

Visual symbols as a tool of cultural and environmental resistance: the example of the movement "Sakkar al-Siyap" (Close the Siap) of Sfax-Tunisia

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ABSTRACT

In the context of the rise of environmental movements and the intensification of popular demonstrations against industrial pollution, visual stimuli have become a central element of the expression of disagreement and the demand for environmental justice. In this context, this article focuses on the analysis of visual symbols within the Sfax movement as an expression of environmental injustice and a mechanism for stimulating collective consciousness. This article is based on social semiotics and Pierre Bourdieu's theory of symbolic power to deconstruct the relationship between the signifier and the social and political signifier. "shows how resistance is embodied through the image, because it is loaded with deep cultural connotations and anchored in the context. In this context, the visual symbol is not only seen but also felt as an act of resistance.

Introduction

In environmental movements, visual symbols appear as effective tools of resistance that transcend the limits of verbal language to become a visual act loaded with meanings and connotations, because the symbol is not only an image or an aesthetic visual form, but a bearer of profound messages that translate the suffering of peoples and embody their resistance against environmental and cultural injustice. In this context, visual symbols are an essential tool to denounce environmental violations and a means of expressing cultural identity, because they are not only seen, but also read and interpreted in the light of their social and political context. The study of visual symbols is therefore an essential sociological entry point to understand the mechanisms of formation of environmental movements and their modes of action in the social space, particularly those who use culture and the environment as a platform of resistance against models of domination and marginalization.

This article examines the "sakkar al-siyap" movement in Sfax, and more specifically its visual slogan "Yazi takhnakna", as a living example of how visual

symbols can be used to resist environmental injustice. We use social semiotics as a theoretical framework to analyze the way symbols and signs work in the social fabric and understand their meanings in the cultural contexts that produced them. We also rely on Bourdieu's theory of symbolic power to decipher the deep dimensions that control the circulation of symbols and the way they are transformed into tools of resistance within the social space. The question we are trying to answer is the following: how can visual symbols be a tool of environmental and cultural resistance, and how do they contribute to denouncing environmental injustice?

The question of our study consists in understanding the role of visual stimuli used in the "Sakkar al-Siyap" movement from a socio-semiotic point of view, and how visual symbols become an engine of cultural and environmental resistance. The study starts from the following question: "How are visual stimuli used in environmental movements as an engine of cultural resistance? How does the visual symbol contribute to denouncing environmental injustice? If every symbol has a signifier and a signified, what is the relationship between the visual form of the symbol (the signifier) and the cultural and social meanings that it carries (the signified)? To what extent can this interaction between the signifier and the signified be considered as a key to understanding the ability of visual symbols to fulfill a function of protest and resistance in crisis contexts?

This study aims to test the following hypotheses:

1. The more a visual symbol is not loaded with deep cultural and social connotations, the more it has the power to denounce environmental injustices.
2. The wider the interactive relationship between the signifier and the signified is in the visual symbol, the more powerful the visual form becomes to evoke the social and political meanings linked to the cultural context, transforming the symbol into an effective tool of resistance against environmental and cultural hegemony.

The objectives of this study are, 1) Understand the role of the visual symbol in the resistance to symbolic and cultural hegemony. 2) Reveal how visual stimuli can be used to denounce environmental injustices. 3) study the relationship between the visual form of the symbol (the signifier) and the cultural and political meanings that it reflects.

Theoretical approach

For non-specialists, visual sociology is often reduced to the sociology of the visible (SIROIS, 2023), but sociologists have proven that sociological semiotics is

not limited to the interpretation of symbols, but seeks to relate these symbols to the social and historical field that produced them, which makes it an effective tool for understanding the social order, whether in its reproduction or in its opposition. In this context, symbols become militant tools that express society's protest environmental pollution and demonstrate its resistance to current policies. Thus, social semiotics reinforces the role of symbols in the reproduction or questioning of the social order, which makes them an essential element in shaping the identity of the protest movement and directing it towards achieving tangible change. By infusing it with new concepts such as social structure and interpretation, sociological semiotics can not only construct images and signs that are interconnected to form a model of signs but also relate this model to the socio-historical field that produced it, (BOUAZIZI, 2010). More than a theory, social semiotics is a method of collective investigation on the meanings given to images, because social semiotics seeks to study the interaction between the materiality of signs and the social context of perception and reception, semiotics seems to be more than the ambition of a theoretical project for the study of meaning, it seems to be an attempt to establish a new signifier after having transformed the entire vocabulary of the world into signs and each sign can refer to a meaning, (AL-SHARKAWI 2023).

Semiotics, as introduced by Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce, is an approach to understanding signs as communication systems that produce meanings in specific social contexts. De Saussure's semiotics is based on a set of pillars, the most important of which is the duality of structure and meaning, in the sense that a word consists of two faces, the signifier "Signifier" (physical form), that is to say the phonetic image of the noun, and the second face is the signified "Signified" (meaning), that is to say the mental image and the relationship between the signifier and the signified. The relationship between the two faces is arbitrary, (DE SAUSSURE, 1985), and since the signifier and the signified are inseparable, the existence of one depends on the existence of the other, (AL-FATTAH, 2010), the relationship between the signifier and the signified is a relationship that establishes a perception that governs vision according to correlation. This allows us to analyze the slogan "Yazzi takhnakna" of the environmental protest movement "Sakkar al-Siyap" as an expressive sign that combines the textual form with deep meanings related to the suffering of the population. Beyond its literal meaning, this slogan becomes a militant symbol that reflects the reality of society and expresses its protest environmental pollution, reinforcing its impact as an effective tool to crystallize the identity of the movement and direct it towards achieving tangible change.

According to Bourdieu, those who exercise this authority must be able to articulate their intentions and convince others of their ideas using appropriate linguistic and rhetorical techniques. By influencing people's minds, their perception of the world and the relationships it maintains changes, which is reflected in their behavior and ultimately leads to influencing the social world and orienting it in a direction that serves the interests of those who produce and promote the discourse, (BOUBIRI, 2023). Thus, what makes symbolic power effective is that individuals voluntarily accept it, because it seems natural and justified, when it serves to reproduce the existing social order. Symbolic power is therefore not only a communication process, but a mechanism for influencing individuals' perceptions and behaviors through the construction of discourses and semantic frameworks that seem neutral or objective. It is even more effective if it is based on the participation of individuals themselves in the establishment of values and norms that may serve certain interests without them being fully aware of it. Bourdieu thus underlines the importance of the analysis of discourses and symbols as key.

Method

The study is qualitative in nature. John Creswell believes that the researcher in a qualitative approach "is a data collection tool that gathers words or images and analyzes them in an inductive way, which allows him to focus on the nature of the participants and describe the process in an expressive and convincing way" (CRESWELL, 1988). It is within this framework that our research, in which we have chosen understanding as a methodology, seeks to understand the behavior of the actors of the "Sakkar al-Siyap" movement, highlighting how visual symbols have been used to reframe the discourse of resistance and create broad community solidarity. What makes symbolic power effective is its voluntary acceptance by individuals, because it seems natural and justified, when in reality it works to reproduce the existing social order. Symbolic power is invisible and can only be exercised with the complicity of those who refuse to admit that they are subject to it and even to practice it according to its rules (BOURDIEU, 2007). Symbolic power is therefore not only a communication process, but a mechanism for influencing individuals' perceptions and behaviors through the construction of discourses and semantic frameworks that appear neutral or objective. It is even more effective if it is based on the participation of individuals themselves in the establishment of values and norms that may serve certain interests without them being fully aware of it.

Field of research: Sfax is located between the coast and the south of Tunisia and is bordered to the east by the Mediterranean Sea, to the north by the state of Mahdia, to the west by the states of Sidi Bouzid and Kairouan, and to the south by the state of Gabes. Its area is 7,545 km, or 4.6% of the total area of the country, and it is inhabited by 999,275 inhabitants according to 2018 estimates from the National Statistics Institute, while the population density is about 1,324 inhabitants/km². Several oil and natural gas fields are scattered in several areas of Sfax, as well as a large phosphate refining plant in Gafsa and phosphoric acid productio, (see figure1).



Figure 1: Study area Sfax Governorate- Tunisia

The research tools: The sociological approach is considered one of the most capable of revealing what an image is, whether in the field of language as a source of mental images or in the field of visual arts as visual sensory images. Given the predominance of the image in the human mind today, it was inevitable that a formalist school would emerge, which would take the image or the form as its title. As part of our research, we have relied on the following techniques.

The technique of semiotic analysis of images : The semiotic analysis of images or visual sociology is a research technique and an analytical approach that focuses on the understanding of social phenomena through visual images and symbols. There is no doubt that understanding the meaning of an image or determining its meaning is one of the most difficult and confusing questions for most researchers. Perhaps this is due to the fact that the term image is one of the most ambiguous words due to the diversity of its meanings. It has been defined in the sociological field as a kind of sign and a sign, in its simplest sense, is something material, reminiscent of something moral (MUSTAFA, 2011). This justifies the use

of the semiotic analysis technique which, in our opinion, is very suitable for the study of protests and activist symbols such as the slogans of the "Sakkar al-Siyap" movement. This technique will help us to read several visual conceptions, such as the "takhnakna" conception adopted by the protesters of the "Sakkar al-Siyap" movement.

Table 1. The semiotic analysis of the visual symbols of the "Sakkar al-Siyap" movement

Axe principal	Sous-thèmes	Preuves
Visual symbols as a tool of cultural and environmental resistance	The role of symbolism in denouncing environmental injustice	This image symbolizes the deliberate negative impact of the industry on the environment and society.
The signifier and the signified in the visual symbol	<i>The visual Signifier</i>	The image of a child symbolizes life and that of a fireplace symbolizes death.
	Social and political significance	The rifle is a symbol of violence and environmental terrorism.

We can see from the painting that visual conceptions, despite their simplicity, carry many meanings, hence the importance of using simple symbols and adopting expressive simplicity to penetrate the depth of feelings and evoke feelings of fear of the present and fear of the future.

Semi-directive interview

The interview is one of the most effective methodological tools for investigating and collecting data due to its flexibility. This is a "direct technique used to interview individuals individually and, in some cases, groups in a semi-guided way" (ANGERS, 1997). For example, our central question on the importance of visual symbols as an engine of cultural and environmental resistance has been divided into sub-questions, the first being the role of the symbol in exposing environmental injustice, and the second the relationship between the form of the visual symbol (the signifier) and the cultural and social meanings (the signified) it carries, and how this relationship contributes to the context of resistance, which is part of the process of creating the interview guide. Below we present an example of an analysis of the transcripts of the interviews used in our study.

Table 2. Interview analysis grid Related table

Main themes	Sous-thèmes	Frequencies
Visual stimuli as a driver of cultural and environmental resistance	The role of symbolism in denouncing environmental injustice	Environmental injustices Organized crime the transition of the factory from an industrial object to a tool of threat and destruction
The signifier and the signified in the visual symbol	The visual Signifier Social and political significance	Direct threat Pollution is a daily threat to everyone the gun is a symbol of violence Pollution is a problem that cannot be ignored Pollution is an organized crime

Table 3. Extraction of maintenance certificates

Main themes	Examples of evidence
Visual stimuli as a driver of cultural and environmental resistance	"The image of the child choking next to the fireplace is a symbolic representation of the environmental injustices suffered by the inhabitants of the region. "When the factory is presented as a weapon, it becomes obvious that the pollution is not accidental, but rather an organized crime against the environment and the population. "The visual symbol served as a provocative tool to denounce the perpetrators of these acts and encourage people to take a stand against this injustice.
The signifier and the signified in the visual symbol	"The use of symbols, such as the child choking, has helped unite the protesters around the issue of pollution, because this symbol has become a direct tool to show the threat to everyone, especially to future generations.

Population

We have selected five respondents divided according to the following table:

Table 4. Representativeness of the sample in the "Sakkar al-Siyap" movement

Subject	Profession	Age	Role in the movement
1	Retired professor	65	General coordinator of the movement
2	Retired professor	66	Spokesperson of the movement
3	Lawyer	49	Interested in legal affairs in the movement
4	Doctor	47	Interested in publishing medical reports related to environmental pollution
5	Lawyer	54	Interested in legal affairs in Montreal

The research sample was purposefully selected and included the most important actors of the "Sakkar al-Siyap" movement. The table shows the group of respondents participating in the Sakkar al-Siyap movement, indicating their age,

profession and the role they play in this movement. In terms of profession, the group includes retired professors, lawyers and doctors. The age of the participants varies from 47 to 66 years. The roles are clearly divided between the movement's management (general coordinator and spokesperson) and specialized aspects such as law and health, each person having a specific and important role that contributes to the success of the movement.

Results

Visual stimuli as an engine of cultural and environmental resistance

The use of the shape of the factory chimney as a tool for expressing social and environmental concerns, and its materialization in the form of a rifle barrel, is not only a physical representation, but also a way to convey a serious message about the environmental consequences that threaten society. The analogy between the factory chimney and the barrel of a rifle gives the issue a moral character that places pollution in the context of collective responsibility. It shows that the inhabitants not only oppose the plant as a polluter, but also as a symbol of the violation of their fundamental rights to live in a healthy and sustainable environment. In doing so, visual symbols become a tool for promoting cultural resistance that rejects this official narrative and demands environmental justice, seeking to transform culture into a tool for political change (CASTELLS, 2017). In this image, symbolic violence is used against exploitative regimes, helping to push the movement towards environmental and social justice.

The image of the factory chimney in the form of a rifle barrel is not only a representation of environmental pollution, but a symbol of cultural resistance that seeks to change the social and political realities associated with environmental conflicts. Thanks to this visual symbolism, society becomes aware of the relationship between pollution and power, which stimulates the participation and mobilization of the masses against the regimes that contribute to the destruction of the environment. The images, whether monstrous or discreet, striking or hypnotic, manual or automatic, static or moving, in black and white or in color, silent or spoken, exert an action and provoke a reaction (BOUALLEGUI & al., 2025). Visual symbols become an effective tool of resistance by creating a collective consciousness that encourages individuals to act and participate in the achievement of environmental justice. This indicates that the symbols are not limited to the expression of environmental suffering, but that they have become an effective way to express the rejection of policies that threaten the rights of residents. (BOUALLEGUI & al., 2025).

Visual symbols are a powerful tool in environmental protest movements, as they allow complex messages to be communicated quickly and effectively, to denounce injustice and to alert the public to social and environmental problems.

In the context of the "Sakkar Al-Siyap" movement, the visual symbol is used not only to communicate the idea of environmental pollution, but also to show the environmental and social injustice suffered by the local community. Through symbolic images, the painful reality materialized, and the visual symbol becomes a tool of protest that exposes oppressive practices that cause damage to the environment and society. Thanks to visual symbols representing the factory's chimney like the barrel of a rifle, the factory goes from being an industrial entity to being a tool of oppression that attacks the environment and society. This symbol reflects the environmental violence exerted by large companies against nature and human health. The visual image of the factory chimney, which resembles the barrel of a rifle, symbolizes the growing threat of industrial pollution. The smoke that rises from the chimney is used in this image to imitate the ammunition that comes out of the barrel of a rifle, which reinforces the idea that the factory is not limited to production but has become an instrument of environmental destruction. In this context, Respondent 3 explained:

"When the chimney is represented as a gun barrel, it becomes obvious that the pollution is not accidental, but rather an organized crime against the environment and the population".

He stated in the same context (5):

"This image revealed environmental injustice in a shocking way, which allowed the public to consider the plant as a common enemy".

These statements show that visual stimuli are not only a means of expression, but also a powerful tool to frame and guide public discourse. By representing the chimney as the barrel of a gun, we reframe the relationship between the inhabitants and the factory, moving from an industrial presence to an existential threat, which triggers collective action and encourages individuals to unite against the source of the danger. The image thus becomes a militant symbol that mixes social criticism with a call for change in environmental policy.

The chimney in the shape of a rifle barrel represents the economic and industrial power used against society, so that the symbol becomes an exhibition of this power and a catalyst for political resistance. This symbol highlights the relationship between large companies and the regimes in place and reveals the power of repression of factories against the environment and society. Visual symbols, particularly those that derive their power from symbolic violence, reshape the social narrative that presents large companies as engines of development and prosperity. Through images that show industrial pollution as a

direct threat, the environment is presented as the victim of an unequal struggle between economic and environmental forces.

The signifier and the signified in the visual symbol:

The visual signifier: As for the image (01), the child wearing a mask, it is one of the most powerful visual images used by the "Sakar al-Sayyab" movement. The child is a symbol of innocence and hope, and the mask is proof of the direct threat that pollution poses to public health. The presence of the child in the mask conveys a clear and direct message about the seriousness of environmental pollution and its impact on the most vulnerable groups in society.

The respondent (5) noted:

"The use of symbols, such as the child choking, has helped unite the protesters around the issue of pollution, because this symbol has become a direct tool to show the threat to everyone, especially to future generations."

The presence of a child in a mask sends a direct and poignant message: environmental pollution has become a daily danger that threatens everyone, starting with the most vulnerable groups, such as children, who are considered the future of society. This visual representation not only emphasizes the aggressive dimension of pollution but also allows protest movements to use the symbol to build a global narrative of resistance, showing pollution as a direct enemy of society, thus strengthening the power of demands and increasing their impact in the public sphere. The visual symbol of the image (02), the image of the factory in the form of a rifle, is a visual element loaded with several deep connotations that go beyond the direct meaning. Through this image, the factory is simulating direct violence against the environment. This visual form implies the transition from an industrial object to a threatening and destructive tool, because factories that have long been symbols of industrial development and economic growth are now becoming symbols of destruction and risk. The smoke from the factory is an important visual representation. By comparing the smoke to bullets coming from the barrel of a gun, we reinforce the idea that the environmental pollution caused by these factories is not only a negative impact on the environment, but a serial environmental violence that leads to direct damage to public health, a kind of aggression against life and the existence of the environment.

In this context, the defendant (2):

"The rifle is a universal symbol of violence and, when associated with the factory, it explicitly condemns institutions that exploit the environment without worrying about the consequences."

This image makes pollution an attack on society, just as a gun attacks a victim, redefining environmental pollution as an act of aggression that must be confronted. The analogy

between smoke and bullets suggests that pollution is not only an environmental problem, but a violence directed against the individuals and communities exposed to it. Lead poses the deadly threat, giving the public the impression that this type of pollution can have devastating long-term effects.

The social and political significance: The socio-political importance of the photo of number 01, The child in the Mask, lies in the strong message it conveys about the permanent environmental threat and its impact on future generations. On a social level, the image highlights the most vulnerable members of society, children, who represent the future, and underlines everyone's responsibility to protect future generations from the dangers of pollution.

The respondent (4) stated the following:

"The choice of a child moralizes the demands, makes them more urgent in the eyes of the public and those responsible, and highlights pollution as a problem that cannot be ignored."

In terms of the political dimension, this image is a direct call to action against pollution, highlighting the need for the state and institutions to intervene in the treatment of this environmental problem that negatively affects the lives of citizens. By associating pollution with the child, we are moving from an environmental issue to a human rights and moral issue, which encourages the community to demand a change in current policies.

Mentioned (1)

"This symbol moralizes the demands, makes the issue more urgent in the eyes of public opinion and those responsible, and highlights pollution as an organized crime against the environment and human beings. "

The image therefore represents not only an environmental threat, but also a social crisis that requires a rapid political response, highlighting the deep interaction between the social and political dimensions of this issue. As for the socio-political significance, in image 02, the image of the factory in the form of a rifle directly refers to the social injustice caused by large industries. In modern societies, factories are often considered as sources of economic growth and employment, but in this context, the visual symbol shows that factories are not only responsible for environmental pollution but also contribute to social injustice. The factory, which seems to point the barrel of a rifle at society, reinforces the feeling of being constantly threatened by the permanent exploitation of the environment. For some, the idea of economic development represented by

factories becomes an illusion that masks the environmental damage that affects not only the earth or the environment, but also individuals and society.

The aggressiveness manifested by this symbol expresses the absolute contempt of the companies that own these factories for the risks to which citizens are exposed due to air, water and ocean pollution. The symbol indicates that these big-budget companies have no regard for human rights, nor for the long-term damage caused to people's health or the ecological identity of the region. At the end of this analysis, visual symbols such as the image of the child in the mask and the image of the factory with the rifle carry strong social and political connotations that contribute to the collective identity of the Sakkr al-Siyap movement. These images go beyond the expression of environmental suffering to become a collective call to action against environmental and political injustice. Thanks to these symbols, the message is addressed directly to those responsible and to society, strengthening the power of environmental claims and catalyzing social and political change.

Discussion

The results of this study provide substantial empirical support for the first hypothesis, which posits that visual symbols within socio-environmental movements function not merely as communicative devices but evolve into tools of cultural and environmental resistance. This transformation is clearly observed in the emblematic images produced by the Sakkar al-Siyap movement, where visual symbols act not only as a mirror to collective suffering but as catalysts for reinterpreting reality and mobilizing public awareness.

Among the most salient visual representations examined is the "fireplace-rifle" composite image. Originally designed as a critique of toxic emissions from industrial facilities in Sfax, the symbol presents a traditional chimney emitting not smoke, but the silhouette of a rifle barrel. This merging of domestic imagery with militaristic connotation symbolically transforms the perception of industrial pollution: no longer seen as passive or unintended, it is re-coded as a violent and targeted act against the community (Mitchell, 2005). The image condenses layers of socio-environmental trauma, linking ecological degradation to broader narratives of structural violence. In doing so, it supports the hypothesis that symbols can encapsulate complex social discourses in highly compressed visual forms (Barthes, 1977).

This symbolic reconfiguration aligns with Bourdieu's (2001) theory of symbolic power, wherein the image becomes a site of ideological struggle. The protestors are not simply communicating a grievance; they are disrupting the

semiotic order imposed by dominant institutions. Rather than using the image for direct informational transmission, activists engage in what Bourdieu describes as symbolic inversion—reframing state or corporate narratives to expose environmental injustice and challenge legitimacy (Bourdieu, 2001). This dynamic illustrates how the fireplace-rifle image becomes not just a symbol, but a counter-discourse—one that mobilizes indignation, repositions blame, and offers a platform for communal identity around resistance.

This finding explicitly confirms the first hypothesis: the role of visual imagery is not confined to message transmission but extends to resistance and social confrontation. Each iteration of this imagery disseminated across banners, graffiti, and digital platforms functions as a political act—a semiotic resistance in line with post-structuralist critiques of language and power (Foucault, 1980). The use of domestic or childhood motifs, such as the masked child holding a sign, further heightens emotional engagement and complicates the semiotic layering. The child, in this context, becomes a stand-in for future generations, symbolically evoking innocence, vulnerability, and moral urgency (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

These observations also lend strong support to the second hypothesis, grounded in semiotic theory, particularly the work of Ferdinand de Saussure (1985), which emphasizes the relational nature of meaning between the signifier (the form) and the signified (the concept). In the protest context, the images acquire new, context-specific meanings. The fireplace no longer signifies warmth or domesticity—it now connotes toxicity, aggression, and repression. The mask, once a neutral health precaution, now signifies enforced silence, the dehumanization of life under pollution, and an atmosphere of suffocation, both literal and metaphorical.

The “child in the mask” visual is especially illustrative in this regard. Appearing on placards and social media, this image features a young child wearing a protective mask, standing before factory backdrops or bleak urban settings. The image invokes a signifier (the child) that, in other contexts, might convey hope or potential; here, it becomes a sign of fear and systemic neglect. The mask, too, evolves semantically—from public health precaution to a metaphor for environmental silencing. This dual displacement of signification demonstrates the flexibility of symbolic meaning—a key tenet of Saussure’s linguistic theory (Saussure, 1985). Moreover, these images exemplify the principle of polysemy, where a single symbol may carry multiple, contextually driven meanings (Hall, 1997). A protestor’s placard bearing a solitary image—a broken tap or a dead fish—does not speak in one voice. Rather, it invites interpretation, debate, and

solidarity, becoming what Roland Barthes (1977) termed a relay in the circuit of meaning-making. In this sense, the protest images do not dictate meaning; they invite participation in its construction.

The dialectical relationship between image and audience also aligns with Gramsci's (1971) notion of counter-hegemony. The visual representations created by Sakkar al-Siyap participants serve to disrupt the dominant "common sense" narrative that frames pollution as an unfortunate but necessary byproduct of industrial growth. Instead, these symbols expose the uneven distribution of environmental harm and position local communities as active agents in the struggle against ecological injustice. Through symbolic disruption, the movement creates what Rancière (2004) refers to as dissensus—a moment where the invisible becomes visible, and the inaudible is heard through visual resistance.

Each visual studied in this research affirms that symbols act not merely as reflections of a social condition but as constructors of political meaning. The process of creating and circulating these images is a performative act—what Butler (1997) terms the reiteration of symbolic codes that subvert existing power structures. For instance, a graffiti mural in Sfax showing a gas mask superimposed on a national flag directly confronts state complicity in environmental degradation, suggesting a loss of sovereignty over basic public health. This form of semiotic protest bypasses institutional channels and engages citizens directly through public space, echoing Lefebvre's (1991) concept of the right to the city.

These findings also reflect the power of collective memory in constructing the meaning of protest images. Many symbols draw upon historical traumas—colonial exploitation, post-independence marginalization—which infuse contemporary grievances with a deeper affective charge (Assmann, 2011). Thus, the image becomes not just a reflection of present conditions, but a palimpsest of intergenerational struggle. The ability of the image to evoke such layered meanings is what makes it a central element of symbolic resistance. In sum, the visual artifacts produced and disseminated by the Sakkar al-Siyap movement empirically validate both research hypotheses. First, that symbols transcend communication to function as active agents of resistance, and second, that their effectiveness is derived from their semiotic complexity—their capacity to shift meaning depending on social and cultural context. These symbols demonstrate that protest is not only enacted through marches or speeches but through the careful crafting of visual interventions that reshape public understanding and reclaim agency in spaces of environmental injustice.

Conclusion

This study clearly demonstrates that visual symbols have evolved beyond their traditional roles as mere tools of communication or aesthetic expression; they now serve as central agents in the articulation of cultural and environmental resistance. The case study of Sakkar al-Siyap illustrates how imagery can function as a potent language of protest, capable of transcending verbal discourse and powerfully denouncing environmental injustice. The hypotheses proposed in this study affirm that the power of visual symbolism lies in the depth and multiplicity of its meanings, where the form (the signifier) intersects with cultural and political significance within a contested social space. Utilizing the lens of sociological semiotics, this research has shown that symbols do not merely reflect reality—they also contribute to its construction. Their interpretation is deeply connected to the social structures that produce them and the conscious agency of actors who deploy them as instruments of symbolic negotiation in the ongoing tension between power and society.

However, this study is not without its limitations. As a qualitative inquiry involving only five respondents, the small sample size inevitably constrains the generalizability of the findings. While the insights gathered offer rich, contextualized understanding of the Sakkar al-Siyap movement, they may not fully capture the diversity of perspectives within the broader activist community in Tunisia. Future research would benefit from expanding the sample and employing comparative or mixed method approaches to further validate and extend the thematic patterns uncovered in this study.

Beyond the local context, the findings of this research offer broader implications for the study of resistance movements across the globe. The symbolic strategies deployed by Sakkar al-Siyap demonstrate how visual semiotics can serve as a unifying discourse in struggles for environmental justice, particularly in regions where traditional modes of protest may be suppressed. These findings open avenues for further exploration of visual activism in different sociopolitical contexts, including how digital media platforms may amplify symbolic messages and transform localized protests into globally resonant movements.

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