

# Dissent by Design: A Multimodal Study of 2019 Women's March MY Protest Signs

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**Abstract**—The power of texts and visuals in the repertoire of protests – in both its production and consumption – allows protest movements to not only spread their message faster and mobilise support, but also promote active engagement in the public sphere. The present study examined multimodal discourse of protest by analysing textual and visual resources in protest signs used to express and negotiate feminist ideology at the 2019 Women's March MY in Kuala Lumpur. Following Kress & van Leeuwen's Visual Grammar (2006) and van Leeuwen's Social Actor Network (2008), three themes of the march were selected for multimodal analysis. Findings of the study show that multimodal representations through verbal and visual resources vary in its salience across different themes – where some protest signs lean more towards texts in conveying its messages with minimal visuals, others show a higher reliance on textual and visual convergence to convey meaning as well as to bait the attention of readers. Weighing in on the Malaysian feminist discourse, this study puts forth the potential of multimodal strategies through verbal and visual resources in conveying feminist messages and negotiating social change through the act of protest.

**Index Terms**—social movement, slogan, protest sign, visual grammar, multimodality

## I. INTRODUCTION

In present day Malaysia, the public's ambivalence towards feminism and the fight for women's rights in Malaysia prevails – mainly rooted in the common misconception that the movement is an exclusively western-borne ideology. The clashing attitudes – both positive and negative – towards feminism and the women's rights movement in Malaysia were aptly captured by the 2019 Women's March MY which took place in Kuala Lumpur. The media reported over a thousand people from all walks of life coming together in solidarity to march for women's rights in conjunction with International Women's Day. Women's Aid Organisation (WAO) and Sisters in Islam (SIS) were among the women's groups present alongside activists, students, and members of the public – with the set of demands calling for elimination of gender discrimination, a ban on child marriage, an end to violence against women - reinforcing women's rights in all spaces and pushing for equal opportunities and wages (Yong, 2019). The event itself was met with an uproar of disapproval from religious and political parties, with a backlash going as far as calling it “a misuse of democratic space” by a ministry official (Radu, 2019) due to the controversial inclusion of LGBT issues. It is reasonable to presume the discourse of women's rights in Malaysia – considered taboo by some – as a form of negotiation for enacting social change with regards to women's issues. Alongside chanted slogans like “End child marriage”, “Stop Sexism” and “Go Die Patriarchy”, the march displayed over hundreds of protest signs surrounding women's issues, which is the point of interest of this study.

As proposed by Condit and Lucaites (1993), the analysis of slogans in political discourse may provide deeper insights on how social and political problems are constituted and negotiated through political discourse. Signs serve as powerful “mediational means” (Scollon, 2001), as it conveys many important messages in the act of protest, which deserves scholarly attention (Kasanga, 2014). Multimodally, with regards to the potential of visual images in relation to the repertoires of protests (e.g., images, memes, photographs, posters, videos), Milner (2013) argued that the production and consumption of images in participatory media helps new protest movements to not only escalate their message faster and mobilise support, but also promote active participation in the public sphere.

The present study acknowledges the following three in building its premise of inquiry: the conflicting acceptance and attitude towards the advocacy of women's rights in Malaysia, the lack of analysis on feminist discourse in the local literature, and the capacity of multimodal resources of protest signs and slogans in conveying dissent. This study serves as a point of intersection in examining how languages – both textual and visual – are mediated by those who engage in the advocacy of women's rights via protests. The present study aims to look at the multimodal representation of the language of dissent in the protest signs at the 2019 Women's March MY.

### A. Social Movements and Protests

Social movements, as Jasper (2009) defined it, are “*sustained and intentional efforts to foster or impede social changes, primarily outside the normal institutional channels encouraged by authorities*” (p. 4451) – one among the many definitions that settle onto a form of power struggle. It emerges following the collective desire of the people for the same change, whereby a systemic structure exists to mediate the desire of the public (Blumer, 1969; Mauss, 1975; McCarthy & Zald, 1977; Tilly, 1978). Protests, on the other hand, are the materialisation of social movements. Both terms have been used interchangeably in the literature. The relative distinction between the two can be seen in the sense that protests serve as the main form of communication of social movements with their intended audience (Tratschin, 2016), and is perceived as a set of political actions that include strikes, petitions, sit-ins, and more (Keren, 2006).

Observing the connection between language and ideology through the lens of power dynamics and the act of disruptive protests, Bekar (2015) posits that English is used to practice power balance – whereby the oppressed attempts to exert or seize power to further their ideologies through an act that deliberately disrupts and inconveniences the system the authorities, who holds power granted by said system.

The impact of social movements and protests, however, exists on a spectrum – where its most extreme implication would take form in revolutions and collapse of the system, the minimal expectation that entails an act of protest is to facilitate social change within the system. Social movements through its various realisations – from rallies to sit-ins and protests, both static and mobilised – depend on visibility to succeed. Achieving visibility goes beyond ensuring public attention to its key message and demands, it also inspires the masses to join the cause. Recognising visibility as a requisite for success in protests – whether to enact social change or to incite the downfall of a system – the visual and verbal language of dissent holds a certain weight of power in communicating key demands. The focal point of most studies concerning protest discourse has fixated on the impact of languages on the audiences (e.g., Sonntag, 2003; Frekko, 2009; Bassiouney, 2012; Lahlali, 2014; Bahrudin & Bakar 2022). Calibrating the focus onto the expressions of dissent within the context of the women’s rights movement in Malaysia, the present study seeks to contribute an analytical insight on the verbal and visual resources employed in the creation of protest signs, further looking into protesters’ multimodal strategies as a conscious choice to express their dissent to contest and negotiate the feminist ideology within the local community.

### *B. Feminism in Malaysia*

In Malaysia, feminism and the women’s rights movement has grown its roots since the nation’s pre-independence, but the present-day acceptance of the concept representing advocacy for women’s issues still varies among Malaysians in history. The perspective towards the concept of feminism, according to Rohana (1999), is viewed as a western ideal deemed unsuitable to the local community as women’s demands in Malaysia need to be conveyed with respect towards the state, family, and religion. The Malaysian feminist activism has well garnered its due recognition over the years, however the fight is often absorbed and marked under the banner of women’s struggles against discrimination and injustice. In other words, the typical Malaysian struggles are feminist, but are not branded nor recognised as such. This provides an understanding of the stigma around the term ‘feminism’ and words closely associated with it among Malaysians. Due to the misinterpretation of feminism being perceived as an unfitting, irrelevant western ideal, many Malaysian women are especially hesitant to identify themselves as feminists, and the advancement of any attempt henceforth by individuals and a coalition of women groups to elevate the status of women in Malaysia is compromised due to the reluctance to embrace feminism (Rohana, 1999). It is also worth noting that the multiracial and multiethnic nature of the Malaysian demographic plays into the compromised prospects for collaboration and alliance among women’s groups (Mohamed, 2000).

Mired in the academic discourse, local academicians have also sought to define just what ‘Malaysian feminism’ means but to no avail, which is why the question of what makes a feminist movement ‘Malaysian’ is still being negotiated and contested (Rohana, 1994). Debunking the need for an objectively singular identity, Ng, Maznah and Tan (2006) assert that various manifestations of feminism exist in Malaysia which instead acknowledges and accepts the differences along sub-ideological lines (Yusoh et al., 2018, Bakar, 2020; Noor et al., 2022). According to Shymala (1995), gradual acceptance of feminism in Malaysia shows that, as found in a survey, most Malaysian women do embrace a moderate or liberal form of feminism (Rohana, 1999). Stemming as early as Malaysia’s pre-independence, the persistent objective of the women’s rights and feminist movement in Malaysia had always been to liberate and uphold women above oppression. However, in its progression across history, its goals within politics, gender-based violence, as well as inequality oriented towards personal faith have all shifted in its emphasis.

Looking into the Malaysian feminist movement from a linguistic point of view, Alicia (2013) argues that the linguistic landscape of feminist discourse is influenced and conditioned by these historical and political conditions. Acknowledging the diversity of feminist manifestations in Malaysia, Ng et al. (2006) marked the trajectory of feminism in Malaysia within four phases throughout history: nationalist feminism, social feminism, political feminism, and market-driven feminism. Although the resources surrounding the development of the Malaysian feminist movement are fairly accessible in the literature, scholarly attention and analysis on the language use in feminist discourse in Malaysia are limited (Alicia, 2013). Merging the context of Malaysian feminism through the lens of language and ideology, the present study attempts to examine the use of multimodal strategies in protest signs to express dissent by participants of the 2019 Women’s March MY.

### C. *Multimodality in Protests*

Multimodality is described as employing two or more modes in meaning-making process, whereas modes are semiotic resources enabling realisations of discourses and various types of interaction and representation of social life (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001). Different semiotic modes are chosen and brought together from the range of available options and is expressed “according to the interests of a particular communication situation” (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001, p.22). Idiagbon (2014) examined the multimodality of images displayed by protesters against the Federal Government of Nigeria and the Nigeria Labour Congress Face Off with the aim of showing the inter-semiotic and semantic connection and coherence in the written and graphic meaning of the written mode. Using unedited video footages as empirical data, Day et al. (2018) undertook a multimodal study that covers a wider range of modality alongside the context of the protest performance in Cape Town, South Africa. Looking into the visual, aural, embodied, and spatial aspects, findings of the study conclude that moments of protests shift dynamically, and the enactments within it seem to be essential in the resistance to power, insurgence, cooperation, and legitimate or illegitimate actions as defined by official discourse.

From the perspective of physical protest posters as a medium of communication, Yanker (1970) asserts a clear reliance on visual and verbal representations for protest posters to invoke positive attitude and encourage reaction in its intended audience. Crawford (1979) adds that protest posters serve to project information and affect attitude. Perceived as rhetorical presentations made for public display, protest posters are salient in both its visual and verbal dimensions, often comprising captivating graphics and straightforward catchy phrases. Studying protest posters as multimodal rhetorical artifacts, Zhao (2017) explored the mutual connection between rhetorical purpose and multimodal concision in protest posters before and during the Québecois student movement in 2011 and 2012, refining the framework of multimodality while accounting for style sensitivity through an economy-of-sign based semiotic approach.

Accumulating insights from past studies analysing multimodality in protests while noting the lack of multimodal research pertaining to protest discourse within the women’s rights movement in Malaysia, the visual and verbal language used in Malaysian feminist activism becomes the point of interest in the present study.

## II. METHODOLOGY

Focusing on multimodal representation of dissent, the framework of visual grammar proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) and van Leeuwen’s Social Actor Network (2008) were used to examine verbal and visual realisations of selected themes of the march.

### A. *Data Collection Procedure*

At the 2019 Women’s March MY which took place on 8th March 2019 in Kuala Lumpur, the researcher captured as many images as possible protest signs of all types: cardboard signage, flags, and prints, from the start until the end of the event. Acknowledging the limitation of the researcher in photographing all signs while participating in the event, visual protest signs were also sourced online. Using the terms ‘Women’s March MY’, ‘#WomenMarchMY’, ‘Kuala Lumpur’ and ‘Perhimpunan Wanita’, signs, and posters were also searched on Twitter and Facebook daily for a week beginning 8th March 2019, to identify protest signs the researcher might have missed. Images of signs captured and uploaded by other participants were sourced with granted permission by the owners. Visual data sourced by the researcher herself through participation and online sources were merged and included in the analysis. Given the multimodal nature of protest signs, visual grammar framework (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) was used to examine the interplay of different resources (i.e. images and texts) observed in the protest signs to reveal semiotic connection and cohesion in the multimodal representation of dissent.

### B. *Data Analysis Procedure*

Employing a qualitative design following the Grounded Theory approach, a collection of images was used as the starting point, and themes and patterns of features were inductively identified and refined into categories for systemic examination. Individual protest signs were used as unit of analysis, whereby:

- (a) Each sign was visible and decipherable, and was excluded if otherwise
- (b) Two signs composing of the same words created by different movement members were analysed as two separate units
- (c) Multiple signs that appear together in a photographed image were analysed separately as individual units

The analysis of data focused on identifying and examining social actor representation as well as the visual elements used for semiotic cohesion by the protesters. In grouping the 270 protest signs into its respective themes of discourse, the study utilised the constant comparative method to compare sign messages with one another, which were then be clustered into groups based on their similarity. The different types of social actor representation were identified in each protest sign and the data was then quantified and tabulated by aspects of thematic categories, social actor representation (van Leeuwen, 2008) and visual analysis (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006; Bakar, 2015). The analytical approach chosen in the present study showed the emergence of multimodal representation patterns in selected protest themes through the interplay of textual and visual resources.

Hence, the present study aims to answer the following questions:

1. What are the emerging themes of 2019 Women's March MY protest signs?
2. How is multimodality represented by the protesters in conveying their messages of dissent at the 2019 Women's March MY protest signs?

### III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Acknowledging that the protesters' ways of meaning making is not exclusive to textual choices but also relies heavily on visuals to reinforce the delivery of the message forms the main crux of the analysis. Semiotic patterns in the protest signs were observed in the frame of multimodality, whereby textual components converged with visuals - pictures, fonts, and colour choices - in the construction of meanings (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1996, p. 81). In this study, our analysis intends to observe the interplay of textual components and images (pictures and drawings) to construe different themes of the march in the protest signs.

In the context of Women's March MY 2019, the prominent visual images that emerged alongside texts were of (1) women (2) raised fist, (3) body parts, (4) children, and (5) symbols. In such categories, specific signs used certain texts along with images or drawings to reinforce intended representational meanings. Some visuals were used to mirror its verbal counterparts to provide characterization, seen through drawings of women and children. Other visuals went further beyond as means of sensationalisation, evident in the drawings of bare breasts and other body parts, reflecting the objectivation of social actors in the texts. Aside from mirroring and sensationalising, some visuals also served to project ideology through iconology and symbols.

#### A. Common Themes of 2019 Women's March My Protest Signs

In exploring the themes of the protest sign messages brought by the protesters, signs were compared to one another, identified, and refined into respective thematic categories. Weber et al. (2018) argued that Women's March embodies the notion of a connective action, in which Bennet and Segerberg (2013) pinned as "*organisationally enabled connective action*" featuring "*networks of organizations sponsoring multiple actions and causes around a general set of issues in which followers are invited to personalize their engagement (more or less) on their own terms*" (p. 13). Protests and mobilisations in the era of individualised politics, according to Bennett (2012), always involves an array of issues prompted into the same protests through a widely shared, late modern-day spirit of diversity and inclusiveness. Additionally, with such individualised orientations, it results in the public's engagement with politics as an expression of personal hopes, lifestyles, and dissent against injustice (Gordon & Mihailidis, 2016).

With regards to Women's March MY 2019, the prompted issues were evident in the five demands nominated by the organisers of the event, serving as the underpinning action themes of the march. The multitude of issues framed into five main demands include:

1. To end violence based on gender and sexual orientation,
2. To abolish child marriage,
3. To ensure the rights of women to make choices over their bodies and lives
4. To ensure a dignified minimum wage of RM 1800
5. To destroy patriarchy and build a genuine democracy at all levels of society.

As far as personalised politics go, the political engagement of the public in Women's March MY can be seen as their own expression of dissent and dissatisfaction as well as personal hopes for social progress. Aside from the already broadly defined demands of the march, some slogans fall into seven additional themes which emerged in the analysis of the protest signs. With reference to the frames identified in Women's March on Washington (Weber et al., 2018), several emerging themes are similar and are adopted in the context of Women's March MY.

1. Unity and Solidarity for Women
2. Criticism of Misogyny
3. Defining and Criticising Feminism
4. Gender Equality
5. Identity
6. Rejection of Gender Norms
7. Women as Powerful Agents of Resistance

Among the emergent themes, a number of protest signs that did not fall into any of the identified themes were categorised as *sui generis* (i.e., unique, of its own kind, in a class by itself). Due to neither of its textual or visual resources bearing any familiarity to any specific themes, the interpretation of said protest signs solely relied on the context of the protest. Table 1 below breaks down the common themes of demand in Women's March MY 2019 protest signs.

TABLE 1  
COMMON THEMES OF 2019 WOMEN'S MARCH MY PROTEST SIGNS

Themes Of Demand	Frequency	Percentage	Examples
1. Women's Rights to Choices Over Their Own Body And Lives	47	17.53	<i>My Body My Choice</i> <i>Girls Just Want to Have Fundamental Human Rights</i> <i>My Uterus My Business</i>
2. Abolish Child Marriages	25	9.30	<i>Child Marriage Is Child Abuse</i> <i>Child Marriages Are Disgusting &amp; Nasty</i> <i>Child Marriage Is Child Damage</i>
3. End Violence Based on Gender and Sexual Orientation	23	8.58	<i>Criminalize Marital Rape</i> <i>End All Violence Based on Gender And Sexual Orientation</i> <i>We Have No Place for Harassers On Campus!</i>
4. Destroy patriarchy and build democracy at all levels of society	28	10.44	<i>Dismantle the Patriarchy</i> <i>Hulk Smash the Patriarchy</i> <i>Strike the Patriarchy Down</i>
5. Unity And Solidarity For Women	20	7.46	<i>I'm With Her</i> <i>Empowered Women Empower Women</i> <i>I Am A Strong Woman Because Strong Women Raised Me</i>
6. Criticism of misogyny	33	12.31	<i>Cat Calling Is Not A Compliment</i> <i>Fight Misogyny</i> <i>Sexism Does Not Spark Joy</i>
7. Defining feminism	13	4.85	<i>FEM.I.N.I.S.T: (Noun) 1. A Person Who Believes in The Social, Political, And Economic Equality of The Sexes</i> <i>Feminism Is for Everyone</i>
8. Gender equality	15	5.56	<i>Men of Quality Do Not Fear Equality</i> <i>People of Quality Do Not Fear Equality</i> <i>To Those Accustomed to Privilege Equality Feels Like Oppression</i>
9. Identity	7	2.59	<i>We Exist</i> <i>I Am A Feminist</i> <i>I'm Trans And I Exist</i>
10. Rejection of gender norms	11	4.07	<i>Boys Will Be <del>Boys</del> Feminists</i> <i>We Are Not Ovary-Acting</i> <i>Teach Your Sons</i>
11. Women as powerful agents of resistance	38	14.07	<i>Respect Existence Or Expect Resistance</i> <i>Women Don't Owe You Shit</i> <i>We Resist</i>
12. Sui generis	8	2.97	<i>I ♥Naps but I Stay Woke</i> <i>Tweet Others How You Want to Be Tweeted</i> <i>It's 2019 I Can't Believe I Still Have to Protest This</i>
TOTAL	268	100	

### B. Multimodal Representation of the Language of Dissent

Following Van Leeuwen's Social Actor Network (2008) and Visual Grammar (2006), the multimodal representation of dissent was explored according to common themes and the interplay of textual and visual elements as cohesive devices of meaning-making. Three themes were chosen to demonstrate the multimodal interplay of textual and visual elements in the creation of protest signs: (a) women's rights to choices over their own body and lives, (b) unity and solidarity for women, and (c) women as powerful agents of resistance.

#### 1. Women's Rights to Choices over Their Own Body and Lives

Textually, the narrative of one's rights and agency in choices was actualised through the use of possessive pronouns *my*, *her*, and *our* in their slogans. The theme regarding women's rights to choices over their own bodies and lives was explicitly conveyed with noun phrases that denoted choices, like "*My Body My Choice*" and "*My Clothes My Choice*" (see Table 2). Protesters also conveyed the demand for choice in the sign "*My Hips Are My Own, Not Just For Childbearing!*" – asserting their right to personal autonomy through the use of possessive determiner (*my own*), meant as a swipe to the patriarchal culture that controls women's personal choices in many aspects of their lives, often minimising women, and their bodies to its functional worth (childbearing). A similar narrative was presented ironically in the sign "*my body belongs to 1. my father 2. my husband 3. my child NEVER to me*", indicating a woman's right to her own body is rooted in kinship, marital, and maternal functions and relations, instead of a woman's own agency as an individual.



Figure 1 Signs for Women's Rights to Choices Over Their Own Body and Lives Incorporating Possession

Where some sample signs only employed capitalised caps onto contrasting colour choices, some protesters visually employed the narrative of choice and agency through individual differences – the choice to don or not to don the headscarf, or to style their hair unconventionally – all in which served to signal personal identity (see Figure 1).

TABLE 2  
VERBAL AND VISUAL ELEMENTS CONSTRUING WOMEN'S RIGHTS TO CHOICES OVER THEIR OWN BODY AND LIVES USING POSSESSIVATION

Thematic Category	Verbal Realisations	Visual Realisations
Women's Rights to Choices Over Their Own Body And Lives	1. Nouns 'body' and 'choice' 2. Somatisation of social actors, premodification of nouns with possessive pronouns; "her body" "my body" "my hips"	Depicted qualities and attributes: Hair styles, head gear, accessories

The visual representation of women's rights themes also constructed meaning in a sensationalised way with drawings of women's breasts. Figure 2 shows how protesters actively incorporated social actor representation via somatization, strategically paired with visuals of body parts.



Figure 2 Signs of Women's Rights to Choices Over Their Own Body and Lives Incorporating Somatization and Bodily Visuals

The phrase "Let My Nips Be Free" can be interpreted literally or figuratively – but essentially boils down as a callout to the culture of men controlling women's bodies on what they should wear, using breasts – the most sexualised body part of women – as the subject. The message can also be perceived as a swipe at the patriarchal culture that constantly sexualises women's bodies, which results in women being shamed for their clothing choices. Employing similar visuals, one protest sign reads "Still Not Asking For It", which aims to respond to the harmful, however very common commentary of sexual harassment victims "asking for it" regarding rape crimes, which perpetuates victim-blaming and further enables rape culture by normalising the crime and being apologetic of its perpetrators.



In the above collection of protest signs highlighting women's rights to choices over their own bodies, protesters employed the category of possessivated somatization in representing themselves as social actors in discourse (e.g. – *My Body, My Uterus, My Nips, My Vagina*). In their slogans, the act of reclaiming their rights to choices over their own bodies was apparent in the interplay between the two categories of Social Actor framework. The discussion of women's body parts, when isolated from the women themselves by others, can be deemed as sexual objectification. However, in voicing dissent, grounding their body parts as the subject of their slogans while asserting their rightful possession of their body parts through possessivation (insertion of possessive pronouns such as *my, her, ours*) is an act of reclamation from the protesters themselves. The interplay of textual strategy was also further reinforced with visuals of body parts to amplify the message, especially with drawings of bare breasts and the outline of a woman's bodily curves, things that are often sexualised in the media and society (see Table 3).

TABLE 3  
VERBAL AND VISUAL ELEMENTS INCORPORATING SOMATIZATION AND BODILY VISUALS

Thematic Category	Verbal Realisations	Visual Realisations
Women's Rights to Choices Over Their Own Body And Lives	Nouns of body parts Somatisation of social actors, premodification of nouns with possessive pronouns; "my nips" "our bodies" "my vagina" "my uterus"	Depicted qualities and attributes: Body shapes, bare breasts, vagina and uterus, raised fist

## 2. Unity and Solidarity for Women

The theme Unity and Solidarity for women were realised textually using association to represent social actors, seen through the preposition *with*, displaying a direct association between the activation of the protester (*I am*) and women of the society (*her*). Echoing messages of "*I'm With Her*" in Figure 3 below were frequently seen in the protest, all similarly accessorised with arrows pointing outwards, denoting their association and solidarity with the women present in the protest. The recurring phrase "*I'm with her*" makes up a prominent sub-theme in Unity and Solidarity for women: mainly co-opting and echoing Hillary Clinton's run for presidency tagline in 2016 with similar use of icons and symbols to signify the collective action of meaning making by the protesters in their mobilisation (Bennet & Segerberg, 2013).



Figure 3 Signs for Unity and Solidarity for Women Incorporating Activation, Association, and Arrow Visual

In the signs above (Figure 3), the textual and visual analysis showed social actor realisation through the first-person pronoun *I*, association via the preposition *with*, and the visual use of arrows. Where other slogans opted for classification and relational identification to represent social actors in their message of unity and solidarity (e.g. – *Women support women, Support our sisters*), the use of personal pronoun *I* reinforced agency, acting as a dynamic force of action in their slogan regardless of their gender, age, or social group. Bound by spatial boundaries of protest signs, the interplay of textual and visual choices also served as the protesters' stance in grounding their physical presence as alliance with other fellow women marching for their rights. Previous studies have suggested protests as deeply physical and sensual experiences – which serves as both collective and connective action mobilising bodies and senses in space (Fabricant & Postero, 2013; Sutton, 2010). Their presence itself lent further context to the message displayed on the protest sign, and this served as an act of reinforcement – that women are not alone in the fight for their rights, but women should also not be overshadowed by their allies in the fight for women's issues. The recurring use of outwards arrow complemented her and served to direct readers' attention to the women at the march voicing their dissent.

The textual and visual interplay uncovered the transformation of individual agencies (through the use of singular first-person pronoun *I* and singular third person pronoun *her*) which became a collective show of solidarity, echoed from one person to another; the pronoun *her* symbolised women in society in general instead of one specific person. The multiple arrows surrounding singular pronouns connoted unity and solidarity towards women as an entire group.

In this context, manifested intertextuality is leveraged by the protesters through the adoption of ideas, icons, symbols and imagery of fellow activists and movements, allowing them to deliver their message of support and dissent within the women's rights movement in Malaysia.

TABLE 4  
VERBAL AND VISUAL ELEMENTS CONSTRUING UNITY AND SOLIDARITY FOR WOMEN THROUGH ACTIVATION, ASSOCIATION, AND ARROW VISUALS

Thematic Category	Verbal Realisations	Visual Realisations
Unity and Solidarity with Women	Activation of social actors through the I-statement Verb clauses; relational process (being) Association of social actor realised by circumstances of accompaniment via prepositional phrase with "I'm with her"	Depicted action with vectors, iconography: Arrow icons pointing outwards

### 3. Woman as Powerful Agents of Resistance

In the emergent theme of Women as Powerful Agents of Resistance, Figure 4 showcases signs where the social actor is excluded by suppression. Protesters opted for agent deletion in constructing their dissent through nominalisation (e.g. – *Power To The Women*), and imperative sentences with covert subject (e.g. – *Rise Up Pussy Power*, *Fight Like A Girl*, *Respect Existence Or Expect Resistance*). Despite the deletion of agent via covert subject, protesters were also represented via classification, specifically by the female gender (*Women, Girls*) as well as its symbolism (*Pussy Power*). In some signs, this textual element was complemented by drawings of women, and in others by the female gender symbol (♀).

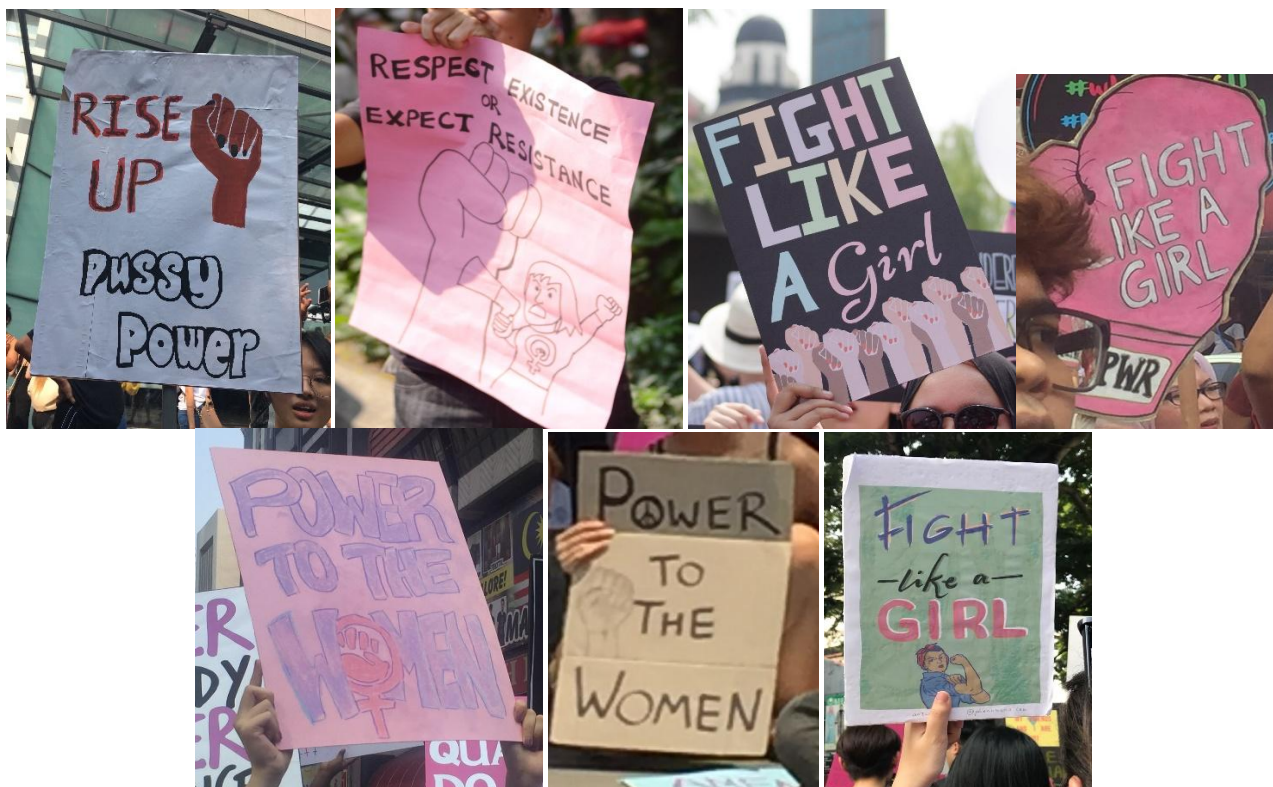


Figure 4 Signs for Women as Powerful Agents of Resistance Incorporating the Imperative Mood, Classification, and Visuals of the Femme Fist

The recurring phrase *Fight Like A Girl*, adopted from the popular #LikeAGirl campaign by the feminine hygiene company Always was echoed by the protesters in their signs to imply their explicit resistance in the fight for women's rights. Although adopted word for word, each protest sign was multimodally personalised in its own way while incorporating a shared visual – the femme fist. The femme fist was visually identified in multiple signs of resistance, which was appropriate given its historic context of the women's rights movement. Visually realised in different ways, one sign visualised the femme fist in a row of multiple women's hands of different skin tones raising their fists in



unison, another visualised the raised fist with a pink boxing glove which indicated a physical fight, and another through the graphic visualisation of Rosie the Riveter, a cultural icon representing female workers during World War II.

The femme fist was also seen in protest signs bearing the slogan *Power To The Women* – both incorporating the female symbol (♀); one was drawn on the wrist of a raised fist, in another the raised fist was superimposed into the circle of the female symbol (♀) (see Figure 4).

TABLE 5  
VERBAL AND VISUAL ELEMENTS CONSTRUING UNITY AND SOLIDARITY FOR WOMEN  
THROUGH THE IMPERATIVE MOOD, CLASSIFICATION, AND FEMME FIST VISUALS

Thematic Category	Verbal Realisations	Visual Realisations
Women as Powerful Agents of Resistance	Classification of social actors by gender “girl”, “women” and the somatic equivalent “pussy” Suppression of social actors by nominalisation “POWER TO THE WOMEN” Suppression of social actors by agent deletion via the imperative mood Verb clauses; material process (action), mental process (affection, cognition) “FIGHT LIKE A GIRL” “RISE UP PUSSY POWER” “RESPECT EXISTENCE OR EXPECT RESISTANCE”	Depicted qualities and attributes: Women, strong, loud Painted nails on raised fists Pink boxing glove Depicted action with vectors, iconography: Raised fist / femme fist, female symbol (♀)

Summarising the interplay of textual and visual resources in the selected themes above, specific texts or visuals appear to repeat across multiple protest signs, revealing the emergence of a pattern of multimodal representation. In representing meaning, some protest signs appear more text-oriented whereas others show a reliance on the merging of verbal and visual resources. Both textual and visual intertextuality was also identified across different themes, evident in echoing messages of “*I’m with her*” adopted from American politics as well as the femme fist symbol to signify feminist resistance, morphed into different forms as well as imposed into texts.

All in all, the public’s political engagement reflects their personal hopes and dissent against injustice despite their individual political orientations (Bahrudin & Bakar, 2022), and the shared visuals and symbols from one protest sign to another alongside the co-option of slogans from existing social and corporate activism signifies the protesters’ collective action of meaning-making in expressing dissent (Bennet & Segerberg, 2013).

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Revolving around current women’s issues in Malaysia, the Women’s March MY protest rightfully reflected the notion of individualised politics, prompting an array of social concerns through widely shared spirit of diversity and inclusiveness. Common themes of the march include the five demands nominated by the organisers of the event, which are (a) women’s rights to choices over their own body and lives, (b) abolish child marriages, (c) end violence based on gender and sexual orientation, (d) enforce a minimum wage of RM 1800, and (e) destroy patriarchy and build democracy at all levels of society. Revolving around the underpinning action themes of the march, personalised protest signs also revealed emergent themes distinct from the organised demands, which include: (a) unity and solidarity for women, (b) criticism of misogyny, (c) defining and criticising feminism, (d) gender equality, (e) identity, (f) rejection of gender norms, and (g) women as powerful agents of resistance.

Multimodality represented through verbal and visual resources existed on a spectrum of salience in the context of 2019 Women’s March MY. Where some protest signs were more text-oriented in conveying its messages with minimal reliance on visual resources, other protest signs showed a higher reliance on the incorporation of both textual and visual elements not only to convey meaning, but also to capture the attention of the readers. Women’s Rights to Choices Over Their Own Body and Lives showed a varied salience of textual and visual interplay, with a distinction between slogans that allowed more tangible visualisations of the subject (bodily autonomy) and slogans that conveyed intangible concepts more broadly interpreted (rights to life choices). The former could be seen from the use of objectivation (referral of social actors by body parts) visually reflected in the drawings of bare breasts, lips, and even the vagina and uterus. To contrast with the latter, protest signs were more text-oriented with a focus on possessivation of social actors to highlight the narrative of ownership (e.g. – *my choice, my life*, etc.). Vibrance of textual and visual interplay was also seen in Unity and Solidarity for Women, with visuals of women across protest signs. In protest signs expressing solidarity through the message “*I’m With Her*”, protesters complemented it with visuals of multiple arrows. Serving as a minimal visual representation compared to its textual counterpart, it fulfilled the association of social actors in a straightforward and concise way. The theme Women as Powerful Agents of Resistance comprised of symbols and drawings alongside assertive slogans of demand. Where protesters opted for the material process in its phrasal verbs (e.g. – *fight, rise, stop, smash*), the textual elements were paired with vibrant visuals of fists either raised upwards or

punching downwards. The classification of social actors (women) was also visually paired with the female gender symbol, as well as drawings of women.

The discourse of protest – specifically in the context of women’s rights movement in Malaysia and the 2019 Women’s March MY – projects the women’s personalised expression of dissent and dissatisfaction, which this research managed to capture through its multimodal realizations of protest signs. In uncovering the potential of multimodal resources in protest signs, the findings of this study recognise its twofold importance: that understanding multimodal interpretation is deemed significant on both the producers and viewers to create meanings through different modes in designing posters, and to interpret the meaning created through the interaction of different modes, according to its context. This study concludes with this humble insight into the Malaysian feminist discourse, particularly on the reading of protest signs and its multimodal representation in conveying feminist messages in the public sphere.

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