

Research Article

Wearing the Nation: Football, Populism, and the Rise of Wearable Political Technologies in Brazil

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Article History

Received 12 Feb 2026

Revised: 03 Apr 2026

Accepted 01 May 2026

Published 15 May 2026

Keywords

football and politics,

populism,

political performance,

affective publics,

visual politics,

nationalism,

Brazil.

**ABSTRACT**

This article examines how Brazil's national football jersey (amarelinha) became a central site of political performance and symbolic contestation during the Bolsonaro period. It advances the concept of political behavior technology to explain this transformation, arguing that the politicisation of the jersey did not result from a simple intrusion of politics into sport, but from the interaction between embodied leadership performance, street mobilisation, platform-based circulation, and affective economies that attached moral meaning to national visibility. Rather than merely representing nationalism, the jersey actively structured political practice by making belonging wearable, repeatable, and publicly recognisable. Methodologically, the study combines genealogical reconstruction, visual-performative analysis, and media-ecological interpretation of key mobilisation dynamics between 2018 and 2022. While celebrity mediation, particularly Neymar's symbolic visibility, contributed to the amplification of politicised meanings, the article rejects single-actor explanations and conceptualises symbolic transformation as the outcome of a broader ecology of mediated performances. The analysis advances a critical-normative argument: although symbolic capture is always contingent, the temporary monopolisation of national imagery by exclusionary political projects constitutes a democratic pathology because it restricts access to the symbolic commons and reshapes conditions of public recognition. By linking populist aesthetics to material infrastructures of visibility, the article contributes to Latin American political sociology and cultural studies by showing how everyday cultural artefacts become both instruments of symbolic power and arenas of democratic contestation.

1. INTRODUCTION: WEARING THE NATION

In Brazil, few objects condense national belonging as powerfully as the yellow football jersey. For decades, it functioned as a mass-cultural emblem of collective celebration, creative play, and everyday patriotism associated with the ritual pleasures of futebol. More than a symbol, the jersey operated as a material interface between bodies and an imagined Community, connecting street practices, stadium rituals, media spectacles, and affective identification. Yet over the past decade, and most sharply during the Bolsonaro cycle, this emblematic garment became entangled in political antagonism. Wearing the amarelinha increasingly signalled not only support for the national team, but political alignment, moral identity, and a visible claim to the nation itself.

This article investigates that transformation. It asks how the yellow jersey moved from a widely shared cultural artifact to a contested political marker within Brazil's polarised public sphere, and how such a shift became socially legible and enforceable in everyday life. The central claim is that politicisation did not occur simply because politics "invaded" football, nor because supporters opportunistically adopted national colours. Rather, the jersey became a political behavior technology: a material artifact capable of organising political practice by coordinating bodies, affects, and visibility. It did not merely represent nationalism; it actively helped enact a particular form of nationalism through repetitive, recognisable, and highly circulable performances across public space and digital platforms [1].

This perspective resonates with recent theoretical work on nationalism as practice rather than ideology alone. As Rogers Brubaker argues, nationalism should be understood less as a stable doctrine and more as a set of everyday practices through which nationhood is enacted, performed, and reproduced in situational contexts. From this viewpoint, national belonging is not only narrated; it is embodied, displayed, and materially mediated. The Brazilian jersey exemplifies this dynamic: a mundane object transformed into a portable infrastructure of political identification[2].

The analytical wager of the article is that national symbolism is not only interpreted; it is worn, circulated, and socially regulated. Affective attachments to symbols are not private emotional states but socially produced relations that bind

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feelings to objects through histories of repetition and circulation. As Sara Ahmed (2014, p. 23) observes [1], “feelings may stick to some objects, and slide over others.” This affective “stickiness” is politically consequential: it helps explain how the same piece of cloth can index moral virtue for some and moral threat for others, turning everyday material culture into a boundary-making device under conditions of polarisation.

1.1 Populism beyond discourse: from style to infrastructure

The argument is situated within broader debates on populism, political performance, and democratic crisis in Latin America. A growing literature conceptualises populism not primarily as ideology or policy orientation, but as a political style oriented toward visibility, emotional polarisation, and performative construction of “the people” against internal enemies. In this perspective, populism operates less as a doctrinal package than as a repertoire of embodied and mediated practices. As Benjamin Moffitt (2016, p.54) argues, populism “is not a particular entity or ‘thing’ but a political style that is done” [15]. This performative turn is particularly productive for analysing *bolsonarismo*, where political identification was repeatedly staged through gestures, affects, visual codes, and media-friendly spectacles rather than coherent programmatic commitments. Yet even performance-oriented accounts tend to concentrate on rhetoric, leadership style, or communication strategies. This article extends that focus by shifting attention from populism as discourse and spectacle to populism as material-affective infrastructure [3].

Following Lisa Wedeen’s (2015) work on performative politics under authoritarian and hybrid regimes, political loyalty is not only produced through persuasion but through ritualised participation, visible compliance, and embodied enactment. Objects that can be worn, repeated, photographed, and circulated become central to this process. The football jersey is particularly effective in this regard: it is intimate (close to the body), public (visually legible), and scalable (mass-circulable across media environments). This combination allows political belonging to be enacted without verbal articulation [4].

This infrastructural dimension also clarifies a key mechanism of political performance. As Jeffrey C. Alexander (2011) argues, staged political action depends on convincing audiences that constructed identities appear authentic rather than artificial. Wearable artifacts operate as symbolic props that stabilise visual coherence, enhance affective resonance, and facilitate symbolic fusion between leaders, crowds, and national imagery. In this sense, the jersey did not merely accompany political performance; it actively structured its aesthetic conditions of credibility [5].

1.2 Why football symbols matter in Latin America

The Brazilian case is especially revealing because football is not a marginal cultural domain. It functions as a central language of national identity, emotional sociality, and public ritual. When football symbols become politicised, democratic conflict migrates into the embodied fabric of everyday life. This dynamic resonates with broader Latin American traditions of political aesthetics, where clothing, colours, and visual codes often operate as shorthand for political belonging.

At the same time, the *amarelinha* presents a distinctive theoretical puzzle. Unlike party uniforms or campaign merchandise, the national jersey is a commercial sports commodity embedded in global markets, transnational media circulation, and collective memory. Its politicisation therefore raises an underexplored question in populism research: how do everyday cultural artifacts originating in sport and entertainment become infrastructures of political identity?

1.3 What this article adds

The article advances three contributions. First, it proposes an analytical shift from populism as discourse to populism as material-affective infrastructure. Beyond speeches and slogans, populist mobilisation is sustained through objects that make political belonging wearable, repeatable, and socially recognisable. The jersey is not merely an illustration of polarisation; it is one of the mechanisms through which polarisation becomes lived.

Second, it offers a non-deterministic model of symbolic capture. Rather than treating appropriation as irreversible, the article conceptualises capture as a hegemonic process: a temporary stabilisation of meaning produced through repetition, media amplification, and affective investment, always subject to contestation and re-signification.

Third, it advances a critical-normative argument concerning democracy and the symbolic commons. Drawing on deliberative theory and critiques of fragmented public spheres, especially Nancy Fraser’s (2008) work on subaltern counter-publics and mediated inequality, the article argues that when political projects monopolise national imagery, everyday practices of visibility become stratified. Democratic inclusion is not only institutional but symbolic: who can “wear the nation” without stigma becomes a political question [6].

1.4 Conceptual orientation and roadmap

To address these dynamics, the article mobilises four core concepts: performance, affective economy, political behavior technology, and symbolic capture. Together, they allow the analysis to move beyond discursive interpretation and examine how political identities are enacted through everyday material practices.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 situates the study within scholarship on populism, political performance, and national symbolism. Section 3 develops the theoretical framework. Section 4 outlines the methodological strategy. Sections 5 and 6 analyse leadership performance, street mobilisation, platform circulation, and celebrity mediation. Section 7

discusses democratic implications. Section 8 concludes by reflecting on the future of national symbols in polarised democracies.

2. POPULISM, PERFORMANCE, AND THE POLITICS OF NATIONAL SYMBOLS

This article engages three interconnected bodies of scholarship: (i) studies of populism as political style and embodied performance; (ii) research on media, visibility, and affective polarisation; and (iii) emerging analyses of national symbols as contested cultural infrastructures. While each of these literatures offers important insights into contemporary political dynamics, their integration remains limited, particularly regarding how material cultural artifacts, such as sports clothing, operate as mediators between populist performance, affective mobilisation, and democratic conflict.

By combining international theoretical debates with recent Brazilian empirical research, this section situates the politicisation of the national football jersey within broader discussions of populism, symbolic power, and mediated politics in Latin America.

Recent scholarship increasingly conceptualises populism not as a fixed ideology but as a performative and mediated political style. Moffitt's formulation defines populism as a repertoire of practices oriented toward crisis performance, antagonistic moral polarisation, and embodied displays of authenticity. In Latin America, this performative dimension has been explored in relation to charismatic leadership and affective mobilisation [7].

However, as Wedeen's work demonstrates, performativity does not operate only through leaders' rhetoric. It is sustained through repetitive embodied practices and symbolic participation that create visible alignment. This insight is crucial for understanding how political identity becomes routinised through everyday material practices such as clothing. At the same time, research on visual politics and affective publics [8] highlights how symbolic meaning circulates through images and emotional intensities. Yet much of this literature still treats symbols primarily as semiotic objects rather than as material infrastructures that structure bodily participation.

Brubaker's (2017) intervention on nationalism as practice provides an important bridge. By conceptualising national belonging as enacted through situational performances rather than abstract ideology, his approach opens analytical space to examine how objects such as jerseys function as technologies of everyday nationalism.

Finally, critical public sphere theory, especially Fraser's work on mediated inequality and counter-publics, sharpens the normative stakes of symbolic monopolisation. When access to national symbols becomes politically stratified, democratic inclusion is compromised not only discursively but visually and affectively.

2.1 Populism as political style and embodied performance

Over the past decade, scholarship on populism has increasingly shifted from ideational definitions toward an understanding of populism as a political style enacted through performance, affect, and mediated visibility. Rather than focusing exclusively on programmatic content, this perspective emphasises how populist actors do politics: by staging authenticity, dramatizing antagonism, and mobilising emotions through public rituals and media events.

Moffitt's influential formulation captures this shift by defining populism as "a political style that features appeals to 'the people' versus 'the elite', the performance of crisis, and bad manners" [9]. From this perspective, populism is not simply articulated through discourse, but embodied and staged through gestures, aesthetic cues, and performative routines that make political conflict immediately legible.

In Latin America, this performative dimension has been extensively analysed in relation to charismatic leadership and mass mobilisation. De la Torre (2017) shows how populist leaders construct extraordinary performances that suspend institutional mediation and create direct affective bonds with followers [9]. Casullo (2019) further argues that populism operates through synecdochal representation, whereby the leader's body comes to stand in for "the people," enabling the moralisation and personalisation of political antagonism [6].

Performance theory provides a broader analytical framework for understanding these dynamics. As Alexander argues, political authority depends on the successful fusion of actors, scripts, audiences, and symbolic props, producing the impression that staged action is authentic rather than artificial [10]. Legitimacy, in this sense, is not only institutional but dramaturgical.

Recent Brazilian scholarship adds an important empirical layer to this debate. Rennó (2022) demonstrates that *bolsonarismo* cannot be reduced to diffuse emotional mobilisation alone. Instead, it reflects a structured ideological alignment combining personalistic leadership with relatively consistent attitudinal patterns among supporters. Bolsonaro's appeal, Rennó argues, is anchored in a form of "personalismo relacional", in which affective identification with the leader resonates with pre-existing ideological orientations [11]. This finding is crucial because it suggests that performative aesthetics do not operate in a cultural vacuum; they become politically effective when they connect with established symbolic and ideological repertoires.

Despite these advances, much of the literature remains strongly leader-centred. Analyses typically privilege speeches, rhetorical strategies, and campaign performances, leaving underexplored the material environments through which political

identities are stabilised and reproduced over time. If populism functions as a style dependent on repetition, recognisability, and affective resonance, then the objects that enable such repetition (clothing, colours, and everyday artifacts) deserve closer analytical attention.

2.2 Media, visibility, and affective polarisation

A second strand of research highlights the centrality of media and visibility in contemporary politics. Visual politics scholarship argues that images are not passive reflections of reality but active agents in the construction of political meaning. As Mitchell famously suggests, images “want things”: they organise attention, provoke emotions, and structure relations of power [12] [14].

In mediatized societies, visibility is not a secondary effect of politics; it is a condition of political efficacy. Castells (2009) argues that power increasingly operates through the construction of meaning in communication networks, where symbolic authority is shaped by circulation rather than institutional position alone. This dynamic is intensified in platform-based environments, where algorithmic logics privilege emotionally charged and visually coherent content.

Affective politics scholarship complements this perspective by focusing on how emotions circulate socially rather than residing solely within individuals. Papacharissi (2014) conceptualises “affective publics” as collectivities formed through shared emotional intensities organised around images, hashtags, and recurring mediated performances. These publics are bound together less by deliberation than by shared affective orientations such as pride, anger, fear, and resentment.

Ahmed’s concept of affective economies provides an additional analytical tool. Emotions, she argues, “do not reside in subjects or objects, but are produced as effects of circulation” [13]. Through repetition, affects “stick” to objects, saturating them with moral value. In polarised contexts, this process leads to the moralisation of symbols: certain signs become associated with authenticity and virtue, while others are framed as markers of corruption or threat.

Brazilian research explicitly links these affective dynamics to bolsonarismo. Silva (2025) conceptualises bolsonarismo as a political culture structured around symbols, rituals, and shared imaginaries rather than policy platforms alone. According to Silva, bolsonarismo operates through visual and moral cues that “organise belonging and exclusion in everyday life” (Silva 2025, p. 398). Within this symbolic repertoire, national colours and the football jersey occupy a central position as markers of political identity [14].

While this literature clarifies the role of media and affect in polarisation, it often treats symbols primarily as visual signs circulating through media environments. Less attention is paid to their material and embodied dimensions. Clothing, however, is not only seen; it is worn, inhabited, and enacted in face-to-face interaction, where it shapes everyday experiences of legitimacy, recognition, and social risk.

2.3 National symbols as contested wearable infrastructures

Existing literatures on populism and visual politics tend to conceptualise national symbols as semiotic resources or rhetorical devices. This article proposes a complementary perspective: national symbols can function as wearable infrastructures of political performance.

Wearable symbols operate at the intersection of intimacy and publicity. Because they are close to the body, they shape self-perception; because they are visible, they shape how others categorise political identity. When worn collectively, such symbols enable immediate recognisability and facilitate the formation of visually coherent crowds. Political belonging can thus be enacted without verbal articulation. Football symbols are particularly potent in Latin America, where football functions as a privileged site of national narration, emotional sociality, and class mediation. When football artifacts become politicised, the boundary between sport fandom and political identity collapses [15].

Recent Brazilian research provides empirical support for this argument. Resende’s (2024) dissertation analyses media coverage of the national jersey during the 2022 World Cup and documents the emergence of explicit symbolic disputes. The amarelinha was framed simultaneously as “captured” by bolsonarismo and as an object that could be democratically re-signified through advertising campaigns, artistic interventions, and popular mobilisation. This empirical finding demonstrates that symbolic capture is not irreversible. Rather, it operates as a hegemonic process: a temporary stabilisation of meaning produced through repetition and affective investment, but always open to contestation.

The Brazilian jersey exemplifies this dynamic. It was not originally designed as a political uniform, but as a mass-consumed sports artifact with deep emotional resonance. Its politicisation reveals how populist projects appropriate existing affective infrastructures rather than creating symbolic repertoires from scratch.

2.4 Research gap and contribution

Despite the richness of existing scholarship, an important gap remains. Studies of populism tend to privilege leaders and discourse; research on visual politics often focuses on images detached from bodily practice; and analyses of national symbolism frequently treat symbols as representations rather than as infrastructures. What is missing is an integrated account of how material, wearable artifacts operate as mediators between populist performance, affective mobilisation, and democratic inclusion or exclusion [16].

This article addresses that gap by conceptualising the Brazilian national football jersey as a political behavior technology. By analysing how the jersey coordinates bodies, affects, and visibility across street mobilisations, digital platforms, and celebrity mediation, the article demonstrates that contemporary political conflict is not only fought through institutions and rhetoric, but through everyday material practices that shape how citizens appear, feel, and recognise one another in public space.

In doing so, the article contributes to debates on populism, media, and democracy in Latin America by showing that struggles over national identity increasingly unfold at the level of material culture. The politicisation of the amarelinha thus becomes a diagnostic case for understanding how symbolic infrastructures can both enable authoritarian closure and sustain possibilities of democratic contestation.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: PERFORMANCE, AFFECTIVE ECONOMIES, AND WEARABLE POLITICAL TECHNOLOGIES.

This article integrates four analytical dimensions: (i) political performance and embodied legitimacy; (ii) affective economies and moral boundary-making; (iii) mediated visibility and attention infrastructures; and (iv) wearable political technologies as sociomaterial interfaces. Together, these perspectives shift the analytical focus from symbolism as representation to symbolism as practice, that is, to how political identities are enacted, circulated, stabilised, and contested through embodied routines and material infrastructures of visibility.

The Brazilian case suggests that contemporary populism is not only narrated through discourse or disseminated through media channels. It is also worn, staged in public space, and reproduced through platform circulation, where material objects participate directly in the production of recognisability, belonging, and political antagonism [17].

3.1 Performance and embodied legitimacy

Performance theory conceptualises political life as staged interaction in which actors produce meaning through scripts, gestures, symbolic repertoires, and ritual repetition. Political performances are not peripheral to “real” politics; they constitute central mechanisms through which credibility is negotiated and legitimacy is socially constructed. Alexander’s cultural pragmatics framework is particularly useful for analysing these dynamics. Successful political performance depends on the fusion of actors, symbolic scripts, audiences, and material settings in such a way that staged action appears authentic rather than artificial. As Alexander argues, political actors must convince audiences that the performance is real that it expresses genuine identity rather than theatrical fabrication. Legitimacy, in this sense, is not only institutional but dramaturgical [18].

Populist performance intensifies this dynamic by explicitly foregrounding authenticity, moral polarisation, and embodied proximity between leaders and followers. Leaders do not simply claim to represent “the people”; they seek to visually and corporeally embody this claim through gestures, clothing, and aesthetic cues. Here, Butler’s theory of performativity provides a complementary insight. Political identity, like gendered identity, is not the expression of an inner essence but the effect of reiterated practices that acquire normative force through repetition (Butler, 2006). Political belonging is similarly produced through embodied routines that become socially recognisable and culturally naturalised over time.

In the Brazilian case, bolsonarismo exemplifies this performative logic. As Silva (2025) demonstrates, bolsonarismo developed a political culture structured around symbolic routines and visual repetition, transforming political alignment into everyday patterns of embodied display. Rennó’s (2022) analysis further clarifies that these performances resonate with pre-existing ideological orientations, linking affective identification with relatively stable political attitudes. Performance, therefore, does not replace ideology; it reorganises how ideology becomes visible, affectively charged, and socially legible.

3.2 Affective economies, recognition, and moral boundaries

While performance theory explains how political identity is staged, affect theory clarifies how symbolic meanings circulate and acquire moral force. Emotions are not private psychological states but socially organised intensities that move between bodies, images, and objects. Ahmed’s concept of affective economies is central to this argument. Emotions, she argues, “do not reside in subjects or objects, but are produced as effects of circulation” (Ahmed 2014, 8). Through repetition, affects become attached to particular signs, saturating them with moral value. Symbols thus come to operate as boundary markers, distinguishing virtue from threat, belonging from exclusion [19].

In polarised contexts, this process intensifies. Objects associated with national identity become morally coded, transforming everyday practices of display into political acts of recognition and stigma. The Brazilian jersey circulated not only as a sign of national pride but as a marker of moral alignment, attaching emotions of pride, resentment, and perceived authenticity to political identity. Fraser’s theory of recognition adds a normative dimension to this dynamic. Symbolic struggles are not merely cultural disputes; they shape the social conditions of participation. When access to national symbolism becomes stratified, misrecognition operates as a form of political exclusion. Symbolic injustice emerges not only from economic

inequality or institutional marginalisation, but from cultural hierarchies that regulate who can legitimately appear as part of “the nation” (Fraser 2008).

Together, Ahmed and Fraser allow the analysis to connect affective circulation with democratic inclusion. The politicisation of symbols is not only about emotional mobilisation; it restructures the moral architecture of belonging within the public sphere [20].

3.3 Mediated visibility and attention infrastructures

In mediatized political environments, visibility operates as a central resource of power. Images, performances, and aesthetic coherence shape political perception as much as formal discourse. Castells (2009) argues that contemporary political authority increasingly depends on the construction of meaning within communication networks, where symbolic resonance is produced through circulation rather than institutional hierarchy alone.

Papacharissi’s concept of affective publics further explains how these dynamics translate into mobilisation. Affective publics are formed through shared emotional intensities organised around images, hashtags, and recurring mediated performances (Papacharissi, 2014). Participation becomes a matter of visibility and repetition rather than formal membership. Within this environment, wearable symbols gain particular relevance. They operate as visual shortcuts of recognition, enabling political identities to circulate rapidly across platforms and physical spaces. Uniform aesthetics facilitate algorithmic amplification by producing visually coherent and emotionally charged content. In this sense, platform infrastructures do not merely transmit political meaning; they actively shape which symbolic forms become dominant [21].

3.4 Political behavior technology as sociomaterial infrastructure

The central conceptual contribution of this article is the notion of political behavior technology: material artefacts, especially clothing, that organise political practice by enabling embodied recognisability, affective attachment, and scalable circulation across offline and digital environments.

The Brazilian national jersey exemplifies this infrastructural logic. It is body-proximate, mass-produced, and visually distinctive. These properties allow it to operate simultaneously as an intimate object of self-identification and as a public marker of political belonging. When worn collectively, it produces aesthetic coherence in crowds. When circulated digitally, it functions as a visual template of political identity. This interpretation is consistent with broader materialist approaches that conceptualise objects as active participants in social and political assemblages. Bennett’s (2010) notion of *vibrant matter* highlights that material artefacts are not inert carriers of meaning but shape affective orientation, attention, and collective coordination. Similarly [3], Bruni’s (2007) actor-network theory rejects the strict separation between human actors and material intermediaries [13], showing how political effects emerge from heterogeneous networks composed of bodies, technologies, platforms, artefacts, and institutions.

Building on these insights, political behavior technology is conceptualised here not as an autonomous agent but as a sociomaterial interface linking embodied performance, affective circulation, and mediated visibility. Its political efficacy derives from this hybrid position: simultaneously symbolic and infrastructural, personal and collective, corporeal and mediatized. In this sense, the jersey does not merely represent nationalism. It helps organise political practice by coordinating bodies, stabilising visual identity, and enabling the repetition through which symbolic meanings acquire durability.

3.5 Conceptual synthesis

To maintain analytical clarity, the article adopts the following conceptual distinctions:

Performance refers to the embodied staging of political identity through scripts, gestures, clothing, and ritual repetition addressed to public audiences. Affective economy refers to the circulation of emotions that attach moral value to symbols and structure boundaries of belonging and exclusion. Political behavior technology refers to material artefacts that organise political practice by enabling recognisability, affective attachment, and scalable circulation across physical and digital spaces.

Together, these concepts explain how an object becomes politically operative: it is enacted through repeated performance, saturated through affective circulation, and stabilised as an infrastructure of visibility and recognition.

4. METHODOLOGY AND ANALYTICAL STRATEGY

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive research design grounded in cultural sociology, affect theory, and visual political analysis. Rather than measuring opinion distribution or behavioural frequency, the objective is to explain how symbolic meanings are produced, stabilised, circulated, and contested through embodied performance, emotional attachment, and material infrastructures of visibility.

The methodological strategy is explicitly aligned with the theoretical framework developed in Section 3. Accordingly, the analysis operates across three complementary analytical layers: performance (public staging of political identity), affective

economy (circulation of emotions and moral meanings), and political behavior technology (material infrastructures that enable scalable political visibility).

This approach treats political symbolism not as secondary representation but as constitutive political practice. In the Brazilian case, this implies examining how the yellow jersey became politically operative through the interaction between leadership performance, street mobilisation, and platform-mediated circulation. Empirically, the analysis is informed by three complementary research traditions: media discourse analysis of the politicisation of national symbols, political culture research on bolsonarismo as a symbolic ecosystem, and digital celebrity analysis of Neymar's mediated performances. These studies provide both substantive reference points and methodological orientation for the interpretive strategy adopted here.

4.1 Corpus construction and selection criteria

The empirical corpus was constructed around three interconnected domains of symbolic production corresponding to the article's analytical framework.

(1) Public performances and leadership staging. This component includes highly visible public appearances by political leaders in which national football symbolism and green-and-yellow aesthetics were explicitly mobilised. The analytical focus is not on isolated speeches, but on embodied performances in which clothing, bodily posture, gesture, and ritual repetition operate as political props. Selection followed Silva's (2025) characterisation of bolsonarismo as a performative political culture structured through recurring symbolic routines and visual grammars. Priority was given to events characterised by repetition, mass visibility, and explicit mobilisation of national imagery.

(2) Street mobilisations and collective rituals. The second component consists of large-scale street demonstrations and performative events, including Independence Day protests, rallies, and mass motorcades in which the jersey and national colours dominated the visual field. These events were selected because they represent moments of high symbolic density, where political belonging is collectively enacted and visually stabilised. This strategy follows Resende's (2024) methodological focus on moments when the jersey shifts from everyday sports consumption to explicit political marking.

(3) Digital circulation and celebrity mediation. The third component focuses on high-visibility online content that amplified or contested the politicised meaning of the jersey. This includes posts by political actors and celebrities, especially football-related figures whose mediated performances connect sport symbolism to political identity. Ferraz's (2025) analysis of Neymar's Instagram activity informed both the selection logic and interpretive orientation, highlighting how celebrity self-presentation operates as symbolic amplification rather than singular causal intervention [10].

Across all three domains, selection criteria prioritised episodes characterised by high circulation, visual coherence, repetition, and symbolic recognisability. Rather than constructing a statistically representative dataset, the study focuses on emblematic cases that function as symbolic condensations within the Brazilian public sphere. This strategy follows established qualitative visual methodologies that privilege analytical saturation over numerical representativeness.

4.2 Analytical procedures

The analysis proceeded through three complementary analytical operations corresponding to the theoretical framework.

(1) Genealogical mapping of symbolic transformation. The first analytical step involved tracing the symbolic shift of the yellow jersey from a broadly shared national sports symbol to a politicised marker of ideological belonging. This genealogical mapping does not aim to produce a comprehensive historical chronology, but to identify key moments in which symbolic meanings were rearticulated and stabilised. Drawing on Resende's (2024) media analysis and Silva's (2025) reconstruction of bolsonarismo's symbolic repertoire, this step situates contemporary performances within a longer trajectory of symbolic reconfiguration. This procedure corresponds analytically to the infrastructural dimension of political behavior technology, identifying how repeated symbolic use established durable patterns of political visibility.

(2) Performative and embodied analysis. The second step focuses on embodied political performance. This involves examining how bodies, clothing, gestures, and ritual repetition contribute to the production of legitimacy, authenticity, and antagonism. Following performance theory, clothing is treated as an active prop within political staging rather than as a neutral accessory. The analysis examines how leaders and supporters use the jersey to visually embody "the people," how collective wearing practices generate aesthetic unity, and how repetition across events stabilises symbolic meaning. This analytical step directly corresponds to the performance dimension of the framework and is informed by Silva's (2025) emphasis on symbolic routines and by Rennó's (2022) demonstration that performative appeal resonates with pre-existing ideological alignments.

(3) Media-ecological and affective circulation analysis. The third step examines how symbolic meanings circulate across media environments and platform infrastructures. Rather than focusing exclusively on content, this analysis considers how visibility, algorithmic amplification, repetition, and emotional resonance shape political interpretation. Here, Ferraz's (2025) findings on celebrity-mediated circulation are particularly relevant. The analysis treats figures such as Neymar not as isolated opinion leaders, but as nodes within a broader attention economy connecting sport, nationalism, and affective

investment. This procedure corresponds to the affective economy dimension of the framework, capturing how emotions attach to symbols through mediated repetition and contribute to moral boundary-making.

4.3 Reflexivity and normative positioning

Because the politicisation of national symbols is normatively charged, interpretive research in this field risks reproducing moral simplifications or elite-centred perspectives. To address this, the analysis explicitly incorporates counter-performances and democratic re-significations, treating symbolic struggle as contingent and plural rather than unidirectional.

Resende's (2024) documentation of campaigns aimed at reclaiming the jersey for inclusive and democratic purposes informed this reflexive orientation. Rather than assuming symbolic ownership as fixed, the analysis conceptualises symbolic control as hegemonic and unstable. The normative orientation of the article is not to depoliticise national symbols or remove them from political conflict. Instead, it is grounded in the notion of a symbolic commons. Democratic societies depend on plural access to symbolic resources that allow citizens to claim belonging without moral stigmatisation or visual exclusion. By explicitly articulating this position, the article situates its interpretive analysis within broader debates on democracy, recognition, and symbolic power while maintaining analytical separation between empirical description and normative evaluation.

5. FROM SYMBOL TO UNIFORM BOLSONARO, STREET PERFORMANCE, AND THE EMBODIED NATION

This section analyses how bolsonarismo mobilised the national football jersey through leadership performance and street aesthetics, transforming it from a broadly shared cultural symbol into a uniform-like marker of political belonging. Rather than treating this transformation as a spontaneous cultural shift, the analysis conceptualises it as the outcome of coordinated performative routines that linked embodied leadership, collective mobilisation, and affective repetition.

The central argument is that symbolic capture did not operate primarily through explicit ideological messaging, but through the normalisation of visual routines that gradually stabilised the jersey as a marker of moralised national identity.

5.1 Leadership performance and the fusion of nation and leader

Bolsonaro's public persona was constructed around an anti-elite aesthetic and a politics of performative authenticity. His visual repertoire combined informal clothing, militarised gestures, and repeated displays of national symbols, producing a carefully staged image of proximity to "ordinary Brazilians." Within this repertoire, the football jersey functioned as a privileged prop.

Wearing the jersey in public appearances did more than signal patriotism. It collapsed the symbolic distance between institutional authority and popular identity. By adopting the same visual markers used by supporters, Bolsonaro enacted bodily continuity between leader and crowd, staging himself not as a representative who speaks for the people, but as someone who visually appears as the people.

From a performance-theoretical perspective, this strategy corresponds to what Alexander conceptualises as symbolic fusion between actor and script. Successful political performances depend on generating credibility through the alignment of bodies, symbols, and audience expectations. Bolsonaro's repeated use of national football imagery helped stabilise this fusion by embedding state authority within popular aesthetic codes [2].

Brazilian scholarship confirms that this was not incidental. Silva (2025) demonstrates that bolsonarismo deliberately constructed a recognisable visual grammar in which national symbols operated as everyday markers of political identity. According to Silva, repetitive symbolic cues transformed political belonging into routine visual practices rather than exceptional campaign gestures (Silva 2025, p. 402). This performative strategy produced two interrelated effects. First, it generated affective immediacy: the leader appeared emotionally and aesthetically aligned with the imagined national community. Second, it indirectly displaced political opponents by positioning them outside the dominant visual grammar of the nation. Importantly, this boundary-making process operated primarily through aesthetics rather than explicit ideological exclusion.

Rennó's (2022) findings contextualise this dynamic. Bolsonaro's performative appeal resonated with pre-existing ideological orientations among supporters. Emotional identification with the leader was embedded in what Rennó describes as relational personalism, linking embodied performance with substantive political attitudes (Rennó 2022, p. 150). The jersey therefore did not create political loyalty *ex nihilo*; it rendered existing alignments publicly visible and affectively intensified.

5.2 Street mobilisations and the visual production of "the people"

Street mobilisations played a central role in consolidating the jersey's transformation from symbol to uniform. Large-scale demonstrations, national commemorative protests, and mass motorcades converted urban space into stages of nationalist

spectacle. Through repeated visual coordination, green-and-yellow aesthetics produced the appearance of collective coherence across socially heterogeneous participants.

Uniform aesthetics generate immediate legibility. When thousands of bodies wear the same colours, political belonging becomes instantly recognisable. Crowds appear aligned, disciplined, and morally unified. This visual coherence is politically consequential because it can be photographed, broadcast, and circulated as evidence of popular legitimacy. Silva (2025) documents how bolsonarismo systematically invested in these ritualised displays of symbolic power. Street mobilisations functioned not only as demonstrations of support but as performative rehearsals of national identity, reinforcing group cohesion through repetition and aesthetic coordination (Silva 2025, p. 405).

The jersey operated as a central element of this ritual economy. It allowed participants to enact belonging through clothing rather than through formal organisational membership or ideological articulation. Political identity thus became wearable, visually synchronised, and easily reproducible across events. These mobilisations also generated exclusionary effects. When national identity is visually monopolised by uniform symbolism, non-participants can be implicitly framed as outsiders. In polarised contexts, this dynamic intensifies moral boundaries. The jersey becomes associated with “the real people,” while dissenters are positioned as politically illegitimate or culturally alien.

Resende’s (2024) media analysis illustrates how this logic was discursively reinforced. Coverage of the 2022 World Cup revealed that the amarelinha increasingly functioned as a politically coded object, with public debate questioning whether wearing the jersey implied ideological alignment. As Resende notes, the shirt became “a visual shorthand for political positioning” rather than a neutral sports symbol (Resende 2024, p. 14).

5.3 Ritual repetition and symbolic stabilisation

The politicisation of the jersey did not result from isolated events but from sustained ritual repetition. Symbols become politically operative when they recur across contexts and performances. The repeated presence of green-and-yellow aesthetics in rallies, televised appearances, social media posts, and everyday public encounters gradually stabilised political meaning.

From a performativity perspective, repetition is constitutive rather than merely reproductive. As Butler argues, identities are stabilised through the reiteration of norms that acquire the appearance of naturalness over time [5]. Applied to political symbolism, this suggests that contingent associations become socially taken-for-granted through repeated embodied enactment. Silva (2025) demonstrates how bolsonarismo relied on symbolic routines that normalised specific visual cues. Over time, these cues became embedded in everyday political perception, reducing the need for explicit ideological framing. The jersey condensed multiple narratives (anti-corruption discourse, anti-left resentment, moral conservatism, and nationalist sentiment) into a single wearable sign.

This condensation effect is central to the concept of political behavior technology developed in this article. Through repetition, the jersey ceased to operate merely as a representational symbol and became an infrastructural device coordinating political identification across physical and digital spaces.

5.4 Moralisation of national belonging

The shift from symbol to uniform also entailed a transformation from plural belonging to moralised belonging. In democratic contexts, national symbols typically operate as inclusive representations that can be worn across political differences. Under bolsonarista performance, however, the jersey increasingly functioned as a marker of moral identity structured around distinctions between “good citizens” and “internal enemies.”

This moralisation operated primarily through affective dynamics. Emotions such as pride, resentment, and the desire for recognition attached to the jersey through repeated circulation. Ahmed’s concept of affective economies helps explain how emotions accumulate around objects, transforming them into markers of virtue and threat (Ahmed 2014). Resende’s (2024) findings illustrate the social consequences of this process. Public debates emerged questioning whether wearing the jersey had become incompatible with democratic positioning. This controversy itself signals symbolic capture: when a national symbol becomes morally polarised, everyday cultural practices acquire political weight.

Analytically, this process reshaped the conditions of public appearance. When national belonging becomes moralised through wearable symbols, citizenship is increasingly mediated by visual cues. The uniformisation of the jersey thus reflects not only a cultural transformation but a reconfiguration of political recognition in everyday public space.

6. PLATFORMS, AFFECTIVE PUBLICS, AND CELEBRITY MEDIATION: NEYMAR AND BEYOND

This section examines how platform infrastructures and celebrity mediation amplified the politicisation of Brazil’s national football jersey. Rather than attributing symbolic transformation to individual actors, the analysis conceptualises Neymar’s role as embedded within a broader ecology of mediated visibility in which political leaders, influencers, journalistic framing, and algorithmic logics interact to stabilise affective meanings.

The central claim is that platform environments did not simply transmit political symbolism. They actively structured the conditions under which visual coherence, emotional resonance, and symbolic repetition became politically effective.

6.1 Platform circulation and symbolic acceleration

Digital platforms intensify visual politics by privileging content that is immediately recognisable, emotionally charged, and easily shareable. In such environments, symbolic coherence becomes a strategic resource. A crowd dressed in uniform colours communicates unity, strength, and “national authenticity” with minimal contextual explanation. The football jersey thus functions as a visual shortcut that compresses complex political narratives into instantly legible images.

As Castells argues, contemporary political power increasingly operates through “the construction of meaning in the space of communication” (Castells 2009, p. 55) [7]. In platform-based environments, this construction is shaped by algorithmic incentives that reward repetition, emotional engagement, and polarising visibility. Images circulate detached from their original contexts and become symbolic templates that can be replicated across multiple events and media formats.

Papacharissi’s concept of affective publics clarifies how this circulation translates into political mobilisation. Affective publics are not organised primarily through formal membership or programmatic alignment, but through shared emotional intensities structured by recurring images, hashtags, and mediated performances (Papacharissi, 2014). Participation becomes increasingly visual: producing, sharing, and inhabiting recognisable symbolic cues.

In the Brazilian case, the repeated circulation of green-and-yellow imagery contributed to the formation of a recognisable affective community whose political identity was anchored less in ideological coherence than in shared aesthetic and emotional markers. Platform logics further simplified political meaning by privileging emotionally polarising content. The jersey was increasingly framed as an expression of patriotic virtue, while alternative uses or refusals of the symbol were interpreted as politically deviant or morally suspect.

Silva’s (2025) analysis supports this interpretation. He demonstrates that bolsonarismo systematically invested in visual repetition across digital platforms, producing what he describes as a “recognisable symbolic grammar” that stabilised political identity through colours, clothing, and aesthetic routines (Silva 2025, p. 404). Within this grammar, the national jersey circulated simultaneously online and offline as a core marker of ideological alignment.

6.2 Celebrity mediation and the symbolic authority of sport

Celebrities occupy a distinctive position in mediated politics because they concentrate what can be described as affective capital: emotional attachment accumulated through visibility, admiration, and symbolic association. Their gestures acquire political meaning even when explicit political statements are avoided.

In Brazil, football celebrities hold exceptional symbolic authority. Football functions not merely as entertainment but as a central narrative of national identity, collective memory, and emotional belonging. When football icons engage with national symbolism in polarised contexts, their performances participate in the cultural production of political legitimacy. Couldry’s theory of media rituals helps conceptualise this process. Media performances do not simply reflect reality; they contribute to reproducing symbolic hierarchies by positioning certain actors as legitimate representatives of collective identity (Couldry 2003) [8]. When football celebrities publicly mobilise national imagery, they become ritual figures in the staging of national belonging.

Ferraz’s (2025) doctoral research provides empirical grounding for this dynamic in Neymar’s case. Analysing Neymar’s Instagram activity between 2020 and 2024, Ferraz identifies systematic associations between the athlete’s self-presentation and symbolic markers of moral and national identity. According to the author, Neymar’s digital persona increasingly emphasised religiosity, family values, and patriotic imagery as central components of his branding strategy (Ferraz 2025, p. 71) [10].

This pattern suggests that celebrity mediation does not merely mirror political contexts. It reorganises symbolic associations between sport, morality, and nationalism, extending politicised meanings beyond explicitly political arenas and embedding them within everyday media consumption.

6.3 Neymar as symbolic amplifier, not causal origin

Neymar’s role in the politicisation of the yellow jersey therefore requires analytical precision. His symbolic weight is undeniable. As a globally recognisable football figure, Neymar embodies contemporary Brazilian football identity. When he engages with national symbolism during periods of political polarisation, his gestures amplify affective associations between football, patriotism, and political belonging.

However, attributing symbolic transformation to Neymar alone would constitute a methodological error. Celebrity mediation operates through an ecology of visibility rather than through isolated causal agents. Ferraz’s (2025) findings explicitly support this interpretation. Neymar’s digital communication strategy is fragmented and oriented toward multiple audience niches rather than unified political messaging. As Ferraz notes, “digital communication is structured through the fragmentation of discourse into niches and sub-niches of audiences” (Ferraz 2025, p. 68) [10]. This fragmentation implies that Neymar’s symbolic effects are contingent and mediated. His posts interact with platform algorithms, audience

reception, journalistic framing, and broader political narratives. Neymar therefore functions less as an ideological leader and more as a symbolic amplifier whose visibility intensifies existing affective associations.

Rennó's (2022) analysis reinforces this point. Political alignment in bolsonarismo is not primarily driven by celebrity endorsement but by pre-existing ideological orientations and political cultures that make specific symbolic cues resonate. Celebrity gestures become effective because they plug into already structured symbolic environments rather than creating them independently.

The analytical claim advanced here is relational rather than personalistic. Neymar's visibility likely reduced the social cost of wearing national symbols in right-wing spaces and contributed to the perception that the jersey remained culturally legitimate despite polarisation. Yet the politicisation of the jersey emerged from the interaction between leadership performance, street mobilisation, platform amplification, and celebrity mediation within a broader symbolic ecosystem.

6.4 Symbolic fragmentation and counter-performances within sport

The sporting field also generated counterexamples that complicate deterministic narratives of symbolic capture. Not all football figures aligned with conservative nationalism. Some athletes publicly articulated alternative political positions, engaged in humanitarian initiatives, or strategically distanced themselves from polarising symbolism.

Resende's (2024) analysis documents how cultural producers, advertisers, and public figures attempted to re-signify the national jersey during the 2022 World Cup, framing it as compatible with democratic values and plural belonging. These interventions demonstrate that symbolic ownership remained contested rather than fixed. From a theoretical perspective, this fragmentation reflects the unstable nature of hegemonic symbolism. Symbols achieve dominance through repetition, but they remain vulnerable to counter-performances that disrupt moral monopolisation. The sporting field therefore emerges not as a politically homogeneous space, but as an arena of symbolic struggle.

This also reveals the limits of celebrity power. While high-visibility figures can amplify symbolic meanings, they cannot fully control interpretation. Audience reception, media framing, and political context mediate how gestures are read. This indeterminacy helps explain why symbolic disputes remain open-ended even under conditions of intense political polarisation.

7. DISCUSSION: SYMBOLIC HEGEMONY, DEMOCRATIC CONTESTATION, AND POLITICAL RESPONSIBILITY

This section develops the article's interpretive and normative implications. It advances three interrelated arguments. First, the association between Brazil's yellow jersey and conservative nationalism should be understood as a contingent hegemonic configuration rather than permanent symbolic ownership. Second, celebrity mediation, including Neymar's role, must be analysed within a broader ecology of mediated visibility rather than through individualised causal narratives. Third, the politicisation of national symbols raises fundamental democratic questions concerning recognition, inclusion, and access to the symbolic commons.

Together, these arguments position the jersey not merely as a cultural artifact, but as a diagnostic object that reveals how contemporary political conflict increasingly operates through material aesthetics, affective infrastructures, and struggles over visibility.

7.1 The jersey is not "owned" by the right: symbolic capture as contingent hegemony

Public discourse frequently frames Brazil's national football jersey as definitively "captured" by the political right. While this narrative is politically resonant, it is analytically misleading. Symbols do not belong permanently to political actors. Their meaning is stabilised through hegemonic practices that remain historically contingent and politically reversible.

From a Gramscian perspective, hegemony is not a fixed outcome but an ongoing process through which meanings are temporarily consolidated via repetition, affective investment, and institutional reinforcement. Within this framework, bolsonarismo's success in associating the jersey with conservative nationalism reflects the temporary consolidation of a symbolic configuration rather than an essential transformation of the object itself. Empirical evidence supports this interpretation. As Resende's (2024) media analysis demonstrates, the politicisation of the amarelinha during the 2022 World Cup was accompanied by sustained public dispute over its meaning. Journalistic commentary, advertising campaigns, and cultural interventions explicitly attempted to detach the jersey from partisan ownership. Symbolic capture, therefore, remained incomplete and continuously contested.

This interpretation avoids two analytical pitfalls. It rejects both the idea that symbols are politically neutral and the assumption that symbolic appropriation is irreversible. Instead, symbolic capture is conceptualised as hegemonic stabilisation: powerful, effective, yet structurally unstable.

7.2 Counter-performances and democratic re-signification

If symbolic capture is contingent rather than permanent, counter-performances become analytically central. These practices do not merely express alternative identities; they actively intervene in the symbolic infrastructure of political belonging.

Three forms of counter-performance are particularly relevant. First, reoccupation occurs when democratic actors deliberately reclaim national symbols in protests and public demonstrations defending institutional legitimacy. During the late Bolsonaro period and the 2022 electoral cycle, progressive movements strategically incorporated green-and-yellow aesthetics in mobilisations centred on electoral integrity and constitutional order. These actions challenged the monopolisation of nationalism by conservative actors. Second, hybridisation and irony function as aesthetic strategies of symbolic disruption. Artists, activists, and digital creators reworked national colours through parody, remix, and intersectional symbolism. Such practices destabilised claims of moral purity attached to conservative nationalism and exposed the constructed nature of symbolic authority. Third, everyday de-polarisation emerges when citizens continue to wear the jersey in explicitly non-partisan sporting contexts, refusing to fully internalise partisan ownership. Resende's (2024) findings indicate that many Brazilians actively negotiated the meaning of the jersey during international tournaments, seeking to preserve its association with football rather than ideological alignment.

These practices constitute what can be described as democratic symbolic labour. They sustain plural access to national imagery and prevent the symbolic commons from becoming fully monopolised. Democratic stability depends not only on institutional arrangements but also on shared symbolic resources that allow citizens to recognise one another as members of the same political community despite disagreement.

7.3 Celebrity ambivalence and the ethics of mediated visibility

The case of Neymar introduces a distinct normative dimension: the political responsibility associated with symbolic authority in mediated democracies.

The argument advanced here is not that Neymar caused symbolic capture. Rather, celebrity politics operates through structural asymmetries of visibility. Celebrities benefit from national affective investment: they are celebrated as embodiments of collective pride, success, and national excellence. When they engage, explicitly or implicitly, with symbolic gestures that resonate with exclusionary politics, or when they maintain strategic ambiguity during moments of democratic tension, they participate in the stabilisation of dominant symbolic configurations.

Ferraz's (2025) analysis illustrates this ambivalence. Neymar's digital self-presentation emphasises religious morality, national pride, and personal authenticity, themes that resonate strongly with conservative affective narratives. At the same time, his communication strategy is characterised by calculated ambiguity, avoiding explicit ideological positioning while maintaining symbolic proximity to nationalist imagery. This strategy reflects platform logics that reward emotional resonance while discouraging political accountability.

The normative question, therefore, is not whether celebrities should become political activists. It is whether symbolic authority entails responsibility in contexts of democratic strain. When national symbols become contested, silence and ambiguity are not neutral positions. They interact with existing hegemonic meanings and may inadvertently reinforce exclusionary aesthetics. In this sense, Neymar exemplifies the condition of political ambivalence in attention economies, where visibility itself becomes a form of political power and symbolic effects often exceed individual intention.

7.4 Against the “single articulator” thesis: mediation as ecology

One of the article's central analytical interventions is the rejection of the “single articulator” thesis. The politicisation of the jersey cannot be explained by attributing causal primacy to any individual actor, celebrity, or isolated media event. Instead, it emerged from a multi-layered ecology of mediation.

This ecology includes leadership performances that fused state authority with national symbolism; street mobilisations that produced visual coherence and ritual repetition; platform infrastructures that accelerated symbolic templates; influencer networks that normalised moralised nationalism; and celebrity figures whose gestures and silences amplified affective resonance. Within this ecology, Neymar's relevance derives from extraordinary visibility rather than ideological leadership. Rennó's (2022) findings reinforce this interpretation by demonstrating that symbolic resonance depends on pre-existing ideological orientations and political cultures. Celebrity gestures become politically effective because they connect to already structured symbolic environments [18].

This perspective strengthens the article's core theoretical claim: the jersey functions as political infrastructure. Its politicisation reflects systemic interactions between material artifacts, affective publics, and mediated visibility rather than the strategic choices of isolated individuals.

7.5 Democratic stakes: recognition, symbolic exclusion, and the public sphere

What is ultimately at stake in the politicisation of the jersey is not merely cultural meaning, but democratic recognition. When national symbols become partisan uniforms, citizens who reject the dominant political project may experience

symbolic exclusion from national belonging. This dynamic reshapes the conditions of public appearance by transforming aesthetic markers into informal criteria of political legitimacy.

From a Habermasian perspective, this process undermines the normative foundations of inclusive public communication. Democratic legitimacy depends on the possibility that all affected citizens can participate as equals in public processes of justification. As Habermas formulates, “only those norms can claim validity that meet with the approval of all affected in their capacity as participants in a practical discourse” (Habermas 1996, p. 360) [12]. When national symbols are monopolised by exclusionary political projects, this condition is indirectly violated: symbolic access to the nation becomes stratified, and participation in public visibility is filtered through moralised aesthetic codes. The public sphere is thus not merely fragmented; it is symbolically reordered. Certain bodies and visual repertoires are naturalised as authentic expressions of the nation, while others become marginalised or morally suspect. This produces a form of exclusion that operates not through formal censorship but through everyday practices of recognition and misrecognition.

From an agonistic perspective, following Mouffe, political conflict is inevitable and constitutive of democracy. However, it must be organised in ways that recognise opponents as legitimate adversaries rather than existential enemies. Symbolic monopolisation pushes conflict from agonism toward antagonism by transforming disagreement into moral exclusion.

The jersey therefore functions as a diagnostic object. It reveals how contemporary political conflict increasingly operates through aesthetics and affect, and how symbolic infrastructures can either sustain plural belonging or deepen democratic fragmentation.

7.6 Research implications: toward a sociology of material symbolism

Finally, the analysis suggests a broader research agenda. If national symbols can operate as wearable political technologies, scholarly attention should extend to other material artifacts: flags, hats, religious objects, consumer brands, memes, and everyday commodities that become politicised.

Such artifacts are not peripheral to political life. They structure how citizens inhabit politics in mediatized societies, where political identity is increasingly lived through visible objects circulating across digital platforms and urban spaces. Understanding contemporary democracy therefore requires what can be described as a sociology of material symbolism, an approach that bridges political theory, media studies, cultural sociology, and affect research.

8. CONCLUSION: WEARING DEMOCRACY IN POLARISED SOCIETIES

This article has analysed how Brazil’s yellow national football jersey became a central object of political performance and symbolic dispute during the Bolsonaro period. By conceptualising the jersey as a political behavior technology, the analysis has shown that politicisation operates not only through discourse and institutional rhetoric, but through material infrastructures that organise bodies, visibility, and affective attachment. Under bolsonarismo, repeated leadership performances, street mobilisations, and platform circulation temporarily stabilised the jersey as an emblem of conservative nationalism and moralised belonging.

This finding contributes to broader debates on populism and democratic crisis by shifting analytical attention from speeches, ideologies, and campaign strategies to the everyday material practices through which political identity is enacted. The Brazilian case demonstrates that political power increasingly operates through objects that can be worn, photographed, shared, and endlessly reproduced, artifacts that compress complex political narratives into immediate visual recognition. In this sense, the jersey functioned not merely as a symbol of nationalism, but as an infrastructural device enabling the aesthetic production of “the people” across public space and digital environments.

At the same time, the analysis has shown that symbolic capture was neither complete nor irreversible. Counter-performances, re-significations, and everyday negotiations of meaning complicated any narrative of permanent appropriation. From an agonistic perspective, this confirms that national symbols remain sites of political struggle rather than fixed ideological property. From a deliberative perspective, it highlights the democratic importance of plural symbolic access. Democratic participation depends not only on institutional rights and procedural inclusion, but also on shared symbolic resources that allow citizens to claim belonging without ideological conformity.

The case of Neymar further illustrates the ambivalence of celebrity politics in contemporary attention economies. While celebrity gestures can amplify hegemonic meanings by lending affective authority to symbolic repertoires, no single actor determines symbolic trajectories. The politicisation of the jersey is better understood as the outcome of a mediated ecology in which leadership performance, street ritualisation, platform infrastructures, influencer networks, and celebrity visibility interact. This relational perspective avoids personalistic explanations and foregrounds the structural conditions under which symbolic power circulates.

Beyond Brazil, the findings speak to broader patterns observable in polarised democracies. From partisan headwear in the United States to colour-coded protest aesthetics in Latin America and Europe, political conflict increasingly unfolds through wearable and visual markers that operate as shortcuts of recognition. These markers simplify political identification while intensifying moral boundaries. Understanding contemporary populism therefore requires systematic attention to the

material dimension of symbolic politics, to how objects participate in the production of political subjectivities and collective identities.

The article's final normative question concerns the future of national symbols under conditions of democratic strain: can inclusive political projects reclaim national imagery without reproducing exclusionary aesthetics? This is not merely a cultural challenge but a democratic one. If national symbolism remains monopolised by authoritarian or exclusionary projects, plural belonging becomes fragile and symbolic exclusion deepens political polarisation. If, however, national imagery is reworked through plural, reflexive, and inclusive performances, symbols may once again operate as shared resources of political community rather than as uniforms of antagonism.

In this sense, the struggle over Brazil's yellow jersey is not about football alone. It concerns who is recognised as "the nation," how belonging is visually constructed, and whether democratic societies can sustain symbolic plurality in polarised public spheres. Wearing democracy, in contemporary politics, is therefore not simply a metaphor. It is an everyday practice enacted through bodies, images, and material objects that shape how citizens appear, recognise one another, and inhabit political life.

Funding:

The authors confirm that no external funding, financial grants, or sponsorships were provided for conducting this study. All research activities and efforts were carried out with the authors' own resources and institutional support.

Conflicts of Interest:

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest in relation to this work.

Acknowledgment:

The authors would like to extend their gratitude to their institutions for the valuable moral and logistical support provided throughout the research process.

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