). This additionally demonstrates an evolution in the way that citizen anger is expressed where oppression and inequality are concerned, following the line of semiotic democracy, and transforming into an activist rhetoric that seems more radical in its underpinnings.

2.4 Cultural tropes in the discourse of signage

The final category of the analysis is that of the cultural references which have in mind both the community-building tactics mentioned earlier, as well as the exclusion of what has been named *dziadersi*, the Polish equivalent of 'Boomers' (Meisner 2002). This is particularly interesting, as it highlights a demographic of youth culture highly engaged in the women's protests. Youth culture, as represented in language, has been investigated from interaction perspectives, as well as from discursive points of view, demonstrating that age is a significant factor in co-constructing a sociolect that delineates people from older and younger generations (Ożóg 2017).

References to popular memes and Internet language include the examples (12)–(17):

(12) *Kaja Godek morsuje w Jacuzzi* (28.01.2021)
'Kaja Godek goes winter swimming in a jacuzzi'

Example (12) is a reference to the phenomenon of winter swimming (or winter diving), which took off in popularity in the same winter that the protests were taking place. The activity has been known to represent a person's level of stamina. Here, it is suggested that Kaja Godek, a very recognizable pro-life activist, does not, in fact, go winter swimming. This could either be

a comment about her weight, as winter swimming is said to help a person burn more calories, or her lack of stamina.

(13) *Jarek rzuć wszystko i wyjedź w Bieszczady* (7.01.2021)
'Jarek, drop everything and go to the Bieszczady mountains'

Example (13) is an allusion to the meme which claims that when life becomes difficult, it is best to go to the Bieszczady mountains. The examples (14) and (15), demonstrate negative attitudes to the Law and Justice Party, denoting its members as old (either old enough to remember cooking sausages in a kettle or old enough to not understand memes).

(14) *PiS gotuje parówki w czajniku* (7.01.2021)
'PiS cooks its sausages in an electric kettle'

(15) *PIS nawet memów nie rozumie* (27.12.2020)
'PIS doesn't even understand memes'

These examples demonstrate the youth discourse present in the protest strategies, namely those that draw on computer-mediated communication and digital discourses, in order to build community with fellow Polish protestors. They also demonstrate more global references to encompass the globality of the issues that are contested. In the discourse of the analysed protest signage, references to pop songs and popular tropes from pop culture are also presented. The indirect reference to popular memes in online discourse, movies, songs, and computer games are among the various strategies used by the protestors, as shown in example (16), which marks the generational difference between the targeted politicians and the protesters, through the reference to Britney Spears. The reference to Jarosław Kaczyński in example (17) is expressed in tandem with reference to pop culture, namely, knowledge of the popular song "Hit the Road Jack" by Ray Charles.

(16) *PiS you are toxic* (8.01.2021)

(17) *Hit the road, duck and don't you come back no more* (11.12.2020)

These examples are only a few which demonstrate the references to popular culture made in the protest discourse, which in turn leads to a demographic of more young people taking part in the protests. It shows another interesting turn in the protest rhetoric strategies, which were already seen in the Black Lives Matter movement (2014-present) and partially in the Women's March on Washington discourses (2016/2017).

3 Conclusions

The presented analysis, in its application of diffusion theory to the understanding of new models of protest, has attempted to demonstrate the proliferation of social movements across the world from a global perspective and a widening, global political discourse of equality and solidarity through the aid of computer-mediated communication. This is an important aspect for twentieth-century work on the subjects of protest, movements, and social responsibility to consider. The protest strategies of the Polish,Women's Strikes of 2016, 2020 and 2021 were not

novel in protests in the United States, demonstrating a convergence of methods by which public dissent is exercised. As a concept, semiotic disobedience presents specific discursive strategies by which public unrest is signified.

The strategies of expressing semiotic disobedience named in the presented paper, albeit only based on text, demonstrate a new wave of even stronger social unrest present in various discourses of protest globally. It is, however, especially visible in the context of the Women's Strikes protests. The fact that these types of protest strategy occur in various places of the globe tie in the role of social diffusion as a process of disseminating action on a larger scale.

Such effects of the waves of protest formation through diffusion are visible in the proliferation of protest rhetoric and tactics of opposition against the government that glean symbols of youth culture from the Internet, including youth-laden discursive devices (such as a wider acceptance of vulgar language in the public sphere) and pop culture symbols. The protest stances have visibly taken on a more symbolic dimension, even when language is more expressive, radical, and, in some instances, of a perceivably aggressive nature.

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