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ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Style usurpation and style reclamation

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Abstract
This paper examines two related phenomena: "style usurpation" and "style reclamation". Style usurpation occurs when members of morally problematic groups use independently existing style items as identity markers, resulting in these style items becoming publicly connected to these groups. Style reclamation occurs when people who aren't members of the respective morally problematic groups use these items to protest their usurpation, resulting in the public connection between these items and these groups getting sufficiently undermined, and without a public connection between these items and different morally problematic groups emerging. More specifically, the paper delineates the phenomenon of style usurpation, explores its underlying mechanisms, and highlights its effects. From this backdrop, it then explains how style reclamation can work and explores potential benefits, both on an individual and a societal level.

Keywords Style usurpation · Style reclamation · Speech acts · Social meaning

1 Introduction

Recent decades have seen a "social turn" in the analytic philosophy of language. The tools it provides have been fruitfully employed to examine various social phenomena, often of a morally problematic nature. Among other things, philosophers have examined (1) how members of disadvantaged groups can be systematically frustrated in their communicative attempts, (2) how language can be weaponised as slurs, hate speech or propaganda, (3) how it can be used to mask morally objectionable agendas,

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and (4) how speech itself can be used to oppress.[1] This paper follows in these footsteps while venturing into less familiar territory: drawing on insights from speech act theory, it examines how clothes and style items more generally can be co-opted by morally problematic groups and absorbed into their communicative arsenal, which effects this has, and how we might respond.[2]

Here are some examples to illustrate what I have in mind. In the early 2000s, clothes by British sports label *Lonsdale* were a known favourite of members of neo-Nazi groups. Because the brand name contains the letter combination "NSDA" - one letter short of "NSDAP", the abbreviation of the original name of the Nazi party – members of neo-Nazi groups had taken to wearing the brand to mark and communicate their endorsement of a fascist ideology (cf. e.g., Benton & Peterka-Benton, 2020: 13–14; Miller-Idriss, 2017: 55). Similarly, *New Balance* and *Fred Perry* have a history of being employed for these purposes – in the first case because the "N" can be read as an abbreviation of "Nazi" (cf. Miller-Idriss, 2017: 77), in the second case "because its logo – a wreath of laurel branches – evokes military insignia used by the NSDAP" (Miller-Idriss, 2017: 66). More recently, members of the far-right group "Proud Boys" have specifically adopted black *Fred Perry* polos with yellow stripes as identity markers, which has propelled the brand to halt sales of this garment in the USA and Canada (cf. Elan, 2020). Also, it's not just specific brands or individual items by these brands that are co-opted in this way. For instance, members of neo-Nazi groups have long used black combat boots combined with white laces to signal their ideological colours (cf. Miller-Idriss, 2017: 2). Moreover, members of different far-right groups have relied on variously instantiated symbols to flag their group membership – symbols often taken from other traditions and cultures. Here, the swastika or *Thor's Hammer* come to mind (cf. Heller, 2000; Quinn, 1994; Miller-Idriss, 2017: 68, respectively).

These are all examples of what I call "style usurpation":

> Style usurpation occurs when members of morally problematic groups use independently existing style items as identity markers, resulting in these style items becoming publicly connected to these groups.[3]

[1] Here are but a few examples. On (1) cf., e.g., Hornsby (1995); Hornsby and Langton (1998); Langton (1993), Langton and West (1999); Maitra (2009); Kukla and [writing as R.] (2014). On (2) cf., e.g., Anderson and Lepore (2013); Bolinger (2017); Gelber and McNamara (2016); Hom (2008); Parekh (2012); Popa-Wyatt and Wyatt (2018); Nunberg (2018). On (3) cf., e.g., Bräuer (2023); Khoo (2017); Mendelberg (2001); Saul (2017, 2018, 2021); Stanley (2015). And on (4) cf., e.g., Langton (1993); McGowan (2009, 2018, 2019).

[2] As other authors have noted, analytic philosophers, including philosophers of language, have so far paid little attention to clothes in their work (cf., e.g., Di Summa, 2022: 1–2; Johnson, 2022: 2; Svendsen, 2006: 7).

[3] What I call "style usurpation" bears close resemblance to what Benton and Peterka-Benton call "hatejacking"; "[t]he adoption of brands as an identity marker for hate groups" where, from the perspective of these brands, this leads to "unwanted associations" between them and the hate groups (2020: 7). Note, however, that the phenomenon I call "style usurpation" is broader than what Benton and Peterka-Benton call "hatejacking". While the latter are only concerned with certain brands, I am also concerned with clothes not manufactured by specific brands, as well as different symbols. Thus, to avoid confusion, and to maintain terminological consistency with what I will call "style reclamation" below, I will continue to speak of "style usurpation".

In the coming sections, I will say more about what I mean by "independently existing style items", "identity markers", and "publicly connected". For now, I hope these terms are intuitive enough to proceed without further elaboration. Also, I won't try to pinpoint what makes a group morally problematic. Instead, I will rely on what I hope are uncontroversial examples of morally problematic groups.

To my knowledge, philosophers haven't investigated what I call "style usurpation" so far. Maybe this is because they have tacitly assumed that the phenomenon in question is but a sub-variant of a phenomenon that has already commanded philosophical attention – *style appropriation*: "the use of stylistic cultural innovations distinctive of one culture by members of another culture, including hairstyles, fashion, cooking techniques, musical styles, and slang" (Nguyen & Strohl, 2019: 982; also cf.; Dodd, 2021: 373; Young, 2008: 6). Indeed, we find references to "appropriation" in the sociological literature concerning the connection between certain brands and the far-right. For instance, Cynthia Miller-Idriss talks of "the appropriation of nonextremist products that have been assigned new meaning" and later mentions *New Balance* as an example (cf. 2017: 21, 53). And Bond Benton and Daniela Peterka-Benton speak of the "appropriation" of *New Balance*, *Fred Perry*, and *Lonsdale* (cf. 2020: 15, 18).

Yet, classifying style usurpation as a sub-variant of style appropriation would be premature. To see this, consider *Lonsdale* and *New Balance*. Here, we have clear examples of style usurpation – but, crucially, not of style appropriation. Following the above characterisation, it is essential to style appropriation that something distinctive of one cultural group gets used by members of another. Yet, this is not what we find with these brands. Before members of neo-Nazi groups started wearing them as identity markers, *Lonsdale* and *New Balance* were just two popular sports and leisure brands among many, worn by people from all walks of life. Wearing them was not distinctive of any specific cultural group.[4] Hence, when neo-Nazis started wearing these brands, they didn't appropriate them from any such group. Ipso facto, they did not engage in style appropriation. That being said, style appropriation and style usurpation can overlap. Arguably, this is the case with the swastika or *Thor's Hammer*. Moreover, we might view style appropriation and style usurpation as species of a common genus we might call *style adoption* – the adoption of certain style items by some particular group(s). Here, it is left open whether these style items are antecedently specific to another particular group, what kind of group adopts it, and for which purpose.

However, style usurpation is not the only phenomenon I will examine. I will also investigate the related phenomenon of "style reclamation":

> Style reclamation occurs when people who aren't members of the respective morally problematic groups use usurped style items to protest their usurpation, resulting in the public connection between these items and these groups getting

[4] It seems fair to assume that wearing sports and leisure clothes is too broad a marker to delineate a distinctive cultural group.

sufficiently undermined, and without a public connection between these items and different morally problematic groups emerging.[5]

The last part of the characterisation is included because, intuitively, cases where the public connection between a style item and one morally problematic group gets replaced with a public connection between that style item and another morally problematic group don't count as instances of style reclamation. Here, we would simply have a change of usurpers. Instead, to say that a style item has been reclaimed, it seems necessary that it loses – at least to a large extent – a public connection with morally problematic groups altogether.[6]

Here is an example for the purpose of illustration. In response to the aforementioned usurpation of *Lonsdale* by members of neo-Nazi groups, the brand launched a campaign called "Lonsdale loves all colours" – among other things, sponsoring anti-racist and LGBTQ+ events and heavily relying on non-white models. Thanks to this campaign, members of many anti-racist groups started wearing *Lonsdale* in protest, which led to others not connected to neo-Nazi groups following suit. And eventually, *Lonsdale* – at least to a high degree – lost the public connection to morally problematic groups it had previously acquired, without acquiring new public connections to different morally problematic groups in the process (cf. Miller-Idriss, 2019).[7]

I take it that investigating both style usurpation and style reclamation is philosophically worthwhile for at least the following reasons. For one, examining style usurpation will provide us with insights into how originally innocuous style items can be enlisted to push nefarious agendas. Also, the examination of style reclamation will show, by way of example, how it is possible to stand up to hateful elements in one's society in one's day-to-day life – and what pitfalls one should be mindful of here. Moreover, as indicated in fn. 2, philosophers have so far paid little attention to clothes and other style items as a means of communication. Since it should be uncontroversial that we frequently employ the latter for our communicative purposes, this seems an oversight. I believe that, through examining style usurpation and style reclamation, we can move some way towards a better understanding of "communication through style" more generally. That is, I believe that the discussion of style usurpa-

[5] Style reclamation bares resemblance to the practice of reclaiming slurs (such as the N-word or "queer"). For instance, Cepollaro and de Sa say that "[b]y *reclamation* we refer to the linguistic practice whereby speakers – typically *ingroups*, i.e., members of the group targeted by certain slurs – employ these terms in order to express pride, foster camaraderie, manifest solidarity, subvert extant structures of discrimination, and so on" (2023: 1–2). Also note that while philosophical discussions of reclamation have focused on slurs, it has been suggested that symbols can be reclaimed as well. For instance, Jensen (2002) and Jeshion (2020) discuss the reclamation of the *pink triangle* by members of gay activist groups (gay prisoners in Nazi concentration camps were forced to wear a pink triangle).

[6] Of course, that doesn't mean those who engage in the acts of protest that lead to style reclamation need to be paragons of virtue. Everything I will subsequently say about style reclamation is compatible with morally flawed individuals, and even members of morally problematic groups, being able to contribute to style reclamation. My point is merely that, to say that a style item has been reclaimed, no new public connection between the style item in question and a morally problematic group must supersede the old one. (Thanks to an anonymous referee for encouraging me to address this issue explicitly).

[7] While the brand itself initiated the process that led to the reclamation of *Lonsdale*, this seems inessential to what I call "style reclamation". The process that led to its reclamation might also have started as a grass-roots movement; e.g., with members of activist groups wearing *Lonsdale* in protest.

tion and style reclamation can help us explore how, more generally, a given style item can become connected to certain groups in the first place, might communicate group membership, and how such a connection might be protested and undermined.[8]

The paper proceeds as follows. I will first bring what I call "style usurpation" into sharper focus (§2). Next, I will draw on resources provided by speech act theory to examine its underlying mechanisms (§3). And I will argue that it constitutes a phenomenon we should be concerned about because of its effects (§4). From this background, I will then turn to style reclamation, providing an account of how it can work and highlighting some potential benefits – on both an individual and a societal level (§§ 5–6).

2 Delineating style usurpation

To get a better handle on style usurpation, let me begin with some clarifications – starting with "style" and "style item".[9] When I say "style", I mean *personal style*.[10] Sometimes, "personal style" is used quite broadly – roughly, to refer to some intentional or non-intentional feature of a person's self-presentation that somewhat distinguishes that person. For example, one might say that a person's aristocratic posture is part of their style. Such an aristocratic posture might be the fruit of an intentional and continuous effort, aimed at giving off a certain impression (perhaps coming from an aristocratic milieu). However, it might also come naturally to that person. Or it might have become "second nature" to them due to their upbringing. Hence, their aristocratic posture might not or no longer be the result of an intentional effort on their part. Nevertheless, this posture might communicate certain things about them (see above). Moreover, there might be what we might call "attribution errors" in both directions. One might mistake an intentionally cultivated and displayed aristocratic posture for something that just comes naturally to that person. Or one might mistakenly judge a naturally aristocratic posture as an intentionally cultivated pose.[11]

That being said, I will adopt a somewhat narrower working definition of personal style for the purpose of this paper. Following Nick Riggle, I will understand someone's personal style as their expression of the ideals they have for themselves (cf. Riggle, 2015: 722) and "ideals" as "conceptions of people (real or not) [they] wish to resemble" (Riggle, 2015: 723). I will use "personal style" in this way because it seems especially fitting for the investigation at hand. After all, as I understand "style

[8] As will emerge at the end of §5, the strategies that can lead to style reclamation can also be used to undermine the public connection between morally problematic groups and the style items that were created specifically for them.

[9] Thanks to two anonymous referees for prompting me to clarify how I will understand these terms.

[10] In addition, in artistic discourse, "style" is often used to refer to *general artistic style* or to *individual artistic style* (e.g., (Wollheim, 1979; Riggle, 2015; Hopkins & Riggle, 2021). The former "is a feature of artworks, and a given general style is associated with a set of distinctive properties that distinguish works in that style from works not in it", while "[i]ndividual artistic style is the style of the artist. It is a feature of the artist that is manifested in certain aspects of her artistic output" (Hopkins & Riggle, 2021: 1).

[11] Thanks to an anonymous referee for pointing out this broad use of "personal style" and suggesting the above example.

usurpation", it concerns members of morally problematic groups using (part of) their personal style to mark their group identity and thus to express an ideal of theirs – e.g., their identification with the ideology characteristic of the respective group.

In accordance with this understanding of "personal style", I use "style item" to denote the kinds of things people typically employ to express the various ideals they might have for themselves. Style items, so understood, plausibly include the things people use to decorate their homes – such as furniture or decorative art. And they include the things that feature in people's everyday self-presentation – such as clothes, accessories, adornments, haircuts, and variously instantiated symbols.[12] In this paper, I will focus on style items that feature in people's everyday self-presentation. My reason for this focus is that style usurpation is especially likely to occur here: Since these kinds of style items typically feature in people's everyday self-presentation and will thus tend to be sported in public, they are especially likely to become publicly connected to a morally problematic group in cases where its members use them as identity markers.[13]

Second, I stay neutral about whether or not members of morally problematic groups intend a public connection between them and the respective style item. For instance, one member of a neo-Nazi group might wish to wear *Lonsdale* as a secret code, while another might do so to broadcast their group membership to the public. Third, I use the term "member" rather loosely – to refer to those at the centre of some morally problematic group and those sympathetic to the group's ideology and/or actions (cf. Miller-Idriss, 2017: 18). Fourth, while the examples of style usurpation I discuss in this paper all pertain to the far-right groups, I don't mean to suggest that these are the only examples of style usurpation. I focus on them because the use of independently existing style items by far-right groups is especially well documented. Fifth, the style items that get usurped are chosen for different reasons. For instance, members of morally problematic groups might opt for an independently existing style to circumvent legal bans concerning certain symbols, to retain plausible deni-

[12] Three clarifications: First, when I say that style items are the kinds of things people typically employ to express various ideals they have for themselves, I take this to be compatible with these things also having other functions. For instance, while we use sofas and scarves to express our aesthetic ideals, we, of course, also use them to sit on and shelter ourselves from the cold, respectively. Second, something being a style item in the above sense doesn't mean that it is necessarily used as a style item – like something being a work of art doesn't mean that it is necessarily used as a work of art. Like I might use a Rembrandt painting as a blanket (cf. Goodman, 1978: 69), I might use an Art Deco lamp as a coat hanger or a tuxedo to wipe the floor. Third, and relatedly, as previously discussed, there might be attribution errors in both directions. For instance, some might mistake the outfit I'm obliged to wear to a social event for the expression of an aesthetic ideal of mine. Or they might think that my beloved sweater, which embodies an aesthetic ideal of mine, is just some random thing I picked up along the way.

[13] To be clear, my point here is merely that style usurpation is especially likely to occur with style items that feature in people's everyday self-presentation. This is compatible with style usurpation also occurring with style items used to furnish one's home – such as, say, decorative paintings in some general artistic style (cf. fn. 10). For example, Hitler is known to have created paintings in a Romantic style (e.g., Spotts, 2003; Dixon, 2023). Inspired by this, members of neo-Nazi groups might start buying paintings in a Romantic style and decorating their homes with them, perhaps to express a "blood and soil" ideology. And this, in turn, might lead to paintings in this style becoming publicly connected to neo-Nazi groups. (Thanks to an anonymous referee for pointing out that style usurpation might also occur with artistic styles and suggesting this example).

ability when challenged about their (alleged) group membership, or simply because the style item is readily available. Likewise, there are various reasons for selecting specific independently existing style items. Sometimes, they are selected because of some (accidental) connection between them and the respective group's symbolic traditions. For example, members of neo-Nazi groups co-opted *Lonsdale* because the brand name contains a letter combination reminiscent of the abbreviated name of the Nazi party. Or they are chosen because they lend themselves to specific associations. White laces, for instance, are meant to evoke associations of "white power" (cf. *Southern Poverty Law Center*, 2010). However, note that the item in question might also be chosen randomly. Imagine that members of a neo-Nazi group were to randomly choose bright green socks as identity markers with the result that wearing them becomes publicly connected to being a member of that group. Arguably, this would also count as an instance of style usurpation.

With these clarifications out of the way, I want to further zoom in on style usurpation by motivating three central features of my characterisation of the phenomenon:

1. Why I talk of *independently existing style items* rather than *style items* simpliciter.
2. Why I make it part of my characterisation that the style item becomes *publicly connected* to the respective group.
3. And why the group in question has to be *morally problematic*.

To see why (1)-(3) feature in my characterisation, we first need to reflect on the meaning of "usurpation". "usurpation" is a *thick term* in Bernard Williams' (Williams, 1985) sense, as it combines description and evaluation. It denotes that someone takes something away from someone else (description) and that there is something morally problematic about the affair (evaluation).

Hence, the term "style usurpation" seems fitting only if the respective group takes the style item away from someone and some morally problematic element is involved. Let me briefly clarify two things. First, style usurpation concerns *types* of style items, not *tokens* (e.g., clothes by *Lonsdale*, not the sweater in your closet). When I say that a style item is taken away, I don't mean to suggest that members of morally problematic groups pillage, say, clothing stores, let alone your wardrobe. Second, I don't think the morally problematic element involved in style usurpation simply consists in members of morally problematic groups sporting some independently existing style item. After all, sporting some style item is, in itself, morally neutral. And it remains so even when done by people who are morally problematic in some way. Instead, what makes style usurpation morally problematic is that members of morally problematic groups sport these style items as *identity markers*: they use them specifically to flag their membership in the respective group and hence employ these items in the service of a morally problematic ideology.[14] (I will return to this issue at the end of this section and then explore different ways sporting usurped style items might serve morally problematic ideologies in §4).

[14] Regarding the morally problematic groups I will be concerned with throughout this paper – far-right groups (see above) – I take their ideology to be morally problematic because it typically includes, among other things, racism, sexism, homo- and transphobia, anti-Semitism as well as a valorisation of violence.

Starting with (1), by "independently existing style item", I mean a style item not developed by or for members of some group and not marketed to them. Such an item might predate the respective group or come into existence after its formation. What matters is that the group played no part in the origin story of that style item. To see that such independence is necessary to say that some style item was taken away from someone by a particular group, consider the following case. A brand sympathetic to neo-Nazi groups manufactures clothes with them in mind and subsequently markets these clothes to them. As a result, their target audience flocks to the brand and wears their clothes as identity markers.[15] Here, it seems wrong to say that the neo-Nazis who embraced the brand took their clothes away from anyone.[16] After all, they acted exactly as the brand executives hoped they would – taking what was offered to them. Ipso facto, it seems wrong to say that neo-Nazis usurped the brand's clothes. Extrapolating from this example, limiting style usurpation to independently existing style items seems reasonable.

However, this raises the following question: who might an independently existing style item that is used by members of some group as an identity maker get taken away from? For one, I propose it might get taken away from members of the wider public who don't want to be mistaken for members of the respective group. Consider the following example. A high school friend once told me he used to wear black combat boots with white laces – simply because he liked the look. Yet, he stopped doing so immediately once he was alerted to what that particular combination had come to signify. Because he became aware that sporting this combination was a sign of being a neo-Nazi, and because he didn't want to be mistaken for one, he felt that he had to abandon that style forthwith:[17] that style had become taboo for him and was taken away from him in this sense. Moreover, in cases where a specific brand is concerned, the items manufactured by them might get taken away from that brand as well – at least in a certain sense. Again, consider *Lonsdale*. In so far as wearing the brand became linked to the neo-Nazi movement in people's minds, said movement effectively took control over the brand's public perception. Against its will, *Lonsdale* got saddled with the image "neo-Nazi brand". This diagnosis gets indirect confirmation

[15] Relatedly, Benton and Beterka-Benton point out that "[s]ome brands were founded in the 1990s solely to service the extreme right market. For example, Thor Steinar offers high-quality and fashionably designed items with coded.

references to the right scene" (Benton & Peterka-Benton, 2020: 9).

[16] Correspondingly, it seems wrong to say that such style items might be *re*claimed. That said, as anticipated in fn. 8, I believe that the connection between such a style item and a morally problematic group can get undermined in much the same way it gets undermined in cases of style reclamation (I will return to this issue at the end of §5).

[17] We might describe my friend's fear in terms of an "attribution error" (cf. the beginning of this section as well as fn. 12). That is, he feared that, although he had no intention to communicate this, people would mistakenly attribute a neo-Nazi ideology to him based on his combining black boots with white laces. Moreover, such attribution errors might also help along style usurpation: Imagine you wear a black *Fred Perry* polo with yellow stripes just because you find the design aesthetically pleasing, without being aware of the Proud Boys connection. Despite this, others might think you wear said polo to showcase your affiliation with the Proud Boys. When this happens, it might help cement the connection between wearing this polo and being a Proud Boy in the minds of those who happen to see you. Put more generally, you might unintentionally help to strengthen the public connection between some style item and a morally problematic group (I will return to this issue at the end of §3).

from the brand's aforementioned "Lonsdale loves all colours"-campaign. Plausibly, the brand launched this campaign precisely in an attempt to regain control over its public perception, which, on the flip side, suggests that said control had been taken away from them (cf. Benton & Peterka-Benton, 2020: 13–14).[18]

The preceding discussion allows us to see why "style usurpation" applies only if an independently existing style item becomes publicly connected to some group, and hence why (2) features in my characterisation. In both examples, it seems that the style items in question were taken away from members of the wider public and/or some brand only because they became publicly connected to a particular group. Imagine that the co-option of black combat boots with white laces had remained entirely covert, so no outsider was aware of it. In this case, my high school friend wouldn't and couldn't have felt the need to stop exercising that style choice – lest others draw undesired inferences. Or imagine that wearing *Lonsdale* had remained an entirely secret identity marker for neo-Nazis. Here, control over the public perception of *Lonsdale* wouldn't have been taken away from the brand, which thus wouldn't have felt the need for a PR counterstrike.[19]

However, let me note that we can imagine cases where an independently existing style item is adopted by some group as an identity marker, becomes publicly connected to it, and is then eschewed by those who don't want to be mistaken for members of that group – but which don't seem to fit the label "style usurpation". For example, in the 2010s, skinny jeans became the go-to legwear for many hipsters, thus becoming publicly connected to that group. And given the widespread animosity towards hipsters, this presumably led some people to eschew skinny jeans, lest they be mistaken for one. Yet, classifying hipsters wearing skinny jeans as style usurpation seems counterintuitive, as this case doesn't seem to merit the negative evaluation contained in "usurpation". This raises the question of how to differentiate between cases like the one just sketched and cases of style usurpation, such as those listed in §1.[20]

To provide an answer, let us compare hipsters wearing skinny jeans to neo-Nazis wearing *Lonsdale*. There seem to be two salient differences between these cases. First, unlike neo-Nazis, hipsters don't seem to fall under the rubric "morally problematic group". Hence, unlike with neo-Nazis wearing *Lonsdale*, when hipsters wear skinny jeans to showcase their hipsterdom, they don't employ them in the service of a morally problematic ideology (see above). Second, and relatedly, when people eschew skinny jeans because they don't want to be mistaken for a hipster, there will likely be non-moral reasons in the background (e.g., not wanting to be perceived

[18] Note that neither is the case with brands that, say, specifically cater to the far-right market. Here, no style choice that would otherwise be available gets taken away. Instead, given that one doesn't want to be perceived as a member of a far-right group, one's range of style choices simply doesn't expand. Moreover, if a brand caters to the far-right market and is embraced by it, then members of the far-right do not take control of the brand's image against the brand's will. (Thanks to an anonymous referee for prompting me to be explicit on these differences).

[19] Of course, it is theoretically possible that some group's co-option of an independently existing style remains entirely covert. However, for the above reasons, I reserve "style usurpation" for cases where there is a public connection between group and style item.

[20] Thanks to an anonymous referee for asking me to address this question.

as annoyingly pretentious). In contrast, when people eschew *Lonsdale* because they don't want to be mistaken for a neo-Nazi, there will likely be moral reasons in the background (e.g., not wanting to be perceived as a white supremacist). Extrapolating from these observations, what distinguishes style usurpation from superficially similar cases is that independently existing style items are employed by members of morally problematic groups in the service of a morally problematic ideology and are eschewed by others for this reason. Due to this, my characterisation of style usurpation is – with (3) – limited to cases where the group in question is morally problematic.

After delineating the phenomenon of style usurpation, I will examine its underlying mechanisms in the next section. More specifically, I will argue that we can understand the "public connection" between a usurped style item and some morally problematic group in terms of *social meaning*. I will then suggest that we can explain how this social meaning evolved by appealing to the resources provided by speech act theory. Though I will only explicitly discuss style usurpation, I believe the considerations presented in the next section, as well as §5, can help us better understand some of the mechanisms underlying communication through style more generally (also cf. Bräuer, forthcoming). Moreover, I take it that these considerations might also be used to shed some light on the inner workings of style appropriation as well as the umbrella phenomenon I called "style adoption" (cf. §1).

3 Social meaning and communicative acts

How can we conceptualise the public connection between a usurped style item and some morally problematic group? The answer that springs to mind is "meaning": the sporting of usurped style items has come to *mean* that the people sporting them are members of some such group (cf. Miller-Idriss, 2017: 21). This answer is in keeping with the oft-made observation that clothes, and adornments more broadly, don't just provide protection against the elements but can and frequently do carry meaning (cf., e.g., Barthes, 2005; Di Summa, 2022; Johnson, 2022, Lurie, 1983; Miller-Idriss, 2017; Svendsen, 2006). But "meaning" is a notoriously tricky philosophical concept. Hence, the question arises in which sense the sporting of usurped style items has come to mean that those sporting them are members of some morally problematic group.

To answer that question, it will help to first identify some data points concerning usurped style items that the respective notion of meaning should be able to capture:[21]

- *Variation*: Even when different independently existing style items are publicly connected to the same morally problematic group, the connection can vary in strength. For example, black boots with white laces are arguably more strongly connected to far-right groups in people's minds than *New Balance* sneakers.
- *Independence*: Wearing a usurped style item can be interpreted as a sign that the wearer is a member of a morally problematic group, independent of whether the

[21] The following data points are somewhat similar to some of the data points we find in connection with slurs (cf. e.g., Bolinger, 2017: 439).

wearer intended to convey this message. For example, people who see me wear a black *Fred Perry* polo with yellow stripes might think I am a Proud Boy, even though I never meant to give off that impression.

- *Cancelability*: Although wearing a usurped style item might convey that the wearer is a member of a morally problematic group despite their intentions, the content in question is cancellable. For example, it seems perfectly felicitous to say "I am not a Proud Boy" while wearing a black *Fred Perry* polo with yellow stripes.

As I will argue in a moment, the notion of social meaning can straightforwardly account for all these data points. Hence, it is a promising candidate for capturing the kind of meaning we find in connection with usurped style items.

Following Justin Khoo, I will, roughly speaking, understand "the social meaning of *x* within a community [as] a cluster of shared (or overlapping) stereotypical beliefs members of that community take to be shared among them about *x*" (2017: 57).[22] Consider two examples for the purpose of illustration. Sally Haslanger points out that, socially, "pink *means* girl and blue *means* boy" (Haslanger, 2014: 25). And Jason Stanley suggests that the social meaning of the word "professor" is "someone with liberal political views, who is practically incompetent" (Stanley, 2015: 169). On Khoo's gloss, this amounts to saying that people in a given community believe, and take it that they share the belief, that, typically, pink is a girl's colour while blue is a boy's colour. And it amounts to saying that people in a given community believe, and take it that they share the belief, that professors typically endorse liberal political views and are practically incompetent.[23]

To see how social meanings can account for the above data points, let us begin with *Variation*. The important thing to note here is that, on Khoo's characterisation, social meaning allows for variation along four dimensions: (i) how many people share the first-order belief (e.g., the belief that pink means girl); (ii) how many people share the second-order belief (e.g., the belief that others believe that pink means girl); (iii) how strongly the respective first- and second-order beliefs are held; (iv) how large the community in question is. Since social meaning allows for variation along all these dimensions, it can easily account for the observation that the public connection between a usurped style item and some morally problematic group can vary in strength.

Moreover, an appeal to social meanings also allows us to account for *Independence*. As Khoo points out, social meanings are prone to trigger inferences. For instance, since a stereotypical belief to the effect that pink is a girl's colour is widely shared in our society, we will likely infer that an infant we see dressed all in pink is a girl rather than a boy (cf. Khoo, 2017: 56–57). And we will do so independently of whether or not the parents dressing their infant this way intended for us to conclude that their child is a girl. Likewise, if a stereotypical belief to the effect that someone

[22] I say "roughly speaking" because Khoo (2017: 57, fn. 31) adds some qualifications to the above characterisation of "social meaning". However, for our purposes, the simple characterisation will suffice.

[23] Khoo uses Stanley's example to point out that a word's social meaning differs from its linguistic meaning. After all, one can coherently describe someone as a right-wing professor (cf. 2017:57).

who wears a black *Fred Perry* polo with yellow stripes is a Proud Boy is widely shared in our society, then people will tend to infer that I am a member of said group when they see me sport that garment – no matter whether I intended to convey that impression.[24]

What about *Cancelability*? Again, an appeal to social meanings allows us to capture this data point. This is because having stereotypical beliefs is compatible with also believing that exceptions exist (cf. Khoo, 2017: 57–58). For instance, even if I share the stereotypical belief that pink is a girl's colour, I might still believe that not all infants dressed in pink are girls. Hence, it wouldn't strike me as infelicitous when a parent tells me that their infant dressed in all pink is a boy rather than a girl – even if I assumed otherwise before. Following this train of thought, the appeal to social meanings can also account for the observation that it doesn't seem infelicitous to, say, deny being a Proud Boy while simultaneously wearing a black *Fred Perry* polo with yellow stripes – even towards those who initially put me in that box.

As I have just tried to show, accounting for the kind of meaning we find in connection with usurped style items in terms of social meaning is promising insofar as doing so allows us to straightforwardly account for all the data points identified at the beginning of this section. However, the appeal to social meanings brings a new question in its wake: How did the respective social meaning evolve in the first place? That is, how did people in a given community come to acquire widely shared beliefs to the effect that people sporting certain independently existing style items are typically members of some morally problematic group (cf. fn. 24)? To answer this question, we first need to introduce the notion of a *communicative act*. As Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò observes, while "paradigm communicative acts are […] utterances, speech acts, signs (in sign language), gestures […] other kinds of acts also communicate" (2022: 301). For example:

> Remaining seated when one is expected to get up may communicate disdain and protest (say, if someone is singing the national anthem); a slap may communicate insult; and changing one's behavioral response to a claim communicated by another may not only communicate the like belief in the accepter but also respect for the person making the recommendation. (2022: 301)

[24] In light of this, one might think that social meaning, including the social meaning found in connection with usurped style items, is a variant of what Grice (1957) calls "natural meaning". After all, following Grice, natural meaning is partly characterised by an independence from communicative intentions. For example: "I cannot argue from 'Those spots mean (meant) measles' to any conclusion about 'what is (was) meant by those spots'; for example, I am not entitled to say, 'What was meant by those spots was that he had measles'" (Grice, 1957: 377). However, as Khoo points out, the "term [natural meaning] stands to mislead, on the grounds that many of our stereotypical beliefs do not track natural facts (nor do they purport to)" (2017: 59). For instance, while our beliefs about the connection between exhibiting certain spots and having measles track a natural fact, our beliefs about the connection between wearing a black *Fred Perry* polo with yellow stripes and being a Proud Boy don't track a natural fact. In the first case, the connection was merely discovered by humans. In the second case, the connection is human-made (I will address how this connection came about later in this section). Because of this difference, I will continue to employ the notion of social meaning and leave open how the latter relates to natural meaning. (Thanks to an anonymous referee for prompting me to address this issue).

Such acts can communicate because "they can affect what social information is public" (2022: 301). Moreover, such acts can be performed with the intention of making social information public. For instance, one might remain seated during the singing of the national anthem to make one's disdain public. Within communicative acts, we might thus distinguish between acts that happen to communicate (non-intentional communication) and acts that are performed to communicate (intentional communication) – calling the latter "communicative acts in the strict sense". To explain how usurped style items acquired their social meaning, I will primarily focus on communicative acts in this strict sense.

In addition, J. L. Austin's notion of *uptake* will presently become important. According to him, achieving uptake "[g]enerally […] amounts to bringing about the understanding of the meaning and of the force of the locution" (Austin, 1962: 116). In the subsequent literature, this is typically understood as one's audience correctly perceiving or inferring one's communicative intentions (cf. McDonald, 2021: 3509). While uptake is traditionally discussed in connection with speech acts, this notion also applies to communicative acts more broadly. Returning to the above example, one would achieve uptake from one's audience when remaining seated during the singing of the national anthem if they correctly infer that one does so communicate disdain or protest, rather than, say, because of a knee injury.[25]

With this in mind, let us return to style usurpation. When a member of a morally problematic group sports some independently existing style item as an identity marker, what they do can be conceived of as performing a communicative act. In sporting that style item, the group member intends to tell others about their group membership. That is, they chose this item because of their group membership. And when they publicly don it, they do so to put said membership on display, wanting their audience – e.g., fellow group members or members of the wider public – to get

[25] Austin considers achieving uptake necessary for the very performance of a speech act (cf. 1962: 115). However, as Strawson points out, this seems too strong: "For surely a man may, for example, actually have made such and such a bequest, or gift, even if no one ever reads his will or instrument of gift. We may be tempted to say instead that at least the *aim*, *if not the achievement*, of securing uptake is an essential element in the performance of the illocutionary act" (Strawson, 1964: 448; also cf.; Bird, 2002; Jacobson, 1995) (I use "speech act" and "illocutionary act" interchangeably; cf. Green, 2020). Put differently, what counts is the speaker's aim that the hearer correctly identifies their communicative intentions, not that the hearer actually does so. Similarly, Maitra suggests that achieving uptake is not required for performing an illocutionary act, but only for *fully successfully* doing so (cf. Maitra, 2009: 313, fn. 7). Combining Strawson's and Maitra's suggestions, I will assume that aiming to secure uptake is necessary for performing an illocutionary act and that actually securing uptake is necessary for fully successfully performing said act. Mutatis mutandis, I will assume that aiming to secure uptake is necessary for performing a communicative act in the strict sense and that actually securing uptake is necessary for fully successfully performing said act. I thus endorse a version of what McDonald (2021: 3506) calls "the *ratification* theory of uptake". According to this view, the speaker's communicative intentions determine *what* illocutionary or communicative act gets performed, while the uptake said act receives only ratifies it. That is, uptake determines whether this act gets performed successfully or not. On the flipside, this means I reject what McDonald (2021: 3506–3507) calls "the *constitution* theory of uptake". According to this view, the uptake an illocutionary/communicative act receives, not the speaker's communicative intentions, determines what act gets performed (McDonald (2021) ascribes such a view to Kukla and [writing as R.] (2014) and argues – convincingly, I think – that it yields several unwelcome consequences). (Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing me to be explicit on endorsing a version of the ratification theory of uptake).

the message.[26] Moreover, the group member achieves uptake if their audience correctly identifies this communicative intention, i.e., if they understand that the person sporting the style item does so to put their group membership on display.

Building on this foundation, I propose we explain how usurped style items acquired their social meaning in terms of frequent communicative acts and their frequent uptake. Once more, consider *Lonsdale*. Conceivably, something like this happened: Among other things, members of neo-Nazi groups wore *Lonsdale* at rallies to highlight their ideological colours. And people, through direct observation or media coverage, took notice. They consciously or unconsciously inferred that, for neo-Nazis, wearing *Lonsdale* wasn't some accidental fashion choice but a means of communication through style. This led to further media coverage and word of mouth spreading the "connection" between wearing *Lonsdale* and being a member of a neo-Nazi group. Due to this, said connection became present in more and more people's minds and yet further neo-Nazis adopted *Lonsdale* as their brand of choice, creating a feedback loop. In short, because members of neo-Nazi groups frequently wore *Lonsdale* as an identity marker, and because this communicative act frequently received uptake, over time, people came to widely share the belief that someone who wears *Lonsdale* is typically a member of a neo-Nazi group. And people additionally came to widely share the belief that others widely share the former belief. Thus, the social meaning in question was born.[27]

After outlining how an independently existing style item can acquire a public connection with a morally problematic group, let me end this section with some remarks on the relation between intentional and non-intentional communication in connection with style usurpation. As just described, usurped style items first acquire their social meaning through intentional communicative acts and their uptake. Roughly, members of morally problematic groups frequently sport an independently existing style item to showcase their group membership, and people pick up on this, forming corresponding beliefs. However, once the social meaning in question gets entrenched, sporting a usurped style item will tend to communicate that one is a member of the

[26] I classify this as a communicative act rather than an illocutionary act for the following reason. According to Austin, we perform an illocutionary act in virtue of performing a locutionary act (cf. Austin, 1962: 98). For instance, I tell you that John is married to Jim in virtue of saying "John is married to Jim". However, characterising, say, the wearing of a certain garment as a locutionary act might seem a bit of a stretch. Hence, I employ the broader notion of "communicative act". That said, one might also wish to extend the notion of "locutionary" and "illocutionary acts". As an anonymous referee points out, some authors interpret "locution" and "illocution" more widely to defend the view that visual artworks can perform illocutionary acts or be vehicles of lying (cf., e.g., Kjørup, 1974; Novitz, 1977; Dixon, 2019; Viebahn, 2019). Following this line of thought, one might also hold that one can perform locutionary and illocutionary acts in virtue of wearing certain garments. Nothing I will argue for depends on whether one opts for a narrow or broad understanding of "locution"/"illocution".

[27] One might worry that this explanation puts the proverbial cart before the horse: one might think that the respective social meaning needs to be in place *before* people can rely on it for their communicative purposes. However, I believe this worry is misplaced. To see this, consider an analogous case. As Nowak points out, it is possible to use a word as an insult even though that word was not previously marked as insulting. Moreover, if the practice of using the word in this way catches on, it might eventually become a bona fide insult (cf. Nowak, 2020: 837). Likewise, it seems possible to use a style item for one's communicative purposes before the respective social meaning becomes attached to it. And the social meaning might evolve precisely because of such (repeated) use.

respective group, irrespective of one's communicative intentions. For instance, given that people believe, and believe that others share the belief, that *Lonsdale* is typically worn by neo-Nazis, I will likely give off the impression that I'm a neo-Nazi when I wear a Lonsdale sweater – even though I never wanted this to happen.[28] And when I do thus give off that impression, then, despite my intentions, this might further help cement that social meaning of wearing *Lonsdale*.[29]

So far, I have delineated the phenomenon of style usurpation and examined its underlying mechanisms. But I haven't yet said much concerning why we should care. In a nutshell, my answer is that we should care about style usurpation because of its effects.

4 Effects of style usurpation

What are the effects of style usurpation? I will provide at least a partial answer by focusing on the wider public, morally problematic groups, and those targeted by them. One effect that style usurpation has for members of the wider public was already suggested in §2. When a style item gets usurped by a morally problematic group, it might become "taboo" for members of the wider public and get taken away from them in this sense. Moreover, when, say, clothes by a particular brand are concerned, these clothes get taken away from said brand as well in so far as the group seizes control over the public perception of these clothes.

Let us now turn to the effects that style usurpation arguably has for the morally problematic groups that have usurped the respective style items. One effect is pretty obvious. As usurped style items function as identity markers for members of these groups, they serve as means to recognise each other (cf. Miller-Idriss, 2017: 48), potentially making it easier for them to coordinate their actions. To see further benefits that style usurpation plausibly has for group members, we need to briefly reflect on the social dimension of individual identity and style's role in this regard. Regarding the former, Jesse Prinz observes that

> individual identity is normally social in nature. When we recount who we are, we conjure up various affiliations: religion, political party, profession, ethnicity, national heritage, and class. Personal identity has individual components, such as autobiography, personality, and projects, but it is equally a matter of what group membership cards we carry. (2014: 590)[30]

And regarding the latter, Anya Farennikova and Prinz submit that

[28] Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing me to be explicit here.

[29] Cf. the beginning of §2 as well as fn. 12 and fn. 17.

[30] Similarly, Galinsky et al., drawing on Rosenberg (1979) and Turner (1987), point out that "[o]ne's social identity is the part of one's self-concept that derives from group memberships; it is the groups that the person identifies with or to which the person is socially recognized as belonging" (2003: 224).

> [f]ashion is crucial for group identity. It can indicate class, musical preference, religion, nationality, political party, or sexual preference. […]. Fashion is fundamentally tribal. It's a quick way of finding friends and foes, dates and dullards. (2011: 26)

Although Frarennikova and Prinz say "fashion" here, we can substitute this term for the broader notion of "style". What is important for our purposes is that, in conjunction, these quotes suggest three related claims – or at least come close to doing so. First, a common group style can heighten an individual group member's identification with the respective group. Second, because of this, a common group style can foster overall group cohesion. Third, this cohesion can encourage or exacerbate group polarisation – friends vs. foes.

Assuming these claims are generally plausible, we should also expect them to apply to morally problematic groups and the style items usurped by them: the common group style afforded by, among other things, usurped style items is apt to contribute to individual group members' group identification, to thereby foster overall group cohesion, and to exacerbate an "us vs. them"-dynamic. Indeed, these claims are corroborated by sociologist Cynthia Miller-Idriss in her study of the role that style plays within the German far-right scene. There, she argues that "[i]n the case of the far right subcultural scene, […] style in general and clothing choices in particular foster group identification and belonging and enable the expression of resistance and anger against the mainstream" (Miller-Idriss, 2017: 40). Similarly, a report by the *European Commission*'s *Radicalisation Awareness Network* states that "with neo-Nazi and ultranationalist movements […] typical features (e.g., Nazi symbols and tattoos, distinct clothes) serve to increase in-group identity and distinguish them from the general public" (Pauwels, 2021: 5).

Moreover, as Miller-Idriss observes at various points, style, especially clothing style, can function as a "gateway" or "entry point" to the far-right scene or even "act as a recruiting tool" – especially for adolescent males (cf. 2017: e.g., 79–80, 41, 48). She identifies several possible reasons: Donning, say, clothes connected to the far-right enables youth to "literally 'try[…] on extremism" while at best "require[ing] a relatively small ideological commitment" (2017: 183).[31] Also, it's not just that a common group style can strengthen a sense of belonging for those who are already committed members of the far-right scene; it can also attract those longing for community. A recurring theme of the interviews Miller-Idriss conducted with youth belonging to the far-right scene is that they first emulated their friends' clothing style and subsequently "became more embedded in far right youth culture" (2017: 41). And, relatedly, "far right clothing does appear to […] provide access to far right events and settings where normal attire might prevent entry" (2017: 48) – events that might well spur (further) radicalisation.

Let me address a possible misunderstanding. I don't claim that usurped style items are the only things that play the above roles for members of morally problematic groups. For instance, everything I have said is compatible with these roles also being

[31] Similarly, though in a more general key, Di Summa argues that "[t]rying on clothes can […] be a way to. imaginatively try on, with the clothes, a different identity" (Di Summa, 2022: 110).

played by clothes by brands specifically catering to the far-right market (cf. fn. 15) – e.g., *Thor Steinar*, *Ansgar Aryan*, or *Eric and Sons* (cf. Miller-Idriss, 2017). Still, it might turn out that usurped style items are poised to play at least some of these roles especially well. Thanks to their wide availability and relative inconspicuousness, a pair of *New Balance* sneakers or a *Fred Perry* polo might be easier entry points for adolescents into the far-right scene than, say, a *Thor Steinar* T-shirt. Relatedly, the former might raise fewer eyebrows from parents and teachers.

After examining some of the effects that style usurpation has for the wider public and morally problematic groups, I want to end this section by turning attention towards those targeted by such groups. To approach this topic, it will help to first look at some of the effects that *slurs* and *hate speech* more generally have on members of targeted groups.[32] Regarding the former, Michaela Poppa-Wyatt and Jeremy L. Wyatt point out that being addressed with a slur can intimidate and silence the target because such an address "carries an implicit threat of violence" (Popa-Wyatt & Wyatt, 2018: 2897). To illustrate these effects, they refer to an incident recounted by Charles R. Lawrence, which happened to one of his students – a gay white male, named Michael (cf. Popa-Wyatt & Wyatt, 2018: 2897). Says Lawrence:

> Michael told a story of being called "faggot" by a man on a subway. […]. He found himself in a state of semi-shock, nauseous, dizzy, unable to muster the witty, sarcastic, articulate rejoinder he was accustomed to making. He suddenly was aware of the recent spate of gay-bashing in San Francisco, and how many of these had escalated from verbal encounters. (1990: 455)

Due to becoming a victim of slurring, Michael felt profoundly intimidated and, in so far as he was unable to respond, became effectively silenced.[33] Similarly, a recent study on the effects of hate speech more broadly finds that victims of hate speech, among other things, frequently feel intimidated and even threatened and, in consequence, refrain from speaking up and prefer to withdraw from the situation (cf. Gelber & McNamara, 2016: 333–334).

There is an important difference between being slurred at or becoming a victim of hate speech and encountering someone sporting usurped style items. In the former cases, unlike in the latter, we are dealing with a direct address. Hence, it stands to be expected that the effects mentioned above are more pronounced in the former cases. Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to assume that encountering someone sporting usurped style items can also be intimidating and silence-inducing for members of targeted groups – especially when several such items are sported in combina-

[32] Two notes on terminology. First, I take a slur to be a term of reference that "derogates the target on the basis of their group membership" (Popa-Wyatt, 2020: 159) – e.g., based on their race, gender, sexuality, nationality, religion or immigrant status (cf. Popa-Wyatt, 2020: 159; Anderson & Lepore, 2013: 25; Bianchi, 2014: 35). Second, I understand "hate speech" as speech "directed against a specified or easily identifiable individual or […] a group of individuals based on an arbitrary and normatively irrelevant feature", such that it "stigmatizes the target group by implicitly or explicitly ascribing to it qualities widely regarded as highly undesirable" (Parekh, 2012: 40–41).

[33] This kind of silencing is referred to as "locutionary silencing" in the literature (cf. Langton, 1993: 315): a person is, due to some circumstances, dissuaded from speaking.

tion.[34] To see this, consider a variation of the incident related by Lawrence. Imagine that Michael had been on the subway with a friend. And imagine further that he hadn't been slurred at but that a passenger in his compartment was wearing a *Lonsdale* sweater combined with black combat boots and white laces, *Thor's Hammer* dangling from his neck. Given that at the time of the original incident, all these items were strongly associated with being a member of a neo-Nazi group (probably more so than today, at least in the case of *Lonsdale*), and given the well-documented history of violent attacks against gays by neo-Nazis, it stands to be expected that Michael would have felt scared for his safety. He would probably have stopped talking with his friend to avoid drawing any heat and exited the subway as quickly as possible – even if he wouldn't have felt quite as "dizzy", "nauseous", and "shocked" as in the actual incident.

It is worth noting that such effects are often anticipated and intended. In addition to what was said, Miller-Idriss points out that, for some members of the far-right scene, part of the appeal of wearing certain clothes is generating fear (cf. 2017: 175). She refers to an interview she conducted with Martin, a self-described "right-wing nationalist", who "explained that he was initially attracted to the style of right-wing extremists because it evokes fear in others" (2017: 175). She quotes him saying: "I always found it … somehow fascinating, because in my view there is an embodiment [Verkörperung], when you appear dangerous and that's how others view you, then other people receive you with a sort of respect or fear. … If one sees three people standing there dressed like [a right-wing extremist], then one normally doesn't get closer" (2017: 175).

By examining some of the effects of style usurpation, I hope to have convinced you that it is a phenomenon we should be concerned about. From this backdrop, I will now turn to style reclamation.

5 Style reclamation

In §1, I have said that style reclamation occurs when people who aren't members of the respective morally problematic groups use usurped style items to protest their usurpation, resulting in the public connection between these items and these groups getting sufficiently undermined, and without a public connection between these items and different morally problematic groups emerging. Several questions arise in connection to this: (1) how, exactly, should we conceive of these acts of protest? (2) when are they successful? (3) how can they lead to the connection between usurped style items and the respective morally problematic groups getting undermined? (4) what are the potential benefits connected to style reclamation? In this section, I will address the first three questions and then turn to the fourth one in §6.

In §3, I have argued that when members of morally problematic groups sport independently existing style items as identity markers, what they do can be conceived of as performing communicative acts: in sporting these style items, group members intend to tell others about their group membership. In keeping with this, I now want

[34] Again, I am not claiming that only usurped style items can have these effects.

to suggest that when people who aren't members of morally problematic groups sport usurped style items in protest, what they do can be conceived of as performing rival communicative acts:[35] When they publicly sport usurped style items, they do so to tell their audience – e.g., members of the wider public or members of hate groups – that these style items shouldn't be left to the respective groups, that the latter shouldn't be able to exert control over what sporting them means. Moreover, they aren't just communicating protest against the usurpation of a style item by some morally problematic group. They are also, by extension, communicating protest against the group itself, taking a public stance against it.

This brings me to the second question. I take it that such an act of protest is successful as a communicative act iff it receives *uptake* from at least some members of one's audience.[36] Say I publicly wear a black *Fred Perry* polo with yellow stripes to protest the usurpation of this garment by the Proud Boys. This act is successful as a communicative act if at least some of the people who see me wear it recognise my communicative intentions. In contrast, this act is unsuccessful in this regard if none of them does so – if they all think that my wearing it is just some random fashion statement, or, worse, if they mistake me for a Proud Boy. Two things are worth noting here. First, such an act of protest might receive uptake from some members of one's audience but not from others. Second, and relatedly, it might be more or less successful as a communicative act, depending on how many audience members recognise one's communicative intentions.[37]

But herein lies a potential problem. How might one secure uptake from one's audience here? How might one get them to recognise that one is sporting the style item in protest – rather than to broadcast one's membership in some morally problematic group?[38] It seems that context and what we might call "communicative markers" can help. Imagine, for instance, that I wear the aforementioned polo for the purpose of illustration while giving a talk on style usurpation and style reclamation. Here, I can reasonably hope that the wearing context clarifies that I am engaging in an act of protest and that I thus secure uptake from my audience. Or imagine that I publicly wear the polo combined with a "Good Night White Pride"-button. Here, the latter would function as a communicative marker. That is, the button would help me make clear that I am wearing the polo in protest and would thus increase my chances of securing

[35] Relatedly, Popa-Wyatt (2020) argues that when people engage in the reclamation of slurs, they are performing illocutionary acts that rival their derogatory use. Moreover, she characterises reclamation as "a form of socio-political protest" (Popa-Wyatt, 2020: 159).

[36] Recall, I assume that uptake is not necessary for performing a communicative act (or an illocutionary act), but only for doing so successfully (cf. fn. 25). Hence, I take it that one can perform such an act of protest even if one doesn't achieve uptake from anyone.

[37] I use the qualifier "as a communicative act" because such an act of protest might succeed on the communicative level without being beneficial in the ways discussed §6. For a similar distinction, though dressed in somewhat different terminology, in connection with the reclamation of slurs, see Cepollaro and de Sa (2023: 12).

[38] A similar problem is familiar from speech act theory. Frequently, the locutionary act – the sentence uttered – leaves ambiguous what illocutionary act is performed (cf. e.g., Strawson, 1964: 439–440). For example, in saying "Close the window" I might either put forth a request or give an order. Still, there is a significant difference. Here, the ambiguity concerns the force with which something is communicated, while the above ambiguity concerns what is communicated.

uptake.[39] Moreover, context and communicative markers of the kind just suggested might work in tandem when it comes to securing uptake.[40]

On to the third question: how can these acts of protest lead to the connection between usurped style items and the respective morally problematic groups getting sufficiently undermined? In §3, I have conceptualised the public connection between some usurped style item and some morally problematic group in terms of social meaning: the sporting of usurped style items has come to socially mean that the people sporting them are members of some such group. Based on this, we can specify the question, asking how these acts of protest can lead to the social meaning of sporting a usurped style item getting sufficiently undermined.

To see how this can work, consider a technique, described by Lawrence Lessig, that institutions, e.g., governments, sometimes use to regulate the social meaning of some X – *ambiguation*. Says Lessig:

> With this technique, the architect [e.g., some institution] tries to give the particular act, the meaning of which is to be regulated, a second meaning as well, one that acts to undermine the […] effects of the first. […], ambiguation is about establishing that X is like Y *or* Z. It simply adds a link without denying an existing link, and thereby blurs just what it is that X is. (1995: 1010)

Recall, if some X has social meaning Y in a given community, then this roughly means that people in this community believe, and believe that people share the belief, that X typically means Y. Thanks to this, people who are aware of the social meaning of X will tend to infer from an instantiation of X that this instantiation means Y. However, if an additional link Z becomes part of the social meaning of X, then this undermines an instantiation of X triggering the inference that this instantiation means Y. That is, people aware of the extended social meaning of X won't be able to straightforwardly infer from an instantiation of X whether this instantiation means Y or Z. Moreover, if, over time, Z becomes the dominant social meaning of X, then people will tend to infer Z – rather than Y – from an instantiation of X.

This ambiguation, I submit, takes place when the above acts of protest are frequent enough and receive uptake frequently enough. Let's zoom in. When an independently existing style item gets usurped by some morally problematic group, it acquires the

[39] This is inspired by what Searle and Vanderveken (2005) call an "illocutionary force indicating device".

[40] Note that the "uptake problem" also presents itself when one, say, protests the usurpation of some general artistic style. In fn. 13, I sketched the possibility that style usurpation might also occur in connection with Romantic-style paintings. An activist who wants to protest the envisioned usurpation by regularly posting images of Romantic paintings on their blog might also be mistaken for a member of a neo-Nazi group. However, as above, context and communicative markers might also help alleviate this problem. For instance, if the images are posted in the context of an article decrying how Romantic paintings have been "usurped" by neo-Nazi groups, then our blogger can reasonably hope that their readers correctly identify their communicative intentions. Or imagine the blogger were to heavily feature anti-Nazi symbols on their blog. Such symbols would presumably function as communicative markers, helping to clarify the respective communicative intentions and thus making securing uptake more likely. That said, it might be more difficult to overcome the uptake problem online than in person. After all, an in-person encounter will often afford more clues concerning one's communicative intentions than an encounter online. (Again, thanks to an anonymous referee for suggesting that I address these issues).

social meaning that sporting it signifies membership in that group. Due to this, people aware of this social meaning will tend to infer from one's sporting that item that one is a group member. However, this changes over time when it becomes common and commonly known that many people sport that style item to protest its usurpation. Here, the style item acquires a second social meaning – that of protest. And this second social meaning interferes with the inference that sporting the style item previously tended to trigger. People who now see someone sport such a style item can't be sure what to infer from this – are they a member of some morally problematic group, or do they want to take a stand against it? Moreover, when the second social meaning becomes dominant, people will likely draw the second – rather than the first – inference.

For the purpose of illustration, consider the reclamation of *Lonsdale* (cf. §1). As a result of the brand's "Lonsdale loves all colours"-campaign, members of many anti-racist groups, as well as the wider public, started wearing *Lonsdale* in protest. And people took notice. They came to believe, and they came to believe that others share the belief, that wearing *Lonsdale* might signify both being a member of a neo-Nazi group *and* taking a stand against such groups. Moreover, arguably, over time, the second interpretation took precedence over the first, such that – at least to a high degree – *Lonsdale* lost the undesired image of being a neo-Nazi brand, emboldening yet further members of the general public to wear it again. Thus, *Lonsdale* was –at least largely – reclaimed.

Let me end this section by noting that an analogous strategy might be used to undermine the public connection between morally problematic groups and the brands that cater to them. If, say, it became common and commonly known, plausibly with the help of communicative markers, that clothes by *Thor Steinar* are frequently worn in protest against far-right groups, then the public connection between the brand and far-right groups might eventually get undermined. That said, there are two important differences between this case and cases of style reclamation. First, unlike with *Lonsdale*, it seems wrong to say that *Thor Steinar* would be reclaimed here. It seems more accurate to say that *Thor Steinar* would get taken away from far-right groups. Second, there is a practical advantage to sporting independently existing style items in protest, insofar as doing so doesn't involve buying from brands that support or at least profit from an ideology one actively opposes.[41]

6 Potential benefits of style reclamation

To explore some potential benefits of style reclamation, let us begin by asking in how far it might help combat at least some of the effects of style usurpation detailed in §4. First, when a style item gets (largely) reclaimed, we can expect the taboo connected

[41] A satirical brand, called *Storch Heinar* ("Stork Heinar"), was founded to explicitly lampoon and protest *Thor Steinar* as well as the far-right more broadly (e.g., Breuer, 2010). Wearing their clothes would be a way to take a stand against *Thor Steiner* (and the far-right) without giving them money in the process. However, wearing *Storch Heinar* would not, in itself, undermine the public connection between *Thor Steinar* and the far-right. At best, parodying *Thor Steinar* in this way might make the brand less desirable to members of far-right groups.

to sporting it to be lifted. Since said item is no longer publicly connected to some morally problematic group (or only weakly so), members of the wider public will likely no longer feel that they have to eschew it. Moreover, once reclaimed, the style item will – on its own – no longer help members of the respective group identify each other and will no longer contribute to that group's distinctive style. Also, relatedly, said style item will – again, on its own – no longer help group members to intimidate others.[42]

That being said, we need to be careful not to overstate the impact of style reclamation in relation to the last two points. As noted, usurped style items are only one of the style tools morally problematic groups have at their disposal. For instance, many clothing brands now specifically cater to the far-right market. Hence, members of far-right groups possess alternatives to usurped style items that help them identify each other, create a distinctive group style, and stoke fear in others.[43] Viewed from this perspective, style reclamation – even of many usurped style items – might seem but a drop in the ocean.

However, we mustn't neglect the benefits of the individual acts that, cumulatively, can lead to style reclamation. In §5, I have characterised these acts as communicative acts of protest: one sports a usurped style item to protest its usurpation by some morally problematic group as well as the group itself. These acts can have several benefits for those performing them and those witnessing them. Call the former *self-directed benefits* and the latter *other-directed benefits*.

It is frequently pointed out in the literature on slurs that the reclamatory use of a slur can feel empowering to members of the group targeted by it (cf. e.g., Cepollaro & de Sa, 2023; Galinsky et al., 2003; Popa-Wyatt, 2020): By choosing to self-label with a word used to derogate one based on one's group membership, one effectively takes this word out of the mouths of those who weaponise it against one. One takes, if only for a moment, control over its use. And this can give one a sense of power over that word and – by extension – over those who use it against one. Something similar seems true regarding sporting usurped style items in protest. Although some morally problematic group might not directly target one, one might feel despair over its actual or perceived power. However, through engaging in this form of protest, one takes, if only in a limited way, control over the use of that style item. And this can give one some sense of power over that style item and – by extension – over the group that has usurped it.

Moreover, as C. Thi Nguyen observes, certain objects and our engagement with them can serve to remind us of the commitments we made. For instance, regularly wearing my wedding band can remind me of my commitment to my partner (cf. Nguyen, 2019: 978). Say one commits oneself to stand up against fascist elements

[42] This is not to say that style reclamation has no pitfalls. For instance, when style reclamation is mid-process, it might help members of morally problematic groups hide in plain sight and afford them plausible deniability should the need arise – e.g., "No, I am not a Nazi. All kinds of people wear *Lonsdale*". (I will address further potential pitfalls connected to style reclamation later in this section).

[43] As previously envisioned, one might employ strategies analogous to those that can lead to style reclamation to undermine the public connection between morally problematic groups and the brands that cater to them. However, as also pointed out, doing so comes at the practical cost of buying from those one actively opposes.

in one's country. Though laudable, this commitment might get pushed to the back of one's mind while navigating the toil of daily existence – keeping appointments, managing one's workload, being there for the people in one's life, etc. Sporting a usurped style item in protest isn't only a way to stay true to that commitment – in however limited a way – it can also remind one of that very commitment. That is, doing so might help one to, once again, bring one's larger commitment into focus – to renew it, keep it alive and fresh.

To see some of the other-directed benefits of such acts of protest, let us begin by considering a case presented by David Shoemaker and Manuel Vargas:

> Tony likes to eat his lunch near the sidewalk and watch the women stroll by. Today he calls out to a young woman (Bev), "Hey, baby! Why don't you smile? Don't worry, I'm definitely smiling as I watch you walk away!" He then makes a series of kissing sounds. Sarah, walking directly behind Bev, stops and yells at Tony: "What is your problem? Why can't you leave women alone? Don't you understand how uncomfortable that is to hear, how harassing it is?" (2021: 588)

As Shoemaker and Vargas point out, through protesting Tony's catcalling Bev, Sarah – intentionally or unintentionally – sends a number of different signals to different audiences. To Tony, his co-workers, and potential witnesses, Sarah signals that Tony's behaviour is not ok and that she won't stand for it. Receiving this signal might somewhat deter Tony from behaving this way in the future. Also, it might deter Tony's co-workers from aping him. Moreover, the example set by Sarah might inspire witnesses to follow her lead – to themselves stand up to this kind of behaviour in the future. Finally, Sarah's behaviour sends a signal of solidarity to Bev. It signals to Bev that Sarah knows Tony's behaviour is wrong and that Sarah has got her back (cf. 2021: 590).

While sporting usurped style items in protest might not take as much courage as protesting a catcaller to his face,[44] I want to suggest that it can send similar signals and thus be beneficial in similar ways. First, by engaging in this form of protest, one can signal – to members of morally problematic groups and the general public – that one takes a stand against the group that has usurped the style item.[45] To members of the respective group, this might serve as a healthy reminder that their views are not shared and, in fact, abhorred by many. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, acting in this way cannot only help remind oneself of one's commitment (see above). Thanks to its signalling function, doing so can also remind others of their commitment to, say, stand up to fascist elements in their country – or inspire such a commitment. It might even inspire others also to engage – maybe only in little and mundane ways – in such acts of protest throughout their daily lives. Lastly, through this use of usurped style items, one can send a signal of solidarity to members of targeted

[44] Though that depends on one's environment. If one, say, lives in a neighbourhood with a high density of neo-Nazis, then engaging in such acts might indeed require a great deal of courage.

[45] Levy identifies the signalling of taking a stand on moral issues as one of the central functions of public moral discourse (cf. Levy, 2021: 9554–9555).

groups. By taking a public stand against a morally problematic group in this fashion, one can – on the flip side – also signal to the latter that one is an ally of theirs.

Note, however, that, likely, sporting usurped style items in protest can have these other-directed benefits only if doing so is successful as a communicative act and not perceived as insincere in the way specified below. In §5, I have argued that communicative success requires securing uptake from at least some of one's audience. And I have suggested that one way of failing to secure uptake is being mistaken for a member of the morally problematic group in question. When this happens, one's act of protest won't send the positive signals sketched above. What is more, even when one's protest receives uptake, it might still be viewed as insincere in so far as it might be perceived as an instance of what Justin Tosi and Brandon Warmke call "moral grandstanding"; i.e., "a contribution to public discourse that is motivated to a significant degree by the desire to impress others" (Grubbs et al., 2019: 4; also cf.; Tosi & Warmke, 2016). As they put it, "[t]o grandstand is to turn one's contribution to public discourse into a vanity project" (Tosi & Warmke, 2016: 199). That is, when one protests in this fashion, some might think that one does so not because one is committed to the relevant cause but because one wants to cast a shining light on one's character. In this case, one's behaviour won't send positive messages to those who perceive it this way – they will neither view it as a source of inspiration nor a sign of (true) solidarity. On the contrary, they might view it as a cause for cynicism: they might wonder whether acts of public protest are often less about promoting worthwhile causes and more about the protester's vanity.[46]

Though serious, these concerns are quite general in nature. For instance, when one uses a slur in a reclamatory way, one might also fail to secure uptake and thus be perceived as propagating hate speech (cf. Cepollaro & de Sa, 2023: 12–13; Herbert, 2015). Moreover, it seems the insincerity-worry pertains to other forms of protest, too – e.g., people might think that one uses a slur in a reclamatory way mainly because one wants to be seen in a favourable light, or that one participates in a protest march mainly for this reason.[47] Hence, the concerns raised above shouldn't make us *especially* wary when it comes to sporting usurped style items in protest. Also, recall that the perception of such an act might vary between different audiences. Some might mistake one for a member of a morally problematic group, while others get what one is up to. And, of the latter, some might perceive one as engaging in moral grandstanding, while others perceive one as being sincerely committed to a worthwhile cause. Hence, there is hope that, on balance, one's act has a positive net benefit, even if there are undesirable consequences as well.

Let us now scale up to the societal level. If usurped style items are frequently worn in protest, and if these communicative acts are frequently successful and perceived as sincere, then, cumulatively, they can help positively influence the political climate in a society. Thanks to the signals these acts ideally send, they can help raise social

[46] For a more detailed discussion of the relationship between moral grandstanding and cynicism, see Tosi and Warmke (2016): 210–211).

[47] Though the danger of one's acts of protest being perceived as insincere might diminish in proportion to the (perceived) potential costs one might incur for engaging in these acts. For related discussion, see, for example, Lai (2021) and Shoemaker and Vargas (2021).

awareness that people are actively opposed to the respective morally problematic groups in their society and are willing to take a stand against them in at least a small way.[48] Such awareness, in turn, might contribute to or spark further, more significant forms of protest that help keep, say, fascist elements at the fringes of society, rather than allowing them to (further) metastasise into the mainstream.[49] Moreover, when a usurped style item gets reclaimed, as arguably happened with *Lonsdale*, this marks a victory in the cause against morally problematic groups. However small and symbolic that victory might be in itself.

In his essay "The neo-Nazi Next to Me" journalist Thorsten Fuchs concludes by saying: "The fight against right-wing extremism is always also a fight over symbols. Over clothes, signs, sentences or words, which – if left undisputed – remain as they are and will eventually be regarded as normal" (2016, my translation).[50] Assuming what I have argued is on the right track, combating style usurpation can make a worthwhile contribution to that fight.

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[48] The considerations presented here bear some similarity to Langton's (2018) discussion of "blocking" as a form of counterspeech. Langton argues that a speaker who engages in hate speech thereby presupposes authority over what is permissible to say, an authority that is obtained by default if nobody objects (cf. 2018: 152; for some critical discussion, see; Saul, 2021: 172). However, this presupposition of authority might get blocked if a hearer protests against the speaker's hateful tirade, making it clear that they take the sentiments expressed by the speaker to be unacceptable (cf. Langton, 2018: 158, 161). Similarly, when a member of a morally problematic group publicly sports a usurped style item to showcase their ideology, they presuppose authority over what that style item stands for and, by extension, over what ideologies are permissible to display. And, as above, such authority might be obtained by default if nobody objects. In light of this, sporting usurped style items in protest can be viewed as an attempt to block this presupposition of authority. By sporting a usurped style item in protest, one makes clear that one is unwilling to thus concede the "ideological landscape" to members of the group in question. (Thanks to an anonymous referee for alerting me to this similarity.).

[49] Here, I partly draw on Táíwò (2022): 305–306).

[50] The German title is "Der Neonazi neben mir". The original quote reads: "Der Kampf gegen den Rechtsextremismus ist immer auch ein Streit um Symbole. Um Kleidung, Zeichen, Sätze oder Worte, die unwidersprochen stehen bleiben und irgendwann als normal gelten"(quoted from Miller-Idriss, 2017: 222; as far as I'm aware, the essay is no longer available online).

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