

The power of the image and the role of social representations in iconographic reproduction: the pink triangle

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The following study explores the narrative following the pink triangle within queer history as a political symbol and its resulting evolving social representation. First used within Nazi Germany and later reclaimed by social movements, it is now used today often within the creative reproduction of professional and novice artists. A mixed methodology was evoked to observe several instances of iconographic reproduction of the pink triangle across myriad mediums of artistic creation from couture to body art. These examples originate exclusively from WEIRD English-speaking countries. This preliminary explorative analysis of social representations within these uses instilled the processes of anchoring and objectification which hold major roles in the construction and ongoing development of social representations. This analysis suggests the major events that give the pink triangle meaning are integral to the identity of the queer community where its use in artistic creation is important for how queer individuals navigate the world and their place within it.

Keywords: social representation, queer history, pink triangle, political symbols, artistic creation

INTRODUCTION

Between 1933 and 1945, an estimated tens of thousands of queer¹ men and trans-women were persecuted and later sent to be killed in concentration camps in Nazi Germany and occupied European countries (Newsome, 2022, Steakley, 1974). Parallel to the 2.7 million Jewish people² who were murdered in death camps, were given one of a select number of symbols to categorise them. For the Jews, it was the yellow star whereas for homosexuals and trans women, it was a light pink triangle (Die Rosa Winkel) that was sewn onto their prisoner uniforms. After the war, some prisoners were rescued whereas many of the queer people who wore the pink triangle still faced imprisonment, according to paragraph 175 of the German criminal code. This was a law which stated that “a man who commits sexual acts (Unzucht) with another man, or allows himself to be misused for sexual acts by a man, will be punished with prison.” (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2021). In some cases, these people were subject to a detention period that was reset, where their time at the camps was not factored into their total sentence (Newsome, 2022). Due to this treatment, and continued injustice decades after the war, the pink triangle was used again, believed to be for the first time, in 1971 by Homosexuelle Aktion Westberlin, a German LGBT+ association in demonstrations to eliminate paragraph 175 of the German criminal code. The use of this symbol in political action was appropriated by many groups, most famously by ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) in 1987. This grassroots political group was organised to fight against AIDS and the inaction of those in power. With ACT UP’s use of this symbol in the 80s and the high media attention they gained across with their 140 chapters worldwide and their continued campaigning to this day, the pink triangle has become a very popular and widely used symbol of queer resistance. Markedly, due to the wide-scale impact of the AIDS crisis and the popularity of the pink triangle, in the past 40 years, there are countless examples of the use of the symbol in artistic expression by queer people and non-queers alike. The significance of such imagery has received a lot of attention in a variety of literature but has yet to be tackled

¹ The term ‘queer’ is used within this paper following the argumentation of Spiel et al., (2019, p. 1), as a term “relating to a sexual or gender identity that does not correspond to established ideas of sexuality and gender, especially heterosexual norms”. This use of the term queer is to avoid the use of “LGBT+” which in literature can feel muddled, overextended, and not in account of intersectionality, whereas queer as an umbrella term appears more effective in the context of the current paper.

² Another 3.3 million were killed outside of the death camp locations, in organised massacres, ghettos, labour camps, and other abhorrent acts.

via the contemporary modes of thinking which explore the artistic reproduction of the pink triangle to transmit social meaning through certain processes that modern Social Representations Theory literature can explain. Therefore, in this article, the author will explore the history of the pink triangle as a symbol, its meanings and uses in various political and commercial spaces, and a case study of one individual who has used the symbol in myriad facets of his life. Following this, I will create a case for an avenue of social representations research further exploring the artistic expression of queer people to illuminate the meaning-making that constructs personal and shared realities.

SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS THEORY

This section will describe the theory of social representations and its processes in their most simple terms then expand upon them by applying this thinking to the power of the image and how we can use the theory within the context of artistic expressions.

Social Representations Theory (SRT, Moscovici, 1973, 2000), has been used widely by theorists as a meta-theoretical framework to understand how individuals are guided in the understanding of their realities where SRT had aimed to explicate “the human psychology with contemporary social and cultural questions” (Moscovici, 1998, p. 241). Specifically, social representations here are described as common systems of values, ideas and practices across a social group or community, which allow individuals to orient themselves in their material and social world and subsequently navigate it in a way that equips them with a coda for communication as well as development of shared identities constituted within community history (Moscovici, 1973). Negatively oriented social representations that had originally allowed for the creation of the paragraph 175 law, would then later interact with the sociohistorical context of 1940s Germany and allow for the further persecution of queer men during the Holocaust due to the common shared beliefs of the time. Furthermore, to apply the thinking of Howarth (2006, p.79), where she discusses the noisy nature of social representations which reflect and can amplify “echoes of our individual and collective histories” to inform ideologies. These shared common values and beliefs allowed Nazi-party member German citizens and other complicit persons across Europe to make sense of the post-WW1 situation of the country, of their reality and that of others. This meaning-making had allowed them to act within and navigate this reality and further exert a level of agency, such as

voting, campaigning, and reporting ‘problem’ scapegoated persons – here, perpetuating a long history of antisemitism and queerphobia.

As we can see, these social representations are organised as narratives (see László, 1997) and informed via two general processes, known as ‘anchoring’ and ‘objectification’. The first, anchoring in its most basic form is the process of giving meaning to objects or phenomena for example, by categorising or naming them (Moscovici, 1973). Ascribing this meaning to an unfamiliar phenomenon thus starts to familiarise an individual or group with it in a way that makes sense within what is already known in the cultural context and collective history. Wagner et al., (1999) depict anchoring within a sociogenetic frame of social representation (his schematic depiction will be visually applied later within the current article). Here, further discourse and elaboration with group members to orient the group in conjunction with the novel event/phenomenon is anchored in response to an unfamiliar event or threat – triggered by what has been termed ‘collective symbolic coping’ (Wagner et al., 1999). From this, an existing social representation can be changed and evolve with new information, or via discourse that ‘objectifies’ a representation. This objectification is dialectically related to anchoring, it is the process of taking abstract meanings and giving them concreteness, composing the abstract back into a scheme or figure for tangibility and an accessible structure (Arruda, 2016). In essence, through this process, a representation attains a corporeal form. These processes in these most basic forms can be illuminated by applying them to the activism of *Homosexuelle Aktion WestBerlin (HAW)*. Founded in 1971, this organisation is believed to be the first to reclaim the pink triangle used during The Holocaust. In 1973, they called upon queer people, mainly men, to wear the pink triangle to firstly memorialise the lives lost and destroyed by the Nazi regime and secondly to protest paragraph 175 (which would be later repealed in 1994, Gianoulia, 2004; Newsome, 2022). In October of the same year, the *HAW Feminist Group* released a 25-page document detailing why they believed the pink triangle should become the symbol of West Germany's gay liberation movement (Newsome, 2022). It is then by re-attributing the pink triangle years later to appeal for the abolition of paragraph 175 that we see its initial anchoring, ascribing the continued discrimination in then West Germany to that of the historicised then categorises it, the pink triangle acting as an abstracted form of their reality. *HAW* then in providing their manifesto, demonstrate one form of the active objectification of the collective

social representation of queer history, providing a clear set of beliefs and social practices implicated by wearing the pink triangle during protest and in everyday life for an activist.

To extend these basic definitions of SRT, we can point to Arruda (2016) who indicated the need to explore the ‘imaginary dimension’ of social representations. She states that this dimension of a social representation can be illustrated by the visual imagery and other figurative elements existing within it are generated by anchoring and objectification. Ullan (1995), conceives of these processes from the sphere of artistic creation, regarding art as the symbolical reality for the creator, and further inherently as a social reality. First, anchoring can be facilitated by artistic creation “since both the creator and the viewer assign the work, the product, and its referents to an already established category, although on occasion they may have to modify their previous ideas to be able to take in the new object” (Ullan, 1995, p. 6). When discussing the formation of artistic images, Ullan (1995) describes three phases of objectification, (i) selective construction, (ii) schematization, and (iii) ontologization.

Firstly, *selective construction*: the decontextualization of selected information based upon certain criteria that can be both cultural and prescriptive. Secondly, *schematization*: the process of producing a figurative core or ‘nucleus’ grants the thinking of artworks as structured systems, this then contributes to the objectification of a symbolic reality by taking the selected parts of available information and articulating these parts as well-organised images, even when chaotic. Thirdly, *ontologization*: the introduction of the image to a ‘real’ world. Artistic images are hailed as ‘things’ rather than as symbols as they become *actual*. The subsequent belief in the reality of an image or symbol is dialectically linked with the meaning-making processes that occur in the anchoring process. The creator can interpret it and familiarise themselves with it integrating the image into their socio-cognitive schemata. The attributed meaning and categorisation are then able to orient behaviour. Furthermore, when thinking about using political symbols and producing images from these to make the ‘un-familiar familiar’, we can also point toward collective symbolic coping where the salience of a social representation can greatly guide everyday sense-making and attitudes (Moscovici, 1984; Sen & Wagner, 2005; Wagner, 1998). This can be seen within the realm of advertising (see Wagner & Kronberger, 2001).

Within social representations, the imaginary is thought to have a role within a creative dimension where for example, social objects with a controversial history provide a foundation

for the social imaginary³ and its socio-historical context to be manifested in the social representation's construction (Arruda, 2014). The mobilisation of social movements and public protest can be achieved via the use of these types of symbols and images (Awad & Wagoner, 2020). This is seen with activism from HAW as well as in contemporary spaces. For example, Rorholm and Gambrell (2019) discuss San Francisco's Pink Triangle Monument and how this memorialises the queer community as a way of facilitating collective memory. Via observation and interview, they found the pink triangle to be a transformative symbol for the community as well as an 'interruptive' motif against the continuing rise of hate within the USA. However, what is not accounted for here is the ways in which individuals go on to utilise the symbol in their own lives, such as with artistic expression. This type of reproduction, diffusion, and transformation of political symbols across time and space such as their continued manifestation as collective memory is pertinent within contemporary literature (see Awad & Wagoner, 2020). In the context of the current paper, when exploring historical and contemporary uses of the pink triangle as an enduring political symbol in artistic expression, several artworks will be appraised by applying the processes of anchoring and objectification as described by Ullan (1995), their role in the imaging dimension of social representations.

Research objectives

When thinking about the power of the image, especially political images, the current research aims to further the development of research in the realm of the imaging dimension of social representations within the creative reproduction of political objects and protest symbols. One objective here is to extend previous SRT research into a specific and enduring example of a popular political symbol, which appears to be under-researched within a psychological context. Furthermore, with the rising persecution of queer persons in contemporary Western politics, it appears to be a pertinent time to extend and develop research into the realm of historical symbols for this group within the social imaginary, before the symbols will be used again for reasons of protest rather than of Pride. Consequently, the current article aims to apply social representations theory to the creations of artists to (a) examine the creations of artists which

³ The web of shared meanings across a social reality which individuals and groups can use to imagine them. Whilst going beyond language use, imaginaries facilitate discourses and mobilise the construction of the past and future to allow sense-making within the social world (Arruda, 2016)

involve queer history as a continued legacy of queer activists, and (b) explore the dynamics and personal meaning for an individual who uses iconography from queer history in their art. To explore these aims, the author asks: how can the images associated with a historical political movement be explored via their social representation shared within artistic creation?

METHOD

Sourced sample and procedure

Within this research, a mixed methodology has been used to produce data from a range of sources that have used the pink triangle within their artistic expression. These uses include a logo, a poster, food packaging, couture, body art as well as a theatre piece and its set design (see Table 1).

Table 1.

Profile of the explored uses

Mode of use	Sourced from	Original context	Additional information
Branding	Pink Triangle Press	Produced as a publication for the legal protection of a magazine	Canadian context
Poster campaign	ACT UP	To call attention to the AIDS crisis	American context One example of multiple campaigns
Food packaging	Skittles	To celebrate Pride month	American context One of a selection of packets designed for Pride
Couture runway ensemble	RuPaul's Drag Race UK	Produced for the arbitrary runway category 'tickled pink'	British context
Theatre set design Body Art	Case study: NH	Autobiographical play Chosen due to the reflective nature of the play	British context HIV+ gay man in his 30s living in Manchester

To analyse the three former examples, publicly available information and interviews are used. Analysis of the runway couture piece uses a transcript from the television show it appeared on. Finally, the latter two examples originate from the same case study, where a narrative interview of the individual, as well as a recording of the production, are used to explore how they have reproduced the pink triangle in their artistic expression. When researching historical uses of

the pink triangle, the author selected those featured in the current paper in conjunction with the amount of publicly available information for those examples. Additionally, they contacted many individuals regarding their art to facilitate interviews where only one materialised. While this is indeed a limitation of the current paper, the author hopes the used examples can be used to illuminate the enduring power that collective symbols hold in communicating the ideas and attitudes that arise in response to historic persecution. It is for this reason that analysis will be presented as a narrative, to account for the story surrounding the pink triangle across the examples used.

ANALYSIS

Pink Triangle Press (1971-now)

First produced in 1971, *The Body Politic* was a magazine sold throughout the gay bars of Toronto for 25 Canadian cents (Mills, 2011). It stands as one example of journals which publicised the prior history of the pink triangle and urged the use of the symbol in memorials (Gianoulis, 2004, McLellan, 2012). After legal battles surrounding the content of the magazine, the Pink Triangle Press (PTP) began operation in 1976 (Xtra, 2013). This press aided in providing the magazine with legal protection and autonomy (Miller & Willett, 2018, Xtra, 2013). Nowadays, it is a much larger media organisation which concentrates on queer journalism with many off-shooting projects.

On their website, they include their mission statement which starts with their catchphrase 'Daring Together' and ends with the words:

Pink Triangle Press was born from the conscious will and daunting work
Of the gay and lesbian people who made the Body Politic.
The history of our communities
Is a foundation, inspiration, a lesson and a warning.
We seek to own our history: we learn and teach and guard it.

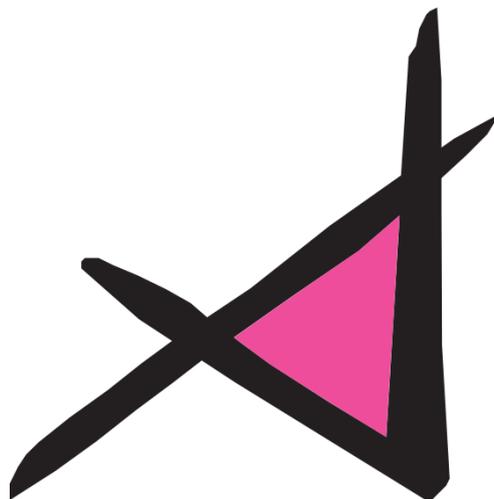
The use of this specific name and use of the pink triangle in their logo (figure 1) was adopted to reflect this commitment to the protection and dissemination of queer histories. This can be

seen over their 50 years of publications and the organisation has been seen to contribute numerously to the Canadian gay and lesbian liberation movement (see Mills, 2011).

On the PTP website, it is explained that their use of the logo was to reflect their commitment to the vigilance of history, citing an article from *The Body Politic* entitled "Homosexuals and the Third Reich" by James Steakley (1974). In the article, Steakley provides an extensive history, of what was known in the 70s regarding the queer persecution of only 30 years prior. Interestingly, Paul Halsall (2023), who has reprinted the article online, writes, "The first account in English of the situation of homosexuals in Nazi Germany appeared originally in *The Body Politic*". When thinking about this article from Steakley and PTP's pledge to teach and guard their history, it appears the use of the pink triangle in their nomenclature and logo they are aiming to communicate this, they are stating to the world that they are a publication that is not only pridefully queer but inherently protective of themselves and the community they want to serve. We can see the formation of the publication itself as anchoring, especially as this was for the legal protection of *The Body Politic*, especially against censorship, thus ascribing meaning ingrained within this context.

Figure 1.

The current Pink Triangle Press logo. It includes a pink triangle situated inside the Phoenician letter aleph rotated and stylised to look like the letter 'P'. Copyright The Pink Triangle Press.



The use of the pink triangle in the publication's name thus anchors as communicating defence against the editing of queer expression. Further, the name and the logo then ontologise the pink triangle iconographically – by reproducing it in this way, it not only continues to persist as a symbol of safeguarding, but this type of ontologization and continued use reminds readers to not allow themselves to be censored.

Silence = Death Poster (1978)

Human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) first detected in the USA have since spread globally. This pandemic began in 1981 when five homosexual men in California contracted a rare lung infection known as *Pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia (PCP, Centers for Disease Control, 1981). Simultaneously, eight homosexual men in New York developed a rare cancer known as Kaposi's Sarcoma (Hymes et al., 1981). In the same year, PCP was also found in several intravenous drug users (Masur et al., 1981). By December, there were 337 cases of severe immunodeficiency in homosexual men, of which 130 died (HIV.org, 2021). These phenomena mark the beginning of the HIV/AIDS pandemic which reached its peak in 1995 (UNAIDS, 2020). Before this, it was thought that as many as 300,000 people developed HIV/AIDS before the pattern of cases was reported in the US (HIV.org, 2021). At this point, the condition was known as GRID (Gay-related immune deficiency). 40 years later, the spread of HIV/AIDS has slowed immensely but the estimated total global death toll has surpassed 33 million persons (UNAIDS, 2020).

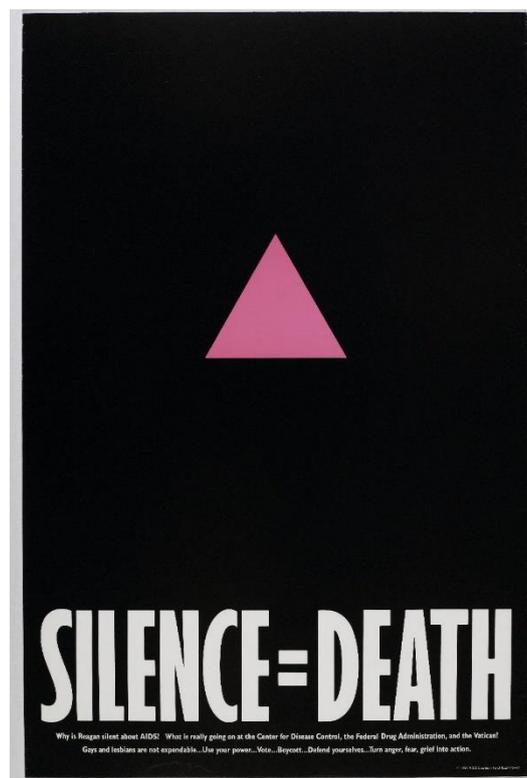
According to Kinsella (1989), news organisations underreported HIV/AIDS due to its most affected population (by number⁴), homosexual men being associated with 'deviant sexual behaviours'. Stories appearing in the media were consistently ambiguous, until 1984, when Ryan White (an American child) was diagnosed with AIDS following a blood transfusion and was labelled an 'innocent victim', triggering a shift away from the narrative of the 'gay plague',

⁴ Trans-women, and especially trans-women of colour have been found to be historically the most statistically likely group to be diagnosed with HIV/AIDS (Stutterheim, van Dijk, Wang, & Jonas, 2021).

which othered the queer community (Wright, Sparks & O’Hair, 2012). This stigma followed HIV/AIDS wherever it spread and remains the largest barrier to its prevention.

Figure 2.

Highly used example of the poster. Not visible is the text at the bottom which reads: “Why is Reagan silent about AIDS? What is really going on at the Center for Disease Control, the Federal Drug Administration, and the Vatican? Gays and lesbians are not expendable... Use your power... Vote... Boycott...Defend yourselves... Turn anger, fear, grief into action.”. Image from the Brooklyn Museum



Howarth (2002) argued that negative social representations can become internalised as part of one’s social identity, thus contributing to low self-esteem and self-hatred. Similar processes of internalising negative representations as part of one’s social identity have been observed among gay men living with HIV (Joffe, 1995). In the spring of 1987, three thousand posters were put in New York City, designed, and produced by Avram Finkelstein, Brian Howard, Oliver Johnston, Charles Kreloff, Chris Lione, and Jorge Socarrás who would later spearhead the creation of the ACT UP group, who would lead the fight against these negative representations. These posters were black, adorned with an upside-down pink triangle and the words 'Silence = Death' (figure 2).

Finkelstein was one of the individuals who aided in the design of the poster, growing up in Long Island, NY, he learned lithography in high school and produced political posters (Finkelstein in an interview with Schulman, 2013). Notably, one of the posters, an anti-violence poster, read "Sheep who died silently are no useless victims", a quote Finkelstein admits comes from philosopher Marshall McLuhan.

Later in life, during the AIDS crisis, Finkelstein lost a partner who contracted the disease, when it was known as GRID. Partly from this loss, and the growing losses of others, he, being aware of the political crisis that was AIDS, wanted to become politically active. In the interview, he states that many of the political groups who held meetings, such as GLAAD and the Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Rights, were not talking about AIDS. It was during dinner conversation regarding AIDS between who would be future ACT UP members that they decided to form a group, as a space for discussion became paramount. Here, Finkelstein states: We met every week and we talked about our fears and dating and loneliness and being gay and AIDS. But almost every week we would end up, the conversation would end up talking about politics. So it became very obvious to me, after about six months of that, that we were a political consciousness-raising group as well, and that's how the poster idea came about

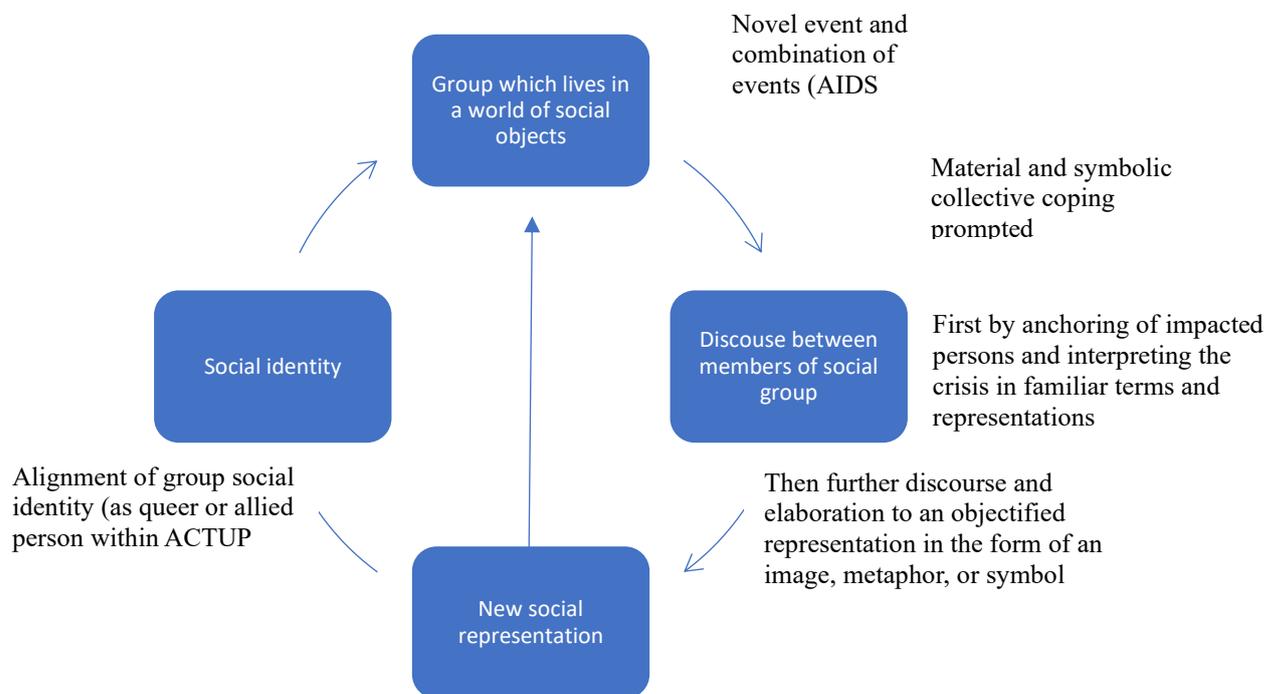
This can be reflected within Wagner et al., (1999)'s schematic depiction of the sociogenesis of social representations (Figure 3). This schematic exemplifies a cycle of how social representations are formed and evolve. Firstly, we see the AIDS crisis as a threat with the attached non-response from those in power as a combination of events triggering collective symbolic coping. The discourse between Finkelstein and his dinner guests allows them to come to a basic shared understanding of the unfamiliar phenomenon it is essential to name it and attribute characteristics which allow the phenomenon to be communicated. This is where the issues of media non-reporting led to protests from ACTUP, the lack of public knowledge and the naming of the disease at the time 'GRID' contributes to a certain social representation of AIDS and misinformation leading from this where group members who could be impacted are required to selectively construct their representation based on what is available to them. These circumstances triggered the group's need for activism and the resulting objectification of their shared experiences. It is from this we see the group produce a corporeal version of their new social representation – the Silence = Death Poster. When discussing the poster, which was originally going to be a tattoo on someone's buttocks, however, due to certain concerns it was

scrapped. Further, with advertising space being competitive, largely corporate, and flashy, Finkelstein says:

...we had to figure out a way to define our space discretely with one poster, and that's how we ended up with black, to neutralize the context. It was meant to be seen in that context, but it was meant as an intervention into that context, clearly (...) if it isn't a tattooed body, what is the abstract image that will signal to the lesbian and gay community we're talking to them?

Figure 3.

Adaptation of the schematic depiction of the sociogenesis of social representations (Wagner et al., 1999) to the actions of ACTUP and production of the Silence = Death poster



Within this mode of schematization, they toyed with the idea of using the lambda symbol or the labrys (which was a popular symbol with the lesbian community of the time). The rainbow flag was also discussed as an idea, which they hated. Finkelstein goes on to say:

Then there was the pink triangle, which we also hated. We hated all of them. The triangle we hated because it intoned victimhood, obviously, but it seemed like it might have the most chance of being clear enough to the lesbian and gay community, more clear than the other images we were discussing that were abstract, and graphic enough to be intriguing, interesting, compelling, to people outside of the community who didn't know what it was.

Finkelstein admits he was afraid of 'defanging' concentration camps as a metaphor by using this type of image. However, due to comments from conservative pundit William Buckley who called for quarantining for those people with AIDS as well as mandatory tattooing to warn future sexual partners, the group's use of the symbol was settled (Waxman, 2018). He discusses that they decided on inverting the triangle to unite power between them, to incite action rather than to stay passive. Interestingly, it is thought the inversion of the triangle was an accident, which it appears ACT UP members have since claimed later was intentional (Boddington, 2021). Additionally, Finkelstein has also stated elsewhere that the specific colour of the triangle, fuchsia, was a feature of the collective rejected the pale pink used in Nazi Germany, as a function of giving the poster a 'current' feel (Boddington, 2021). The change in colour and orientation as functions of not being a 1:1 reproduction of the pink triangle, where the inverted fuchsia triangle represents the rejection of victimhood and a call to action, a hopeful brightness built of a strong foundation, even if retrospective. This reflects how the representation of an image, even objectified and created by the same individual can evolve and change where new meanings displace initial ones. It may stem from the memory of the process may be lost to time, or being entangled in a social movement produces a certain narrative in its beginnings but the story slowly changes years after the phenomena had already become familiar.

Lastly, in terms of the text, 'Silence = Death', Finkelstein refers to it as a 'volley' he says:

I had read in The New York Times something about the silence of a community being deafening. I don't remember what the context was. It was in reference to a social issue... I wrote in my notes, "Gay silence is deafening," (...) it was Oliver who said, "What about 'Silence is Death'?"(...) And then I'm not sure who said, "Oh, no, it should be 'Silence Equals Death.'" And then someone else said, "We

should use an equal sign.” It was literally that fast. It was four comments. Then we lived with it for a while before we realized that actually was what we wanted to say.

It was after the rollout of these posters that ACT UP found its success, it was their use of graphic design that allowed them to direct their anger towards the government and in turn, act up, themselves via the ontologization of their new social representation. In the 35 years since its inception, ACT UP boast myriad accomplishments. Some of their most famous include demonstrations such as the Wall Street sit-in which demanded for access to the experimental AIDS drugs the ending of profiteering where companies charged incredibly high prices for their medicines and the near media black-out years prior (ACT UP, 2023). This demonstration garnered high media attention and so did subsequent demonstrations. This in turn produced larger protests where the poster was heavily featured on placards (figure 4). Now with 140 chapters globally, we can see that ACT UP and by extension, the pink triangle has endured and now that the AIDS crisis has ended, its famous poster remains in the queer collective consciousness, in events such as Pride and further in artistic expression as will be explored. The wide attention and use by protestors of this symbol allowed for it to gain international legitimacy. Here, with countless people joining ACT UP initially and its boom globally, it is

Figure 4.

Photographic examples of the use of the poster at various ACT UP demonstrations. Images from Getty Images.



evident how the poster as an image has been used, re-produced, and re-presented over decades being used as an anchoring point for individuals to align themselves with the group's positive social identity and perpetuate this sociogenetic development themselves by reproducing the symbol themselves and moving away from stigmatisation and allowing themselves to become more ill due to self-hatred.

Skittles Pride Packs (2020-now)

The first-ever Pride parade was held in New York, one year after the Stonewall riots, on June 28th, 1970. After its initial use, the pink triangle is a very common sight during today's Pride parades and other events during Pride months globally. Gianoulis (2004) denotes that due to the more cheerful appearance of the pink triangle, it was often used to add a "gay touch" to everyday objects such as golf balls. This can be exemplified in one example from recent memory. Kah Yangni, an American illustrator and muralist, produced one of several designs for Skittles packaging during Skittle's celebration of Pride in 2022 (figure 5). This was in partnership with the American non-profit organisation GLAAD, where Skittles pledged to donate one dollar (USD) for each pack sold. In an interview for the Skittles YouTube channel (2022), Yangni said:

I made my design about vintage queer protest pins. We have this huge awesome history of activism and defiance, and I just wanted my art to pay homage to that history.

Here we can see there are many symbols/signs associated with modern pride, including the pink triangle. Interestingly, they appear to have similar reasoning for the use of the triangle as the PTP, the historical 'defiance' of the queer community and safeguarding of this history is at the forefront of thinking when using this type of imagery. The design adorning multiple pride pins as well as raised fists becomes somewhat of a protest symbol. Some argue that Pride is a protest, due to its inception and continued legacy (see Mojela, 2023). Thus, it seems to be a natural progression which has been cut short for the 'Pride Packs' initiative to include colourful and meaningful packaging started in 2020, as opposed to generic rainbow or even grey pride packaging (their tagline being 'only one rainbow matters'). For Pride 2023, five new designs

were unveiled, notably most of these designs concentrate aesthetically on the various Pride flags, but no other specific iconography. Meaning, of the ten packages designed for Skittles pride, ignoring flag imagery, Kah's is the only design to use such political imagery and protest symbols overtly.

Figure 5.

Kah's design for Skittles which includes the pink triangle as well as other symbols.



Yangni further in the interview recalls their design process:

I realised that there was a need for people to make art that showed like the beauty in our experience (...) I want people to look at my art and feel encouraged and inspired. I want people to look at my art and feel like what they are is okay.

Here, Yangni talks about their art in general, contextualising it within murals, this art style can be seen within their packaging design. There is clear selective construction and schematisation that can be illustrated here. In designing this packaging, they take the conjoint themes of Skittles and Pride and extend them further than the rainbow metaphor. They make explicit the queerness of Pride and utilise the symbols they see as pertinent, recognisable, and assumably the most inclusive – but most importantly they make explicit the nature of Pride as protest, which other designs largely ignore.

Due to the consumer nature of the packaging, this design is seen to be contentious, one Twitter user (Benson, 2022) wrote:

Oh ok so we've reached the "use pink triangle to sell Skittles" level of hell. Neat.

This tweet, which included a picture of the larger version of the packaging on supermarket shelving, exemplifies the protective nature that people have over their queer history. It is easy to imagine that the version of the symbol used to fight against the corporate greed that exacerbated the AIDS crisis used by another corporation would vex some consumers. In this way, it appears that not all forms of ontologisation of protest symbols via artistic reproduction are created equally. Despite the charity linkage, the corporatisation of Pride and in this case, the pink triangle appear to sully the message, the ‘defanging’ of the symbol that Finkelstein and his peers had feared has become a reality.

Drag Race UK Runway (2022)

During episode six of RuPaul's Drag Race UK Season Four (a drag artistry competition show), Manchester-based Drag Queen Cheddar Gorgeous wore an ACT UP-inspired ensemble (figure 6), during the runway portion of the show. When the queens get ready for the runway in the 'werkroom', the queens see the outfit and begin a discussion. One queen, Dakota Schiffer upon noticing one of the triangle embellishments asks:

Dakota: "That's the symbol that they used to identify homosexuals in the holocaust, isn't it?"

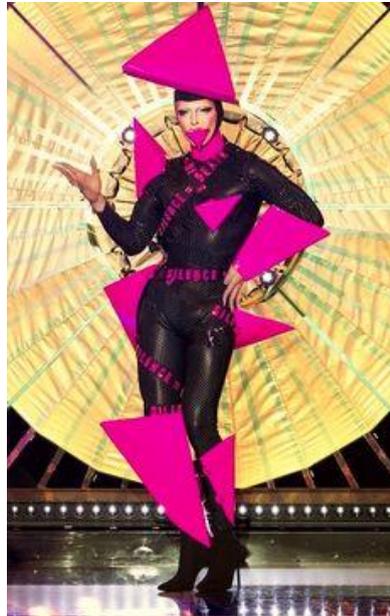
Cheddar: "Yes absolutely, and later it was taken by a lot of queer movements. So, particularly by the ACT UP movement, Silence = Death was their slogan".

This initial exchange shows how ranging initial representations can be, Dakota asks a clarifying question, trying to make sense of the motif that Cheddar is using for her runway, the first thing coming to mind being the holocaust. This question is one form of making something slightly unfamiliar, more familiar when used in the context of fashion. During the conversation, the television show cuts into ‘confessional’ interview moments to contribute to a narrative the viewer can follow. Cheddar, in a confessional, explains:

"During the HIV and AIDS crisis in the '80s, the ACT UP movement took those symbols that were used against us and turned that into a symbol of queer resistance"

Figure 6.

Cheddar Gorgeous' 'Tickled Pink' ensemble. It appears to be a black catsuit with straps reading 'Silence = Death' and pink triangle



Cheddar (werkroom): I just wanted to, like, do a little bit of a twist on pink, really,

Cheddar (confessional): The ACT UP movement did so many kinds of crazy out-there stunts and made use of spectacle and gag-orders to draw attention to social issues. And they acted all over the world.

Cheddar (werkroom): In Manchester, they would shoot condoms over the wall of Strangeways Prison. So, it was these stunts that drew attention to HIV as an issue for everybody because, at the time, people were just regarding it as something that gay men had to deal with.

Pixie Polite: The inaction of people in power to do anything-- it's essentially the wilful genocide of queer people.

It is then here that we see that the larger metaphor of the pink triangle comes to light, 'wilful genocide' as Pixie describes - when presenting this metaphor for a televised audience it works as the show's narrative hinge to aid in explaining the significance of Cheddar's ensemble to the viewer.

Later in the episode, during her runway commentary, Cheddar says:

"My tickled pink runway is inspired by an illustration of the pink triangle. Along the straps are the words silence equals death. For me, it's a metaphor for the way gay identity works fullstop. This look is absolutely dedicated to everyone who's fighting stigma around HIV."

Here, Cheddar equates her use of the pink triangle to her own identity and in doing so she bridges this identity with her personal representation of the triangle. Further, not only does the use of political symbols in art aim to communicate a specific message, but it also allows the artist to show who are they and what they stand for. Here, an artist shows their queer identity in a show that not only celebrates queerness but also allows its contestants to show their solidarity with individuals within their community who have historically seen themselves marginalized, the case here being those living with HIV/AIDS. In this way, the use of imagery anchors the earlier message in the program into a full image, and the following processes of objectification guide the viewer into associating the social issue with an object of the social imaginary, the ensemble itself.

This specific use of the pink triangle also exemplifies how symbols can be used by social movements to communicate a representation of themselves (Awad & Wagoner, 2020). To illustrate, Cheddar's "twist on pink", echoes Finkelstein's purposeful use of the colour fuchsia rather than light pink. This would not only appear more striking in an alley or street already overcrowded with advertising, but on a television set the combination of jet black and a deep fuchsia would seem to command the attention of an audience sat at home. Additionally, utilizing the triangle in her mouth to reflect how activists, such as those affiliated with ACT UP used "*spectacle and gag-orders to draw attention*" – in this way Cheddar uses her art to first endorse the activities of ACT UP with her design but also to teach the world about them. It seems that with meticulous effort on the part of an artist, the reflective action of creation aids in the personal objectification of a series of events or phenomena enough to then explain it to others, to a national and international audience with confidence and clarity. To this point, Drag Race UK is televised by the BBC and thus has the potential to reach millions of people – if the runway facilitates conversation between the queens, it is then likely to have reached an audience who may or may not know then queer history and thusly construct meaning attached to not only the symbol of the pink triangle but the meaning of what drag artistry can be. The

weight of this visual diffusion of a historicised symbol on television can be seen later in the program. Each week, contestants receive feedback for their performance on that week, during Cheddar's turn, the judges in succession say to her:

RuPaul Charles: The outfit is amazing, and it is everything that I've come to know about you, which is you're very smart.

Alan Carr: I love how your mind works. I mean taking the colour pink and then turning it into something important- what a triumph.

Michelle Visage: All I can say about this outfit tonight is thank you. Having lived through the AIDS crisis in New York, this means a lot to me.

Interestingly, these lines exemplify how the opinion of persons with assumed power can potentially guide the construction of group attitudes. The judges, by giving these critiques also strengthen the point that this outfit signifies a noteworthy and emotionally moving symbol, one with a certain weight to it and one that almost deserves the acknowledgement and appreciation that can be offered by a cultural staple such as Drag Race. As Awad and Wagoner (2020) explain, symbols of protest are concurrently a representation of the group, (by extension the individual) as well as a facilitator of that group's unification of action and ideas. When those with perceived power and knowledge appear to have a convergent representation, this can more easily extend to the larger collective.

Case study of NH

NH is a 36-year-old gay man living in the Greater Manchester Area who was diagnosed as HIV+ when he was 16 years of age. His use of the pink triangle was found on Twitter, a post showing a tattoo of the triangle above wording which reads 'Action = Life' (figure 8). In addition to this NH produced an autobiographical play called *First Time* which explores his life leading up to the diagnosis and his transition into a normal life following. After not talking about his HIV for 15 years, he decided to create his production in 2017. With over 100 shows, multiple five-star ratings, and awards, the pink triangle had become quite prominent in his life. As seen in Figure 8, the stage for the show featured several pink triangles, one on the floor, one on the backdrop, as well as on some staging blocks and a t-shirt.

NH was approached by the author, and he agreed to an online interview which was around one hour. The interview technique followed the principles of the narrative interview as described by Jovchelovitch and Bauer (2000). The interview was transcribed by hand and its narrative was analysed via a thematic analysis. When examining this data within this article, we will explore how NH has developed from his teenage years, being diagnosed as HIV+, living secretly with this, and finally reaching self-acceptance and taking action to live his life, using this lived experience within artistic expression alongside representations of HIV/AIDS and its attached signs. These are displayed as three themes, (1) Journey to Self-Acceptance, (2) Diffusion, and (3) Ideation. A schematic for these themes and their respective sub-themes can be seen in Figure 7.

Figure 7.

Thematic map to illustrate the three main themes of NH’s narrative interview. Here the linked themes concern the production of his social representation of AIDS symbols and reproduction via artistic expression.

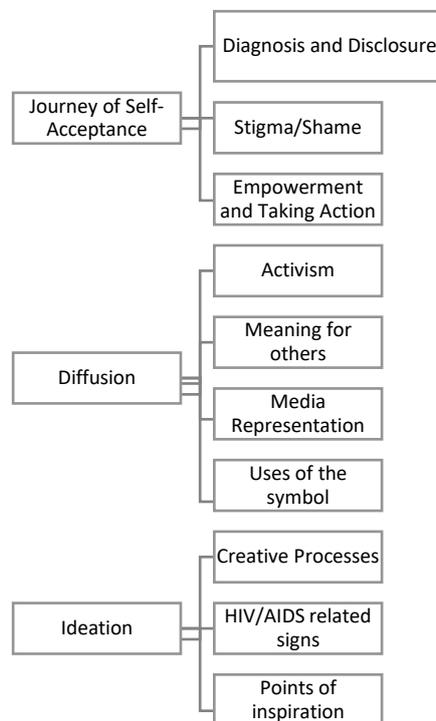


Figure 8.

Pink triangle tattoo on NH's forearm



Figure 9.

Stage of First Time. Featured are many items including the outline of a triangle on a pink curtain, a pink triangle centre stage and two blocks with the pink triangle painted on them. NH is seen on the left of the image, and right of the stage.



Journey to Self-Acceptance

This theme and its codes directly characterise personification – linking an idea or phenomenon to specific persons – by nature of autobiographical theatre this method of objectification would likely leave the audience of *First Time*, those familiar and unfamiliar with HIV/AIDS-related stories as well as the pink triangle linking these with NH, or at least the version of him they see on stage. By sharing this journey of self-acceptance with the audience, the initial diagnosis, how he must medicate, to the link between stigma and mental health, he says:

I was diagnosed with HIV in 2003 but it was the stigma and the shame of the virus that nearly killed me (...) By 2017, I was in a place where I could tell my mental health was in such a bad state, I think I could have very easily slipped further and further down quite a dark path.

The internalisation of a certain social representation of HIV/AIDS and persons associated with it led to these years of self-stigmatisation. It took NH fifteen years to share his diagnosis with his family – finally taking the plunge concurrent to producing his play.

In addition, the autobiographical nature of *First Time* perfectly exemplifies how an individual's personal, private experience can also guide their sense-making of problematic events, such as being diagnosed with a chronic illness. Lifelong experience, self-study, and activism as part of this sense-making transform this experience into common-sense constructs for the person living with the illness. The ability to then turn these constructs into artistic expression with their attached basic symbols allows the individual to transform their lived experience and evolving social representations of phenomena into award-winning art.

Diffusion

Further, than the pink triangle being intertwined with personal growth and lifelong development after diagnosis of NH, the meaning of the triangle for him is completely intertwined with his constructed representation surrounding HIV/AIDS narratives and the attached meanings of associated symbols. This denotes the theme of the diffusion of the symbol (i.e., how the representation of the pink triangle as well as HIV/AIDS has spread and been re-presented).

Due to the spreading of the triangle and the activism of ACT UP and others, far and wide within and out of the queer community by the time NH first encountered them, myriad examples of media representation had existed for NH to digest and learn about HIV/AIDS stories. In the narrative, he mentions media such as Dallas Buyers Club, Torch Song Trilogy, and 120 Beats per Minute. The former example like many others NH describes, paints an extremely sad and harrowing picture of HIV/AIDS where many actors/theatre-makers like him go on to star in equally depressing productions. It is from watching these and noting how uncomfortable he felt watching many people work through their experiences in real-time. It is from this representation of HIV/AIDS stories that NH and contemporary artists have wanted to actively 'flip the script'. By using his platform to share another narrative and using his production/set design as a teaching tool as he believes the audience will leave this production fully familiar with a positive narrative and its attached signs:

For me that the kind of the past history of the triangle is really important. And I'm often surprised at how few people know about its history (...) even people that I thought would know, you know, from the LGBTQ community didn't know about it at all. So, it feels for me like a really important symbol because it's like a beacon it's like a guiding light through our history.

Extending this, within the narrative he divulges the story of a date gone wrong, explaining that:

He didn't know I was HIV+ (...) he was like 'It's morally wrong if someone who's HIV+ doesn't tell their partner' (...), and so I turned around to him and said, well, you might as well slap a pink triangle on a lot of us and be done with it. You know, to like, basically just branders just identify those that were HIV+. And in the audience, it's interesting. Audience's reactions to that because you can hear and see the people that get the reference.

Seemingly reflecting the reasoning of ACT UP's decision to ultimately use the pink triangle in their poster due to the comments of William Buckley, NH argues against his date. This illuminates for us that over time, he has become much more comfortable with his condition

and is comfortable disputing discourse surrounding HIV/AIDS that not only threatens his existence but the representation of the conditions for others. This demonstrates the importance of how symbols such as the pink triangle can, not only be used to construct and reconstruct their representation of queer history where this representation can be used to aid in argumentation against ignorance and negative representations of people living with HIV/AIDS. Here, we can see how the diffusion of the symbol across people and decades has been instrumental in the sense-making and reimagination of NH for queer history and understanding his diagnosis. The attached social representation for this individual impacts how he navigates his reality as an HIV+ person as well as responds to the wider social representation represented in wider media and discourse with other persons.

Ideation

This theme denotes how NH ontologises the pink triangle in his work through instances of inspiration, the creative process, and the discussion of HIV/AIDS-related signs to design and build his theatre set as well as the design of his tattoo. Within the narrative, he talks about working on mood boards with a designer where the pink triangle was the most appealing symbol. For one reason it was pink and therefore *queer*, for another, it had a strong geometric structure which allowed the stage to be split into three sections. Within this theme of ideation, NH also discusses how he rejected many other symbols, reflecting Finkelstein's creative processes. Here, he says:

...I don't want any red ribbons⁵. I don't want any red, just like as like red and white feels just really like on the nose and really obvious. And honestly, a lot of campaigns around HIV and AIDS use red and white.

Here, he imagines how the themes and story would be communicated to the audience via colour language. Trying to move away from the narrative of the AIDS-related tragedy, he opts for set design that evokes a positive atmosphere, such as hanging the word 'hope' above the stage.

⁵ The red ribbon is a commonly worn symbol to denote an individual's support of people living with HIV/AIDS. The symbol is also used for other illnesses such as addiction and heart disease.

Additionally, for the bulk of the performances, the production included a six-by-three-metre glitter curtain with a three-by-three-metre pink triangle.

After touring the show for a long period, NH decided to get his tattoo. The specific meanings of the pink triangle's design were of great importance to him:

I thought, I'm gonna flip it round. And then I panic. I was like, oh my God, what if it's been flipped through a real reason, like, whoever designed that version.

NH having to research which way round the triangle was before getting the tattoo also resembles the team of ACT UP creating the poster with the upside-down triangle – as a function of the symbol's simplicity we see that with the held meanings which endure, there are also issues of reproduction that endure across uses. NH did not enjoy the idea of having the word 'death' tattooed on his body forever, rather opting for 'Action = Life' finding the message of other artworks, citing Keith Haring as one inspiration. This subversion of the messages changes the representation of the triangle for the individual's meaning-making, the process of getting a tattoo as objectification requires varying levels of through-thought depending on the individual. This exemplifies a type of selective construction in the continuing process of objectification that would come with tattooing the symbol. In inverting the meaning of the original poster, NH shows that his representation of the symbol is not one of death and suffering, but one of survival, one of choosing to live despite living with HIV. In this one case, his action does equal life, he took charge of his actions and truly started to live. By producing *First Time* and using the pink triangle in myriad ways, he is first anchoring the pink triangle in the personal meaning he wanted to convey during his play. In the process of objectifying his representation, one of strength, one of survival and choosing to live despite living with his condition, 'Action' here does equal life, he took charge over his actions and truly started to live. This is conveyed very well during *First Time*, and the audience leaves the theatre constructing their representations, attaching meaning to the pink triangle due to its predominance in the production – even if someone did not know what it signified, it is reasonable to assume when NH mentions it, the audience will start to understand that the symbol has pre-attached meaning within the realm of HIV/AIDS, at the least.

Overall, by producing *First Time*, NH was able to share his own story, teach his audience about his experiences but also queer history and drive a new narrative of HIV/AIDS as well as attach it to a symbol that he sees as incredibly personally important – all through the power of theatre and set design. These themes can be ultimately summarised with one quote: ...the then personal association with the symbol strengthened because it was, for me, it was something that was part of that journey of self-acceptance, moving away from shame, moving away from a place of self-stigma to a place of authenticity, empowerment. And I think that's probably what drove me to having it permanently stamped on my skin.

Ultimately, NH choosing the tattoo as a memorandum of his growth as a person and not to be a marker of a dangerous, 'plagued' person like Buckley had suggested also suggests how the impact that ACT UP and other activists have had on firstly, changing the narrative about HIV/AIDS but also how the image of the pink triangle behaves within the social imaginary. The fact that NH chooses the pink triangle to define his action in the face of adversity allows us to understand how much power this specific image holds and continues to hold.

CONCLUSIONS

The above example reproductions of the pink triangle provide a non-extensive chronology of use. First in the 1940s and being reclaimed in the 1970s and 80s by multiple groups. With these uses existing as responses to the continued persecution of queer persons after WWII, the spread of the symbol may have been much less prominent than it would have been if a) paragraph 175 was repealed much earlier and b) the AIDS pandemic and the organisations which exacerbated its harm were much less impactful than reality. This is not to say that without these former existential threats, the pink triangle men of the holocaust would not be remembered or remain within the social imaginary. With the vast number of ontologised examples of the symbol such as memorials and individuals such as Steakley safeguarding this now familiar history, it is logical to believe that the diffusion of the symbol and its current representation and power of this image would be wholly different. When thinking about anchoring, we can see that artists such as Kah Yangni and NH have used the symbol as imagery of hope and continued activism, taking the original meaning of the triangle and subverting it or highlighting its use in a more unfamiliar context. Originally, the major political movement to mobilise the use of the pink triangle was ACT UP, which purposefully used the triangle to highlight dangerous bigotry and

inaction during the AIDS crisis. The other examples explored within this paper from the 2020s reference the Silence = Death poster explicitly. With Cheddar Gorgeous and NH hold the pink triangle within their social identity as queer persons and using it as a communicative tool. Kah Yangni using it the triangle more to spread a positive message to a wider consumer audience, we can see a variety of modes in which this symbol can and has been objectified within the wider cultural landscape outside of the necessity of protest. It is in these capacities that we can find avenues to analyse how these artists hold representations of the symbol and how their art bridges the gap between their personal meaning-making and how audiences may perceive the art and navigate social issues they might be attached to.

Within the scope of this more exploratory paper, it does hold some limitations. For example, the paper used examples solely from a Western, English-speaking context. It is reasonable to argue, for example, due to the 140 chapters of ACT UP in the world that the spread of the pink triangle is much more pervasive than the current paper gives light to, however, it would also be difficult to extrapolate these conclusions far beyond the current paper due to its small scope. The author calls for future research to investigate the diffusion of the pink triangle in countries where English is not an official language, especially where ‘Silence = Death’ may use a different language when translated and therefore hold a slightly changed connotation that would slowly compound overtime to potentially alter the social representation of the symbol that the slogan is attached to. Additionally, the author wishes to interview a wider variety of artists, e.g., non-professionals who have used the symbol in art created as a hobby. Further than this, other popular, or once-popular symbols have the potential for investigation using thinking from the perspective of SRT, one example being the raised fist in its many uses across social movements. Outside of an overtly politically oriented sphere, it is hoped that this paper can illuminate the potential for research into social representations of more specific art forms such as the art of drag.

Overall, the pink triangle in its simplicity is a symbol that has endured over decades and has implemented itself in the cultural consciousness of those connected to it. Its use and resulting social representation have evolved tremendously from initially being used to persecute queer men and trans-women alongside other groups then being reclaimed as a symbol for protesting other continued or novel threats as a way for a community to make sense of them. In our current era, this image is used widely as a memorial for those many lives lost in The

Holocaust and the AIDS crisis whereas others use it on a celebratory or commercial basis, such as Pride month. In these latter examples, we can see that it that the power of this image comes as a symbol of queer resistance and action. This continued history when preserved and reproduced by its community members, for the most part, proceeds to positively guide a culture which is becoming more widely receptive to the queer experience. Despite this, the current paper merely scratches the surface of possibility in this avenue of research, especially for this symbol alone.

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