

**2025**

**VITALII  
KULESH**

**THE POWER OF VISUAL RHETORIC IN  
TRANSFORMING LGBTQ+ PERCEPTIONS**



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Dissertation submitted to IADE — Faculty of Design,  
Technology and Communication of Universidade Europeia,  
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master in Design and Visual Culture, under the scientific  
supervision of Assistant Professor Maria Joana Vilela.



I dedicate this work to my mother, father, older brother, and all those closest to me whose love and unwavering support carried me through every challenge. Your faith in me, even in the darkest moments, gave me the strength to keep going.



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**Palavras-chave**

Ativismo visual, Cultura visual e identidade, Estratégias narrativas, Interseccionalidade, Visibilidade queer

**Resumo**

Esta dissertação explora de que forma a retórica visual molda a percepção pública e desafia a marginalização das pessoas LGBTQ+, funcionando como uma ferramenta de resistência, afirmação identitária e transformação social. Em contextos onde a liberdade de expressão é censurada ou insegura as imagens tornam-se instrumentos vitais de advocacia. Recorrendo à semiótica, à teoria queer, à retórica e aos estudos dos media, a investigação defende que os visuais não refletem simplesmente a realidade social, mas constroem-na ativamente através do poder simbólico, da ressonância emocional e da estruturação ideológica. Através de exemplos históricos e contemporâneos — desde símbolos de protesto até conteúdos digitais virais — o estudo demonstra como o ativismo visual gera solidariedade, provoca empatia e contesta narrativas dominantes, ao mesmo tempo que expõe a instabilidade e a natureza contestada do significado visual. As respostas do público, recolhidas através de um inquérito qualitativo, revelam que é a interpretação — e não apenas a representação — que determina o impacto, sendo esta moldada pelas lógicas das plataformas e pelo contexto sociocultural. Espectadores LGBTQ+ tendem a experienciar as imagens ativistas como validadoras e empoderadoras, enquanto as reações de pessoas não LGBTQ+ variam entre a solidariedade e a resistência, salientando a necessidade de literacia visual e de uma estruturação estratégica. Em última análise, a dissertação posiciona a cultura visual como um espaço central de luta política, onde a inclusão, a responsabilidade e o envolvimento crítico são essenciais. As imagens não acompanham simplesmente o ativismo — constituem-no, oferecendo uma linguagem poderosa para a

justiça, a visibilidade e a mudança cultural num panorama mediático cada vez mais algorítmico e polarizado.

**Keywords**

Intersectionality, Narrative Strategies, Queer Visibility, Visual Activism, Visual Culture and Identity

**Abstract**

This dissertation explores how visual rhetoric shapes public perception and challenges LGBTQ+ marginalisation by functioning as a tool of resistance, identity affirmation, and social transformation. In contexts where speech is censored or unsafe images become vital advocacy instruments. Drawing from semiotics, queer theory, rhetoric, and media studies, the research argues that visuals do not simply reflect social reality but actively construct it through symbolic power, emotional resonance, and ideological framing. Through historical and contemporary examples — from protest symbols to viral digital content — the study shows how visual activism generates solidarity, provokes empathy, and contests dominant narratives while exposing the instability and contested nature of visual meaning. Audience responses gathered through a qualitative survey demonstrate that interpretation, not representation alone, determines impact, shaped by platform logics and sociocultural context. LGBTQ+ viewers often experience activist imagery as validating and empowering, while non-LGBTQ+ reactions range from solidarity to resistance, highlighting the need for visual literacy and strategic framing. Ultimately, the dissertation positions visual culture as a central arena of political struggle, where inclusivity, accountability, and critical engagement are essential. Images do not merely accompany activism — they constitute it, offering a powerful language for justice, visibility, and cultural change in an increasingly algorithmic and polarised media landscape.



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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Motivation of the study

Early exposure to sociocultural contexts in which LGBTQ+ individuals were systematically marginalised (Pew Research Center, 2020) contributed to developing a critical understanding of visual narratives as instruments of power. The relevance of this dynamic intensified in 2024, when legislation in Russia formally designated LGBTQ+ individuals as extremists (Reuters, 2024). In such contexts, visibility entails not only the condition of being seen but also the risk or affirmation embedded in recognition, functioning as a politically charged form of exposure.

When language is censored or dangerous, visual storytelling — using imagery to convey meaning, memory, and emotion — emerges as a vital mode of communication. It carries the potential to express identity, feeling, and dissent. As Susan Sontag writes, “photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe. They are a grammar and, even more importantly, an ethics of seeing” (1977, p. 1). This ethics becomes political when representation threatens dominant ideologies.

Visual storytelling can bypass rational defences and reach the emotional core — evoking empathy, reframing prejudice, and fostering connection. By enabling viewers to see the world through another’s eyes, it challenges bias and contributes to the pursuit of social justice. A single image can become a quiet act of rebellion. As Bell hooks powerfully asserts, “there must be a revolution in the way we see, the way we look” (1995, p. 4). In environments where existence is criminalised, visual narratives create space for authenticity and presence.

This inquiry is grounded not only in theoretical frameworks but also in the sociopolitical realities of marginalised communities. Visual storytelling enables the assertion of identity, the expression of love, and the claiming of dignity where verbal expression is constrained. It offers moments of visibility in otherwise silent contexts. W. J. T. Mitchell (1994) describes this cultural shift as the “pictorial turn”, a moment when images are no longer subordinate to language but central to how we understand the world. He writes: “What we need is a critique of visual culture that is alert to the power of images for good and evil and capable of discriminating the variety and historical specificity of their uses” (p. 3).

Such a critique is vital in contexts where LGBTQ+ representation can invite harm. Every visual trace becomes a negotiation between exposure, erasure, survival, and selfhood. The strength of images that endure censorship and speak across borders illustrates the transformative potential of visual rhetoric. As hooks notes, “art constitutes one of the rare

locations where acts of transcendence can take place and have a wide-ranging transformative impact” (1995, p. 8).

The research is driven by questions rooted in theory and sociopolitical context: How has visual storytelling functioned historically as activism? What strategies enable it to endure in hostile environments? And how can it create conditions for empathy and justice in the present? These questions emerge from a need to understand how silenced realities can be made visible — and how, in doing so, change might be fostered even where it seems impossible.

## **1.2. Research Problem and Questions**

This study is driven by the need to understand how visual rhetoric functions within LGBTQ+ activism to influence societal attitudes and challenge marginalisation. Grounded in both theoretical reflection and personal experience, the following research questions guide the investigation and structure the analytical framework of the thesis.

1. How do visual images operate within social, cultural, and political contexts to construct, influence, and transform public opinion through representational, rhetorical, and semiotic mechanisms?
2. How have visual and narrative strategies employed in historical and contemporary gay activism campaigns influenced shifts in public perception and contributed to social and political change?
3. How can effective visual and rhetorical strategies from LGBTQ+ activism be adapted to contexts with low acceptance levels, and how might they inform future efforts to challenge stereotypes and promote global inclusion?

These questions aim to uncover the mechanisms through which visual strategies operate across different contexts and historical moments. By examining how images persuade, resonate emotionally, and mobilise publics, the study lays the groundwork for identifying actionable strategies. These considerations directly inform the core research objectives outlined in the following section.

## **1.3. Research Objectives**

This research seeks to explore at length the power of visual images, especially within LGBTQ+ activism's sociocultural and political frameworks. Each refined objective corresponds with a core research question guiding the study.

1. To critically examine visual images' socio-cultural and political functions, including an analysis of how representational, rhetorical, and semiotic strategies in

visual media are used to shape public opinion, construct meaning, and influence ideologies within specific contexts.

2. To investigate how visual and narrative strategies in gay activism, both historical and contemporary, have contributed to shifts in public perception and political change. This includes studying landmark LGBTQ+ campaigns to identify just how visual rhetoric, including storytelling, challenged dominant norms to generate empathy and mobilise public support.
3. To identify and evaluate effective visual plus rhetorical strategies that come from LGBTQ+ activism, which also might be localised, recontextualised or even reframed to resonate with resistant audiences to foster broader inclusion while challenging stereotypes globally in low-acceptance environments.

Through these aims, the research endeavours to better comprehend how visual communication mirrors and drives social change, especially among disadvantaged groups.

## **1.4. Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative and interpretive methodological approach to explore how visual rhetoric in gay activism has shaped public perception and challenged LGBTQ+ marginalisation. The methodology is divided into three phases: theoretical grounding, visual and narrative case analysis, and empirical audience research. Each phase is selected to address the study's central research questions and objectives. The theoretical phase establishes the foundational understanding of how images can shape public opinion (Q.1). At the same time, the case study analysis identifies the most effective visual and narrative strategies historically and contemporarily employed in gay activism (Q.2). The audience research phase directly engages with the public to evaluate how these visual strategies are perceived and what impact they have on beliefs and attitudes, particularly in contexts with low LGBTQ+ acceptance (Q.3). The choice of methods reflects the interdisciplinary nature of the research; it draws from media studies, queer theory, art history, as well as cultural studies to form a cohesive analytical framework.

### **1.4.1. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review**

The basis of this study rests upon an interdisciplinary collection of theoretical writings that critically partake in the cultural workings of visual images, specifically as they connect to LGBTQ+ activism. Roland Barthes comprehends myth within its essence (1972). Furthermore, this comprehension situates the image not as reality's neutral reflection but as ideology's bearer,

a system of signs that renders dominant norms natural when it makes them self-clear. For conceiving this is requisite in analysing how queer imagery may either strengthen or disturb heteronormative narratives, frequently beneath a semblance of universality. Stuart Hall's model (1980) advances this investigation by framing visual communication as a site of conflict. In this context, importance is dynamically arbitrated by the creator and the viewer. It contests the supposition of stable representation, suggesting that LGBTQ+ imagery is always interpreted within broader cultural contexts that determine whether it is embraced, misread, or rejected. His oeuvre represents cultural identity, then conjoins the political agency of images with the semiotic mechanisms which fabricate meaning. In Susan Sontag's *Reflections on Photography* (1977), one discerns a critical perspective on visual depiction's moral and emotive aspects. She notes that photographs chronicle and render aesthetic and mould how we appear and what we experience. She contemplates the ethics of seeing and thereby poses substantial questions regarding LGBTQ+ activism. She poses questions as to when exposure cultivates compassion, or when it threatens exploitation or commercialisation. These tensions are markedly accentuated in locales where queerness is criminalised or pathologised.

These theorists offer a multidimensional perusal of visual activism in conjunction. Visual activism is consequently dialogue integrated within frameworks of authority, emotion, and collective recollection instead of merely an instrument of articulation. The study represents classical rhetorical theory: ethos, pathos, logos; furthermore, it examines how visual texts orient audiences ethically, logically, and emotionally, also to sway them. Current visual media still utilise these modes of appeal centrally, whereby an image can construct a reasoned argument, evoke emotion, and establish credibility.

Ultimately, queer theory and visual culture studies furnish the vital framework for comprehending LGBTQ+ representations amid regimes of visibility and erasure. The study leverages the concept of Nicholas Mirzoeff (2002) concerning the "right to look". It also acknowledges that visibility has political implications because gaining attention means being subjected to specific interpretations, policing, or resistance. The methodological design is supported by the idea from Gillian Rose (2001) concerning critical visual methodology. It melds interpretive textual perusal with discourse analysis, examining how visual texts generate meaning throughout cultural, historical, and ideological environments.

As this postulation supports the research, the research is enabled to consider LGBTQ+ visual activism not merely as a subject for aesthetic scrutiny, but as an arena where society grapples, and images simultaneously reflect and instigate as they mould how people perceive, comprehend, and challenge queerness. The phase aims to build a robust analytical framework

to guide the interpretation of activism-related visuals and narratives. Key concepts explored include symbolic representation, visual framing, affect, stereotype subversion, and audience positioning.

#### **1.4.2. Case Study Analysis of Historical and Contemporary Campaigns**

This phase involves visual and narrative analysis of selected LGBTQ+ activism campaigns, drawn from different periods and cultural contexts, to assess how strategies evolve and adapt. The selection criteria include historical relevance, visual richness, and documented social or political impact. The case studies were chosen for their rhetorical importance across different stages of LGBTQ+ visual activism and their capacity to reflect broader shifts in public perception.

The selected case studies represent campaigns from the late 20th century to the digital era, illustrating how visual activism adapts across changing media landscapes. These examples span analogue and digital eras, showing how visual strategies function across different environments — from grassroots protest materials to algorithm-driven online content. Each case represents a unique intersection of design, politics, and cultural reception. These examples span analogue and digital eras, illustrating how visual activism functions across different media environments — from grassroots protest materials to algorithm-driven online content. Each case represents a unique intersection of design, politics, and cultural reception.

Key cases include historically and culturally significant examples that had a lasting impact, achieved widespread visibility, and exemplified key shifts in visual rhetoric:

1. The rainbow flag, originally designed by Gilbert Baker (1978), and its evolving iterations — a unifying emblem of pride, plurality, visibility, and later reimagined, an updated version reflecting intersectionality and inclusion.
2. The Silence=Death poster (1987) — stark visual protest against AIDS-era silence and government neglect.
3. The AIDS Memorial Quilt (1987–present) — large-scale participatory mourning that merged craft, protest, and public visibility.
4. Felix Gonzalez-Torres' *Untitled (Portrait of Ross)* (1991) — poetic minimalism transforming personal loss into political commentary during the AIDS crisis.
5. IKEA's gay couple ad (1994) — one of the first mainstream commercial ads featuring a same-sex couple.
6. #LoveWins campaign (2015) — a digital moment of mass visual solidarity following marriage equality in the US.

7. The “My Big Fat Gay Rat Wedding” meme (2019) — a humorous yet defiant digital response that turned media backlash into a celebratory banner for queer visibility.

Other notable examples include Wilhelm von Gloeden’s early photography, the lambda symbol adopted in the 1970s, and the GAA’s theatrical protest zaps — all of which contributed to the emergence of a distinct visual language of queer resistance. The pink triangle, once a mark of persecution, was recontextualised into a powerful emblem of remembrance and defiance that continues to resonate across activist imagery.

Their selection is based on four key criteria:

1. **Historical significance:** Moments or movements that reflect significant developments in queer resistance and visibility.
2. **Visual or aesthetic distinctiveness:** The presence of innovative or symbolic design elements that mark key shifts in LGBTQ+ visual culture.
3. **Socio-political impact:** Evidence of tangible influence on public discourse, policy, or community mobilisation.
4. **Availability of documentation and audience reception:** Sufficient visual, textual, and media sources that enable rigorous analysis of the campaigns' formation, dissemination, and public interpretation.

Visuals will be analysed using semiotic and narrative analysis methods. The focus will be on elements such as symbolic imagery, composition, colour use, and the representation of queer identities and bodies. Special attention will be paid to tone, emotional resonance, platform of distribution, and target audience. These factors will be examined concerning their ability to construct meaning, evoke a response, and influence public perception.

This analysis aims to uncover recurring patterns and contextual variations in the use of visual rhetoric within LGBTQ+ activism. By closely examining these strategies, the study evaluates their relative effectiveness in shaping attitudes, challenging dominant narratives, and enhancing visibility, particularly in sociopolitical environments where LGBTQ+ rights remain contested. These findings directly support the dissertation’s broader objective: to identify the visual and rhetorical elements that most powerfully contribute to social transformation.

### **1.4.3. Audience Reception Study**

To close the divide between theory and lived experience, qualitative responses from a diverse international audience were gathered through an anonymous online survey. This empirical component deepens the theoretical analysis because it directly engages with how

those who are either part of the LGBTQ+ community or external observers perceive, feel, and interpret. The survey intended to include participants from several different nations. These participants included gay-identifying as well as non-gay-identifying people, mainly throughout Europe and North America. Efforts were made to reflect a broad spectrum of demographic characteristics, including age, gender identity, and cultural background. Capturing how LGBTQ+ communities and more heteronormative social environments interpret visual activism required this diversity. The study offers a comprehension of how visual strategies emotionally and ideologically resonate with varied audiences by engaging with people from different sociocultural contexts. Questions will focus on how participants initially responded emotionally, how they understood the image's core message, and if they perceived LGBTQ+ rights differently after engaging with the image. Furthermore, participants will reflect upon whether stereotypical portrayals or themes of empowerment in visual content are familiar.

The survey, featuring participants from diverse demographic and cultural backgrounds, will be administered online via social media platforms (Instagram, LinkedIn, and academic forums) to permit comparative perceptions. As categories and themes emerge organically from the data instead of imposed beforehand, responses shall be manually coded via inductive thematic analysis, using grounded theory principles. This approach ensures participants' language and emotional reactions, together with interpretive frameworks, guide the analysis because it reveals how different audiences understand and engage with visual materials.

Bridging the theoretical framework and the practical applications requires this empirical component. It is indeed a necessary part of that process. It roots abstract concepts within audience experiences, thereby assuring its pertinence. Concrete evidence is also provided, showing just how visual strategies function across different social contexts. In the end, this phase shall help to better understand how the public views things as well as inform future directions for visual activism that is more effective, inclusive, and culturally sensitive.

This method may privilege people who are active digitally. It is, though, key to acknowledge those already familiar with LGBTQ+ discourse. The data's generalisability may be limited, but this does not weaken the findings' validity. To address this, researchers diversified the sample across various identities and regions. They also aimed for diversification across previous involvement with LGBTQ+ subjects.

#### **1.4.4. Why This Methodological Approach**

This methodological approach was chosen for its ability to bridge theoretical understanding with empirical insight. It allows a comprehensive investigation into how visual

rhetoric in gay activism transforms public perception and challenges LGBTQ+ marginalisation. By integrating critical theory, visual analysis, and audience reception, the research moves beyond abstract theorisation to engage directly with the materials and people involved in or affected by activism.

Using qualitative, interpretive methods enables a nuanced exploration of meaning-making processes within visual media, which is essential given images' symbolic and affective power in shaping public discourse. Critical theory and discourse analysis uncover the ideological underpinnings of visual strategies, while semiotic and narrative methods reveal the structures through which messages are communicated and contested. Importantly, the inclusion of audience reception research grounds the study in real-world interpretations and responses. This tests theoretical assumptions and reveals how different sociocultural contexts mediate the reception of LGBTQ+ imagery. It offers a crucial lens into the practical effectiveness of activist campaigns, particularly in settings with limited acceptance or visibility.

Together, these methodological tools allow the research to satisfy its core objectives: understanding how images shape opinion (Q.1), identifying which strategies have been effective (Q.2), and proposing informed directions for future activism (Q.3). This multi-layered approach ensures that both the construction and reception of visual messages are given equal attention, thereby offering a balanced and actionable contribution to scholarship and practice alike.

The novelty of this method resides in its merging of deep theoretical scrutiny and systematic pinpointing of efficacious real-world applications. The research builds upon statistical data, historical case studies, and contemporary audience responses. Identified moments, visuals, and rhetorical strategies have swayed public opinion or policy. Using this outlook, evidence-based recommendations become enabled as the study progresses from wide-ranging views to concrete findings. Furthermore, the study introduces a versatile structure for visual activism that leverages global understandings and then conforms to local circumstances by assessing the operation of these methods in diverse sociocultural and geopolitical settings. The study adds to academic discourse and furnishes activists plus designers with usable instruments for forthcoming campaigns.

## **1.5. State of Art**

Visual culture plays a pretty calculated and much more vital role in shaping discourse around LGBTQ+ rights. Images function both as reflections upon queer lived experience and as active agents for cultural and political transformation as the battle for equality continues

globally. Scholars both in visual studies and queer theory as well as in political communication have interrogated just how visual narratives construct identity and mobilise affect and even contest dominant ideologies. Despite a growing body of literature on queer visibility as well as protest art, critical gaps remain, specifically concerning how such images are interpreted, circulated, and produced in distinct sociopolitical contexts. This section critically maps existing debates and key interventions in visual activism because it establishes a conceptual foundation for the present study's comparative and context-sensitive approach.

This review emphasises that visual activism functions as an aesthetic and political intervention, relies on symbolic and emotional appeal, and is embedded within specific cultural and geopolitical frameworks. The chapter does foreground tensions that tend to shape the field, such as the universalising tendencies of global queer aesthetics, which clash with the situated, contingent nature of visual resistance within localised struggles. As they set the stage for a case-based exploration of how visual activism functions within and against different ideological regimes, the following sections engage these dimensions in further detail.

### **1.5.1. Visual Activism as Artistic and Political Expression**

Visual activism gets more theoretical attention as a hybrid practice joining artistic creation with political resistance. According to Maço (2021), visual activism represents a genre that challenges systemic oppression via impressive images, and it uses the emotive and symbolic strength of visual media to affirm visibility, prompt thought, and spur progress. This scheme recasts art so it shifts from portrayal to challenging. Zanele Muholi's *Faces and Phases* epitomises this tradition: Muholi validates Black queer identities within South Africa and contests heteronormative erasure through close portraiture, building a visual record. Muholi notes in their statement that their work “is not for show. It is not for play” (Maço, 2021). This underscores the conscious, political risks within queer self-portrayal.

Visual activism operates in vastly different ways due to the sociopolitical terrain, while such examples are often celebrated within global discourses of resistance. In authoritarian regimes, for instance, in the event of overt visual protest, authorities can censor it or use violence, which then prompts artists to adopt subversive or coded strategies. Within diasporic communities, visual activism can conversely serve to preserve culture as well as support transnational solidarity. It twists together hybrid identities and the experiences of displacement. Often, the literature privileges Western-centric or high-profile cases. It underexamines these modes of resistance within the context.

This study addresses this gap by adopting a case study approach. This method explores visual activism's adaptations regarding differing cultural areas. The research seeks to illuminate the ways images challenge oppression. Visual strategies are compared across digital platforms and diasporic networks alongside repressive states to understand risks, constraints, and affordances. As a result, visual activism is approached as a diverse and evolving set of practices shaped through global imaginaries and local realities instead of being seen as a monolithic or universal genre.

### **1.5.2. Emotional and Symbolic Power of Visual Narratives**

The emotional resonance of visuals enhances their persuasive impact. Joffe (2008) explains that images evoke stronger emotional responses than text, creating vivid and memorable mental impressions — a phenomenon known as the “vividness effect”. Gallagher and Zagacki (2005) analyse how Norman Rockwell’s civil rights paintings used empathetic storytelling to provoke moral reflection and inspire change. Similarly, artists like Adejoke Tugbiyele and Leilah Babirye use symbolism and abstract motifs to challenge narratives framing queerness as “un-African”, asserting the cultural rootedness of LGBTQ+ identities (Maço, 2021). Seliger (2014) supports this by arguing that design activism leverages visual rhetoric to blend emotional appeal and critical engagement.

This approach to visual storytelling is echoed in contemporary struggles. While situated in the racial politics of 1960s America, Rockwell's work carries conceptual resonance for contemporary LGBTQ+ struggles. His paintings foregrounded moral courage, the visibility of marginalised individuals, and the demand for public recognition — all elements central to queer liberation. Just as Ruby Bridges became a symbol of vulnerability and strength in the face of systemic exclusion, queer individuals today often confront social hostility while asserting their place in national narratives. The visual rhetoric Rockwell employed, imbuing everyday scenes with ideological force, mirrors the strategies used by LGBTQ+ artists like Tugbiyele and Babirye, who similarly humanise and dignify queer subjects within hostile cultural landscapes. By leveraging emotional appeal through imagery, both Rockwell and queer visual activists prompt audiences to confront bias and reimagine community belonging.

### **1.5.3. Digital and Participatory Visual Activism**

In contemporary activism, digital platforms have become essential tools. Rovisco and Veneti (2017) highlight how social media and Web 2.0 enable participatory engagement, allowing users to consume, co-create, and spread activist content. This is particularly powerful

in restrictive societies, where symbolic imagery and coded visuals can bypass censorship while expressing dissent. Coded visuals refer to images or symbols that convey activist messages metaphorically or indirectly to avoid state surveillance or repression. For example, the “Silence=Death” campaign by the activist group ACT UP in the 1980s used a pink triangle, originally a Nazi symbol for persecuted homosexuals, along with the stark message to draw attention to the AIDS crisis and government inaction (Brown & Riemer, 2019). Barthes (1977) describes images as carriers of “truth value”, giving them the rhetorical authority to challenge norms and advocate for change. Visual campaigns thus serve as tools for knowledge production, advancing LGBTQ+ advocacy and dismantling stereotypes (Foster, 2018).

However, whilst digital technologies have unlocked novel prospects for community organising, salient misgivings are prompted also because they confound romanticised perspectives regarding engagement activism. Critics contend that digital activism frequently functions within infrastructures. Corporate platforms govern these infrastructures. It is asserted that activist goals may not align with these platforms' pecuniary and political interests. Algorithmic suppression can be seen as one key quandary: social media platforms rank content by engagement metrics, and this can marginalise activist narratives because of their emotionally arduous, detailed, and controversial nature. This can signify attenuated or otherwise unseen social justice pronouncements. These messages are transmitted at the hands of disenfranchised communities specifically.

Shadow banning is just another format for algorithmic command. It makes activist accounts more challenging to view, intentionally or inadvertently. Even though a notification may not reach users, its content stops appearing in feeds and results. Campaigners for racial justice and LGBTQ+ people who observed engagement or scope that diminished acutely after sharing politically sensitive material have related analogous encounters. These non-transparent moderation habits may shatter solidarity within movements, habits that suppress disagreement.

The surveillance economy is a threat. This applies especially to activists. Digital implements can augment voices. However, state entities and private entities survey users to an extraordinary degree. This surveillance affects them. Governments could use social media analytics, IP tracking methods or facial recognition tech to identify protest organisers. Authoritarian regimes detain people. In addition, these regimes can also intimidate people. Sometimes, the situation proves even more grave. Even within liberal democracies, activists might face digital profiling, data collection, and algorithmic monitoring. These instruments do affect marginalised groups disproportionately.

Particular academics censure “Clicktivism” or even “slacktivism”. Digital participation is confined to perfunctory actions such as liking, sharing, or hashtagging, and these actions may cultivate a spurious sense of engagement while leaving structural conditions unaltered. This critique highlights the danger in reducing activism to simple theatrics, especially when firms use social justice language to improve how their brand is seen.

These critiques advocate for a vital, more subtle comprehension of digital activism. Digital infrastructures provide unmatched opportunities concerning visibility, creativity, and international unity, though they enmesh activism within governments because these governments involve surveillance, commercialisation, and control. Therefore, a disputed arena represents visual activism throughout the digital epoch, as participants consistently obscure and render apparent, utilise, authorise, subjugate, and oppose.

## 2. The Study

### 2.1. How Images Shape Public Opinion: Theories of Persuasion and Representation

Images play a decisive role in shaping how the public perceives reality. “Visual communication is always coded. It seems transparent only because we know the code already”, as noted by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006, p. 32). Visual culture theorists from various fields — cultural studies, rhetoric, semiotics, psychology, media studies, and more — have examined how images represent ideas and influence beliefs. This chapter provides a structured overview of theoretical frameworks that explain how images influence public perception. It establishes the conceptual tools necessary to analyse visual strategies in LGBTQ+ activism campaigns, particularly how these images persuade, challenge stereotypes, and promote visibility in contexts of marginalisation.

#### 2.1.1. Theories of Representation

Representation in visual culture refers to how images and media depict reality, convey meaning, and reinforce or challenge social ideas. Rather than mere mirrors of the world, representations actively shape how we understand groups, issues, and events. Key thinkers like Stuart Hall and John Berger have all explored how images produce meaning and influence what we see as “real”.

##### 2.1.1.1. Stuart Hall: Representation as Meaning-Making

Cultural theorist Stuart Hall argued that representation is an active process of meaning production, not a passive reflection of reality. The production of the meaning of the concepts in our minds through language (which, in visual terms, includes imagery) links conceptual ideas to signs so we can communicate about real or imaginary things. He defined that representation is not simply about what is present in an image but also about what is absent — what is left unsaid, what is implied, and what meanings emerge from the relationships between elements (Rose, 2002). “Stuart Hall summarised three approaches to understanding the representation process: reflective, intentional and constructionist views” (“Stuart Hall: Representation and the Media”, 2022):

1. **Reflective approach:** Images/media reflect reality like a mirror. For example, a photograph of a rose is thought to reflect the actual flower directly. Hall notes this is limited — a picture of a rose is not the same as touching or smelling the real bloom.

2. **Intentional approach:** The idea that what an image means is wholly determined by its creator's intention. For instance, an artist might intend a painting to convey a specific message. Hall critiqued this view, noting that audiences may interpret images differently than intended, depending on cultural context.
3. **Constructionist approach:** The idea that meaning is constructed through language and signs. We use shared cultural codes to interpret images. In this view, images do not have fixed meanings — meaning arises from the interplay between the image, the artistic ideas it invokes, and the viewer. Hall emphasises that there is no fixed bond between the signified and the signifier, meaning the relationship between an image and its representation is not natural but culturally learned. For example, red might signify “danger” or “love” in different contexts, not because red inherently means those things but because of social conventions.

Hall also introduced the idea that audiences are active interpreters: people may accept the intended meaning of an image, negotiate with it, or oppose it outright. This helps explain why the same news photo might reassure one viewer but anger another — representation is a dynamic process of encoding and decoding meaning. “Interpretation is thus a mental process of acceptance and rejection of the meanings and associations that adhere to a given image and that make demands upon us through the force of dominant ideologies” (Sturken & Cartwright, 2018, p. 78).

#### **2.1.1.2. John Berger: Ways of Seeing and Power of Images**

In his influential 1972 work *Ways of Seeing*, Art critic John Berger examined how images (especially in art and advertising) structure our perceptions and social relationships. Berger famously stated, “seeing comes before words”, — meaning humans understand the world through images before learning the language (1972, p. 7). A child, for instance, recognises and makes sense of visual cues before they can speak. This underscores that visual perception profoundly shapes people's reality; what we see forms our mental model of the world.

Berger highlighted how power and ideology operate through visual representation. One of his well-known observations is about the depiction of women in art and media. He argued that traditionally, “Men dream of women. Women dream of themselves being dreamt of. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at” (“Ways of Seeing & Ideal Women in Popular Culture”, 2010). In other words, women in imagery (from European oil paintings to contemporary ads) are often portrayed as objects for the male gaze. This leads women viewers

to internalise that gaze, seeing themselves through the eyes of others. Such representation influences public perception by normalising power dynamics — for example, presenting women’s primary value as their appearance to men.

An example can be seen in advertising: images frequently show women gazing off or positioned to be observed, reinforcing subtle messages about gender roles. By analysing these visual conventions, Berger shed light on how images can perpetuate social norms. He also noted that context matters: a painting in a gallery and a reproduction of that painting in an ad are “seen” differently. Technologies like photography and mass media change how images are experienced and what they mean.

In sum, Berger’s work on representation emphasises who is doing the looking and who is being looked at. “The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe” (Berger, 1972, p. 8). Images are not neutral; they contain messages about power, gender, class, and society. Understanding these underlying messages — the “ways of seeing” — is crucial to recognising how visual culture influences our perceptions and beliefs.

### **2.1.2. Theories of Persuasion and Visual Rhetoric**

Images don’t just represent reality; they also persuade. Visuals can shape opinions, trigger emotions, and prompt actions — often without the need for words. Theories of persuasion from classical rhetoric to modern social psychology help explain how images effectively sway public perception. Additionally, visual rhetoric focuses on how images function as arguments or persuasive communication. Key ideas in this area come from Aristotle’s rhetorical appeals, principles of social influence, and analyses of how images serve rhetorical functions.

#### **2.1.2.1. Aristotle’s Rhetoric: Ethos, Pathos, Logos in Images**

The roots of persuasion theory trace back to Aristotle, who outlined three modes of persuasive appeal in speech that are equally useful for understanding images:

1. **Ethos (Credibility):** Persuading through the character or credibility of the speaker (or in visuals, the credibility of the image’s source or subject). Credibility is demonstrated by a rhetor primarily through the display of three qualities in the rhetorical act: moral character or integrity, achieved by linking the message and rhetor with what the audience considers virtuous; intelligence, evident in a display of common sense, good taste, and familiarity with current topics and interests; and goodwill, the establishment of rapport with the audience through means such as

identifying with the audience members or praising them. In images, ethos might involve using authoritative figures or trusted symbols (Foss, 2018). For example, a public service poster might show a doctor in a lab coat to enhance credibility. The viewer subconsciously thinks that the message comes from someone trustworthy. Using respected celebrities or experts in advertisements is a visual ethos strategy — the image of a well-known athlete endorsing a product gives it credibility by association.

2. **Pathos (Emotion):** Persuading by appealing to the audience’s emotions. In the book “Rhetorical Criticism”, Sonja Foss highlights that the form of artistic proof “concerns appeal designed to generate emotions in the audience” (2018, p. 34). Visuals evoke feelings — a photograph can make us feel joy, pity, fear, or anger. For instance, a charity campaign might show a heartbreaking image of a displaced refugee child to elicit empathy and compassion (pathos), motivating viewers to donate. Because pictures can instantly convey facial expressions, body language, and atmospheres, they often trigger emotional responses more directly than words. As one political imagery study noted, visuals can create affective responses that bias how we think about an issue.
3. **Logos (Logic):** persuading with reasoning, facts, or evidence. While logic is often associated with verbal arguments, images can also make logical appeals. Information graphics, charts, or before-and-after comparison photos use visual evidence to convince. A simple example is a bar graph showing rising temperatures to persuade viewers about climate change (the logic in the data visualised). Another example is a side-by-side photo of a dirty vs. clean ocean beach in an environmental campaign — the visual comparison itself is an argument for action. Images can’t lay out a detailed, logical proof independently, but they can present data or factual cues compellingly and immediately.

Modern communication scholars apply these rhetorical concepts to visual media. In fact, according to the University of Nevada, Reno Writing & Speaking Center, analysing an image’s ethos, pathos, and logos has become common in media studies (“Applying the rhetorical situation to images”, 2024). A single powerful photograph (say, of a firefighter carrying a child from a disaster) might combine all three appeals: ethos (firefighters as reliable heroes), pathos (the rescue scene evokes emotion), and logos (it documents an actual event, appealing to truth). Understanding Aristotle’s framework helps creators and readers see how

and why images can change minds by establishing trust, stirring feelings, and conveying apparent evidence, often simultaneously.

### 2.1.2.2. Social Influence and Psychological Persuasion Principles

Beyond classical rhetoric, social influence theories in psychology explain how visuals sway people by tapping into basic human tendencies. Robert Cialdini mentioned that “there is a group of people who know very well where the weapons of automatic influence lie and who employ them regularly and expertly to get what they want” (2009, p.7). His most vital principles of persuasion successfully manifest through images:

1. **Social proof (Consensus):** People often decide what to believe or do by observing others. Images can serve as social proof by showing crowds or peers engaging in an action, implying everyone is doing this. For instance, a photo of a long line outside a store signals that a product is desirable (influencing viewers to consider it). In marketing, showing user testimonials with pictures or several followers or likes is a visual cue of popularity. Social proof means that “people are guided by other people’s behaviour” (Nielsen Norman Group, 2014), and images provide immediate evidence of those actions.
2. **Authority:** We tend to be persuaded by authority figures. An image of a person in uniform, a judge’s gavel, or a renowned logo (like a government seal or university crest) can lend an aura of authority to a message. For example, an anti-smoking poster featuring a surgeon general’s emblem or a famous physician’s portrait harnesses the authority principle visually.
3. **Liking:** We are more easily persuaded by people we find attractive or similar. Advertisers use attractive models or relatable “average folks” in visuals to capitalise on this. A political campaign ad might show photographs of smiling families or a candidate interacting warmly with locals — images designed to make the audience like the people pictured and, by extension, the message or candidate.
4. **Emotional triggers:** Psychology also notes that emotion can shortcut rational deliberation. Images that trigger fear or hope can persuade by making those feelings salient. For example, gruesome images of diseased lungs on cigarette packs are used as a fear appeal to convince smokers to quit — an approach grounded in emotional (pathos) persuasion and supported by social psychology research on fear appeals.

It's important to note that images often persuade peripherally. According to the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), visuals frequently act on the peripheral route to persuasion, influencing viewers through feelings or heuristics when they're not profoundly analysing a message. A glance at a compelling image can plant a persuasive seed in a viewer's mind without a deliberate, logical evaluation. For instance, the "Got Milk?" campaign used images of celebrities with milk moustaches. Viewers might not consciously analyse the calcium content in milk (central route); instead, seeing their favourite celebrity (liking/authority) with the product creates a positive association (peripheral cue), nudging public perception about milk's appeal.

These rhetorical strategies are theoretical and convenient tools, especially in LGBTQ+ activism campaigns. Ethos is often built through the visibility of authentic and legitimate voices, such as community leaders or individuals with lived experience. Pathos mobilises empathy through emotionally powerful images that depict love, joy, hardship, or injustice. Logos appears in data visualisation and factual imagery, confronting stereotypes and dismantling prejudice. This integration of appeals allows visual activism to resonate across diverse audiences, helping to drive awareness, change attitudes, and push for policy reform.

### **2.1.3. Visual Rhetoric: Images as Arguments**

Visual rhetoric treats images as a form of argument or discourse, emphasising how visuals communicate messages, create meanings, and persuade audiences, similarly to texts. Sturken and Cartwright note that "the creation of meaning in any given image is thus derived from many different factors, both within and in the context of the image" (2018, p. 33):

1. **Composition and form:** The persuasive effect of an image often stems from its composition. Elements such as layout, angle, colour, and emphasis guide the viewer's interpretation. For instance, a low-angle photograph of a political leader can create a visual argument about their authority, making them appear larger-than-life. Similarly, an image cropped to show a victim's suffering in close-up acts as a rhetorical plea for compassion or action. Images are decoded "by interpreting clues pointing to intended, unintended, and even merely suggested meanings," as noted by Sturken and Cartwright (2018, p.33).
2. **Visual symbols and metaphors:** Images can use symbolism or metaphor to argue a point. A political cartoon might depict a dove chained to convey a critique of war policy (visual metaphor). A promotional image for renewable energy might show a city skyline with a lightbulb-shaped cloud, symbolising a "bright idea" for clean

power — these visuals condense arguments into single symbols that viewers decode.

3. **Implicit narratives:** Images often function through symbolism and metaphor. A political cartoon depicting a chained dove critiques war policy. At the same time, a renewable energy advertisement featuring a city skyline inside a lightbulb-shaped cloud symbolises a bright idea for clean power. Sturken and Cartwright explain that “another way to look at this is to see that images’ meanings are produced according to social and aesthetic conventions and codes” (2018, p. 33). They further state that symbols gain meaning through cultural context, and viewers’ knowledge and ideological positioning shape their interpretation.
4. **Audience interpretation:** Visual rhetoric also considers that viewers actively interpret images. Images often have ambiguity or polysemy, which can be a strength, allowing images to speak to broad audiences. However, it also means people might not all get the same message. For example, the famous photograph of Earth from space, “Earthrise”, has been used to argue for environmental protection. Still, some might see scientific curiosity or national pride in the space program. Compelling visual arguments often rely on shared cultural codes so that a target audience will get the intended message.

In summary, theories of visual persuasion show that images influence people by appealing to trust, feelings, social instincts, and a sense of meaning, often in ways human beings process quickly and intuitively. Whether through classical rhetorical appeals or modern media techniques, visuals are a potent tool for shaping public attitudes and decisions.

#### **2.1.4. Semiotic Analysis of Images**

Semiotics is the study of signs and symbols — how things (words, images, objects) create meaning. In visual culture, semiotic theories by Ferdinand de Saussure and Roland Barthes are essential for understanding how images function as a language that influences perception. By analysing images as signs, we can see how they carry meaning at different levels and how viewers interpret those signs, often unconsciously.

##### **2.1.4.1. Ferdinand de Saussure: Signs, Signifier, and Signified**

Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist, introduced a dyadic model of the sign, which remains foundational in semiotics. According to Saussure, a sign consists of two essential components:

1. **The signifier** — the entity that represents, such as a sound, a written word, or an image.
2. **The signified** — the concept evoked by the signifier.

A sign is formed by combining the signifier and the signified, and the production of meaning depends on social, historical, and cultural contexts. As stated in *Practices of Looking*, “for Saussure, the signifier is the entity that represents, and the sign is the combination of the signifier and what it means” (Sturken & Cartwright, 2018, p. 32). For example, a simple pictogram of a tree consists of two levels: the drawing itself (trunk, branches, leaves) is the signifier, while the idea of the “tree” it evokes in the mind is the signified. The link between these elements is not inherent but socially constructed. Saussure emphasised that the relationship between a signifier and its signified is arbitrary, meaning that any word (such as “tree”) can signify the same concept based on cultural and linguistic conventions.

When applying Saussure’s ideas to images, visual elements such as colours, shapes, and objects function as signifiers that convey particular meanings. For instance, a red rose in an image may signify not just a flower but also love or romance in Western culture. This is not because the flower inherently means love, but because of associative conventions. The book explains, “we are so accustomed to identifying a rose with the concept of romantic love and a dove with peace that it is difficult to recognise that their relationship is constructed and culturally specific rather than natural” (Sturken & Cartwright, 2018, p. 33).

Saussure’s semiotic approach contributed to analysing images as a kind of language or system of signs. In visual culture, people decode signs in images just as with language. A dove in a picture is often understood as a symbol of peace, while a skull is commonly seen as a warning of danger or death. However, meaning is not fixed; historical and cultural contexts shape it. *Practices of Looking* states that “the very fact that the sign is divided into a signifier and a signified allows us to see that images can convey many different meanings” (Sturken & Cartwright, 2018, p. 33). Understanding semiotics allows creators to recognise how visual culture subtly influences perception, steering meaning through familiar signs and conventions.

#### **2.1.4.2. Roland Barthes: Denotation, Connotation and Myth**

Barthes built on Saussure's model, adding a critical dimension about how images not only communicate signs, but also naturalise ideologies through connotation and myth. In semiotic terms, Roland Barthes, a French literary theorist and semiotician, explored how images convey meaning beyond their literal content. His semiotics theory studies signs and symbols, mainly how they function within cultural contexts. Barthes introduced the concepts

of denotation, the explicit meaning of an image, and connotation, the secondary meanings shaped by culture and ideology. He argued that connotations accumulate into myths — widely accepted cultural narratives that appear natural but are constructed representations of reality.

1. **Denotative level:** the straightforward, literal description of what an image shows (similar to Saussure’s signifier with an obvious signified). It answers the question, “What do I see here?” As described in *Practices of Looking*, denotation is understood as “the literal, face-value meaning of a sign”, a meaning that is largely agreed upon by viewers of a particular culture (Sturken & Cartwright, 2018, p. 432).
2. **Connotative level:** the secondary, cultural or symbolic meanings people infer from the image. This answers, “What does this image imply or suggest?” *Practices of Looking* emphasises that these concepts “rely on the cultural and historical context of the image and its viewers’ lived, felt knowledge of those circumstances. Connotation brings to an object or image the wider realm of ideology, cultural meaning, and value systems of a society” (Sturken & Cartwright, 2018, p. 430). This polysemic nature of images means multiple interpretations coexist simultaneously, each shaped by the viewer’s social, cultural, and historical positioning. Rather than offering a single, fixed meaning, images operate within a spectrum of possibilities, where meaning emerges through the interaction between the image and the viewer’s prior knowledge, values, and lived experience. This reinforces the idea that meaning is not intrinsic to the image but dynamically constructed through context.

Barthes noted that connotation is where ideology and cultural values seep into an image’s meaning. It is heavily dependent on the viewer’s cultural knowledge. For instance, seeing a person with a clenched fist raised might connote solidarity or protest (if one recognises it as a symbol of resistance), whereas, without that context, it’s just a hand gesture. Images operate in a system of culturally and historically specific meanings shaped by knowledge, beliefs, and assumptions. Barthes took connotation further with the concept of myth. In semiotic terms, myth is essentially a connotation that has become so widely accepted that it seems natural. It’s a broader narrative or belief system that an image can evoke. For example, a photograph of a sleek new sports car denotatively shows a vehicle, connotatively suggesting luxury and success. At the level of myth, it might reinforce the broader idea of progress and modernity (the cultural myth that newer technology equals a better life). In advertising, the

myth often refers to “buying X = happiness/freedom/status.” Myth is a form of ideology, a way in which meaning is mobilised to maintain particular power relations in society.

A concrete illustration Barthes gave is an advertisement image for pasta (his famous analysis of the Panzani pasta ad). Denotatively, it’s simply a still life depicting everyday grocery items — pasta, sauce, and vegetables — spilling casually from a paper bag, suggesting an ordinary shopping scene. Connotatively, it evokes Italianicity — the colours (red, green, white) and produce suggest Italian culture and home cooking. The myth it sells is the romance of authentic Italian life you supposedly get by buying these products (“Roland Barthes”, 2022). The effectiveness of such advertising lies in its ability to make cultural meanings appear as common sense rather than constructed representations.

In summary, semiotic analysis reveals that images influence public perception not just by what they overtly show but by tapping into a network of signs and symbols. Recognising the signifier-signified relationship, the icon-index-symbol types, and the denotative-connotative layers helps us dissect how a simple image can carry arguments about reality, evoke emotions, and transmit cultural myths simultaneously. This multi-layered communication makes visuals influential in shaping people's thoughts and feelings. Practices of Looking affirms that visual representation is never neutral; it is always constructed through systems of meaning and shaped by historical and social contexts (Sturken & Cartwright, 2018).

### **2.1.5. Media and Cultural Studies: Visual Narratives and Public Opinion**

Beyond individual psychology, images operate in a social and media context. Media and cultural studies examine how visual narratives circulate and shape public opinion, often tied to power, ideology, and collective memory issues. This perspective considers not just the content of images but their broader cultural meaning, how media institutions use them, and how audiences interpret them within societal frameworks. Key concepts here include framing, agenda-setting, the construction of social reality through images, and the role of iconic images in shaping collective understanding.

#### **2.1.5.1. Framing and Agenda-Setting: Shaping the Story with Images**

Media framing theory explains how an issue is presented and shapes how people understand it. The framing was initially examined through language (e.g., labelling someone a “terrorist” versus a “freedom fighter”), but visuals also frame issues by emphasising certain aspects of reality while downplaying others. Kress and van Leeuwen argue that “like linguistic

structures, visual structures point to particular interpretations of experience and forms of social interaction” (2006, p. 2), demonstrating how images guide perception.

Visual framing involves the selection of specific images or visual angles that tell viewers how to interpret an event. For example, during a protest, media editors can choose a photo of a peaceful crowd or a photo of burning tyres and clashes. The first frames the protest as largely peaceful and perhaps justified; the second frames it as violent and chaotic. These choices guide public opinion by providing a visual context for how to think about the protest. As Kress and van Leeuwen state:

Just as grammars of language describe how words combine in clauses, sentences and texts, so our visual ‘grammar’ will describe the way in which depicted elements — people, places, and things — combine in visual ‘statements’ of greater or lesser complexity and extension. (2006, p. 1)

Images can sometimes exert more substantial framing effects than text because people may not realise they are being “told a story”. Visuals feel real and thus carry an air of neutrality even when selected and composed with bias. Kress and van Leeuwen highlight that “expressing something verbally or visually makes a difference” (2006, p. 2), reinforcing how visuals can shape perception in ways that text cannot. They further argue that “visual language is not, despite assumptions to the contrary, transparent and universally understood; it is culturally specific” (2006, p. 4), meaning that different visual framings influence different audiences differently. Gandy, Grant, and Reese also support the idea, noting that viewers may be less conscious of framing when it happens visually rather than through text. As a result, Messaris and Abraham argue that visual images can communicate messages that might face more resistance in verbal form but are more readily accepted when presented visually (2001). In other words, a savvy audience might challenge an editorial statement, but a photograph subtly implying that same statement might slip by critical filters because it’s seen as objective evidence.

The agenda-setting theory proposed by McCombs and Shaw emphasises the media’s role in shaping public knowledge and perceptions. According to *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice*:

Each day, the public is exposed to a large volume of messages via the media. Carefully crafted, these messages provide information that is both needed and desired and work on some level to affect the public’s perceptions of world events. Although some argue about the impact of these messages on their decisions, thoughts, and actions, it is clear

that media messages have both covert and subtle effects on individuals. (Foss, 2018, 70)

The media must choose what to emphasise to satisfy the public's demand for information about an event. Despite the media's role as the most frequent source of information for the public to learn about events, the public's knowledge is limited by the media's available messages. Visual imagery plays a crucial role in this agenda-setting process. Striking images can dominate media coverage, shaping the prominence of specific topics in public discourse. Particularly on television and online platforms, visually compelling stories are prioritised, reinforcing their perceived importance in the public consciousness.

### **2.1.5.2. Representation, Ideology, and Audience Interpretation**

Cultural studies often focus on how images reinforce or challenge ideologies — societal beliefs and power structures. Media scholars build on representation theories to examine how consistent image narratives shape public opinion about social groups, norms, and values. Representation is central to the study of visual culture, as it refers to “the use of language, marks, and images to create meaning about the world around us” (Sturken & Cartwright, 2017, p. 18). This means that visual media reflect reality and actively construct it.

1. **Stereotypes in visual media:** Repeated portrayals can profoundly influence how the public perceives certain groups. For instance, if news and Hollywood movies alike mostly show one-dimensional images of a particular ethnicity or gender, these visual stereotypes can cement biased public perceptions. Over time, the public may accept these mediated images as reality, affecting opinions and policy support. Sturken and Cartwright state that representation is “the act of portraying, depicting, symbolising, or presenting the likeness of something” (2017, p. 450). This underscores how stereotypes, through repetition, become embedded in cultural narratives.
2. **Hegemony and myth:** Italian theorist Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony (not a visual theory per se, but applicable) suggests that the ruling class's worldview becomes the norm. Visual culture is one way this happens — images circulate the dominant values (consumerism, patriarchy, nationalism, etc.) in attractive forms (ads, entertainment, news) so that the public internalise them. Barthes' notion of myth ties into this: images make ideological constructs seem natural. For example, countless advertisements show a heteronormative ideal of family (mom, dad, kids in a happy home) — consuming those images year after

year can subtly reinforce the perception that this is the “normal” or “ideal” family structure, influencing public opinion on related issues without needing an overt argument.

3. **Media rituals and symbols:** Certain visuals become part of cultural rituals — such as patriotic imagery in Olympic broadcasts or political rallies with flags and stagecraft. These reinforce collective identities and opinions. As Sturken and Cartwright explain, “we live in cultures that are increasingly permeated by visual images and technologies” (2017, p. 13). Debord famously said, “the spectacle is not a collection of images; it is a social relation among people, mediated by images” (Debord, 1967, n.p.). These spectacles are more than just aesthetic representations. They shape social relations and public discourse.
4. **Encoding/Decoding:** Stuart Hall proposed that producers encode media messages (including visuals) with specific meanings, but audiences decode them in various ways depending on their cultural context. This means public perception isn’t monolithic; people can interpret the same image differently. Viewers make meaning from images based on their knowledge, beliefs, and experiences. Audiences might adopt a dominant reading (accepting the intended message), a negotiated reading (accepting some parts, rejecting others), or an oppositional reading (completely disagreeing with the intended message) of an image (“Stuart Hall and Representation”, 2021). This framework reminds us that while images are powerful, viewers are not passive; their interpretation filters the influence.

Media and cultural studies also pay attention to visual narratives — how a series of images can tell a story that shapes public opinion. A photo essay on war victims, a montage of images in a documentary, or even the curation of images on a social media feed (which acts like an editorial selection) can create a narrative arc. Visual narratives often hit harder than written ones because they show evidence and allow viewers to witness events firsthand. Sturken and Cartwright note that “images increasingly circulate digitally with great speed across cultural and geographical distances” (2017, p. 13). For example, the U.S. civil rights movement’s public support was bolstered when images of peaceful protesters being met with violence, such as the photos of police dogs and fire hoses used on protesters in Birmingham, were published. Those visuals told a moral narrative with clear “good guys vs bad guys,” swaying public opinion toward civil rights by framing the conflict vividly.

Another concept is collective memory — images serve as anchors for society’s memory of events. A single photo can represent a historical moment (the fall of the Berlin Wall, the

moon landing, etc.), and later, public opinion about those events is often refracted through those iconic images. Sturken and Cartwright explain that “visual culture is not simply about images; it is also about practices we engage in relative to seeing, and it is about the ways that the world is visually organised in relation to power” (2017, p. 22). Scholars Hariman and Lucaites studied “iconic photographs” (like the flag raising at Iwo Jima or the “Napalm Girl” running in Vietnam) and argued that they encapsulate arguments and emotions that shape political discourse and memory (Anonymos, 2024). An iconic image can become shorthand for complex issues — Napalm Girl, for instance, stands for the tragedy of war and contributed to anti-war sentiment.

From a media/cultural studies perspective, images are part of society's contested meaning terrain. They can legitimise particular views or challenge the status quo. Public opinion is thus not just shaped by isolated images but by the continuous stream of visual culture that provides frames, symbols, and stories through which people collectively make sense of the world.

#### **2.1.6. The Theory of Digital Surveillance and Influence (TDSI)**

In the digital age, the circulation and impact of images are shaped by technological systems that publicly influence how visual content is produced, distributed, and interpreted. The Theory of Digital Surveillance and Influence (TDSI), proposed by Hanan Habibzai (2023), expands on classic propaganda models by incorporating algorithmic mediation and the role of digital technologies in shaping public opinion. The persuasive power of images is shaped by the structures that determine their circulation and symbolic content. Developed by Hanan Habibzai, The Theory of Digital Surveillance and Influence (TDSI) offers a framework toward understanding how images influence public opinion through algorithmic distribution. TDSI builds upon the basic work of Chomsky and Herman's *Manufacturing Consent*. Habibzai (2023) accounts for the technological dynamics of surveillance capitalism and algorithmic control, extending their media propaganda model. Unlike traditional propaganda models that emphasise editorial control and media ownership, TDSI foregrounds how technologies — especially algorithms, artificial intelligence, and big data — do not merely serve as passive conduits for ideological content but actively mediate influence. These technologies dynamically curate, amplify, and personalise persuasive visuals in real time, creating an adaptable and predictive system of influence that operates invisibly within digital platforms (Habibzai, 2023, pp. 2–4). Thus, TDSI shows how influence today is algorithmically

engineered, making digital persuasion less about what is said and more about how, when, and to whom it is shown.

TDSI argues that governments, corporations, and platform owners surveil digitally and then use behavioural data, influencing how people perceive reality through such curated visual content. This power is usually slight but common. It relies upon data commodification, algorithms that curate, and elite coordination, which happen to be three interrelated mechanisms.

1. Digital surveillance allows platforms to collect users' behavioural data, which they use for micro-targeted content. In this context, emotional immediacy makes visual media especially powerful. Habibzai (2023) says the use of personal data to deliver images that elicit fear, hope, or trust is central to algorithmic influence and “create tailored advertisements or even propaganda designed for specific people and groups” (p. 2). In this light, micro-targeting is not merely a side effect of algorithmic systems but often a deliberate strategy intended to exploit cognitive and emotional vulnerabilities. It helps intensify ideological entrenchment and deepen polarisation by ensuring that individuals repeatedly encounter emotionally charged content that aligns with their existing biases, reinforcing and radicalising identity positions over time (Habibzai, 2023, pp. 3–5).
2. Algorithmic curation shapes the visibility within users' feeds, and it often privileges content that evokes emotions, polarises, or reinforces ideology. This dynamic creates echo chambers while repetitively exposing users to specific narratives, altering public perception. On a personalised scale related to framing theory, the algorithm frames reality by deciding when, via whom, and which images are seen. O’Callaghan et al. (2014) observed how algorithmic systems can guide users away from mainstream content and to more radical visual narratives through recommender logic. This depicts just how visual persuasion can be entangled within technological affordances. These algorithms “learn” user preferences through continuous feedback loops: they track what content users click on, how long they engage, what they like or share, and which posts they ignore. Over time, this data is used to predict which types of content are most likely to hold users' attention. The goal is to reflect and anticipate interests, delivering content that keeps users scrolling, watching, or reacting. This learning process underpins the powerful influence of algorithmic curation, as systems become increasingly adept at selecting the most persuasive or emotionally triggering visuals.

3. TDSI relies on elite coordination as a key point. This coordination is a concept taken from Manufacturing Consent. Political actors, corporate advertisers, and platform managers often share interests to strengthen prevailing ideologies. Habibzai (2023) warns that “governments and corporations employ digital surveillance, personalised content, AI, and algorithmic control to shape public opinion and behaviours subtly” (p. 5). It seems that organic visual trends may reflect coordinated influence strategies. This occurs within this environment.

These mechanisms are particularly effective because images can bypass rational scrutiny. As Sonja Foss (2018) explains, pathos-based visual persuasion often operates on the peripheral route of the Elaboration Likelihood Model, influencing attitudes without conscious deliberation. TDSI deepens this by showing how platforms systematically promote persuasive imagery based on behavioural prediction models. This raises a critical concern: do people have less room for critical interpretation due to such technological mediation? While viewers may still negotiate or resist dominant readings, algorithmic targeting significantly narrows the interpretive field by shaping what is and how it is seen. As platforms optimise content delivery for engagement, they subtly privilege readability, immediacy, and emotional clarity over ambiguity or complexity. This tendency limits the audience's interpretive agency by discouraging alternative readings and suppressing content that invites critical reflection. In effect, platforms do not just streamline content exposure — they also streamline cognitive response, reinforcing dominant narratives and marginalising dissent. TDSI suggests that the architecture of algorithmic influence doesn't just deliver meaning but restricts the conditions under which meaning can be contested.

This aligns with Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model: users may decode images in negotiated or oppositional ways. However, TDSI suggests that algorithmic targeting often ensures the image reaches audiences predisposed to accept its encoded meaning. In this sense, digital surveillance selects content and tactically matches images and viewers to maximise ideological impact. TDSI highlights how the composition, framing, and narrative in images are algorithmically selected regarding visual rhetoric. These selections exploit persuasion principles such as ethos, pathos, and social proof. Campaign ads showing authority figures, emotional crises, or viral infographics are rhetorically persuasive and algorithmically optimised for influence. Image flows based on algorithms explain TDSI's intersection with media and cultural studies to construct collective memory and contribute to agenda-setting. Habibzai (2023) stated that the digital ecosystem ensures that specific images go viral not by chance, but by design, reinforcing dominant narratives through strategic amplification and

“these algorithms also act as powerful, unseen gatekeepers, subtly shaping public opinion” (p. 3).

In summary, the Theory of Digital Surveillance and Influence lets us understand in a structural way how visual culture today shows all that exists and how and to whom. It integrates perceptions from visual rhetoric and semiotics with media theory into a current account of algorithmic persuasion. Thus, a study must look at the influence of images on public opinion now. Moreover, TDSI is a descriptive model and a practical analytical tool for examining real-world phenomena such as political campaigns, misinformation, and visual propaganda. By identifying the mechanisms through which digital platforms operationalise influence, from surveillance and data commodification to algorithmic targeting and elite coordination, TDSI provides researchers, journalists, and policymakers with a framework for diagnosing and critiquing how visual content shapes collective belief and behaviour in the digital public sphere.

### **2.1.7. Summary & Conclusion**

Images function not simply like reflections of the world but as tools actively shaping its comprehension. Visual culture constitutes a primary mode for meaning-making, as demonstrated throughout this chapter, deeply embedded within those processes through which power relations, ideologies, and emotions are contested, expressed, and internalised. Theories from cultural studies, rhetoric, semiotics, and media analysis highlight that images play a central role within the construction and circulation of social knowledge.

Visual meaning's constructed nature is underscored via the idea of representation as articulated by John Berger and Stuart Hall. Berger's gaze analysis shows visual media reinforce key social hierarchies like gender, race, and class, while Hall's model presents representation as negotiated between encoded meaning plus audience interpretation. In this context, images do not passively depict reality; instead, they actively produce it because they legitimise specific perspectives and marginalise others.

Affectively, visual media operate according to such persuasion theories, going from classical rhetoric to psychological models. Appeals to ethos, pathos, and logos function simultaneously within just a single image, for they do shape audience responses through trust, emotion, and perceived rationality. Often, these effects remain disregarded. Images take advantage of visual cues with social signals to sway attitudes and behaviours without needing explicit verbal articulation.

Semiotic theory, as Saussure and Barthes particularly worked within, lets one dissect the symbolic dimension of visual communication. Denotation differs from connotation,

exposing how images function, having levels of meaning and associations often bearing ideological weight. Repeating and cultural habituating create visual signs that function as myths, reinforcing dominant worldviews while concealing their constructed origins, representing naturally.

Media and cultural studies contextualise visual persuasion further within broader institutional and systemic frameworks. Framing and agenda-setting theories show how editorial decisions shape all of the terms for public discourse. Editors select as well as present images, influencing the conversation. At the same time, the role that iconic images play in collective memory depicts how visual culture forms shared moral and historical narratives because of how it contributes to them. It embeds specific interpretations within that cultural imagination.

The Theory of Digital Surveillance and Influence (TDSI) advances this discussion by situating visual persuasion within the logic of digital media platforms. In this time, algorithms curate while behavioural targeting prevails — the intended image deployment benefits from data profiles from production and consumption. Emotional resonance, ideological alignment, and viral potential are algorithmically optimised to maximise engagement. This process often sacrifices critical reflection. This raises pressing concerns since individual autonomy is affected, various actors manipulate, and specific opaque mechanisms govern visibility and influence in the digital public sphere.

Ultimately, the study of visual persuasion reveals that images are not neutral conveyors of information but potent rhetorical and ideological agents. They help shape public consciousness, influence political and social attitudes, and structure the conditions under which meaning is produced and contested. In an era of visual saturation and algorithmic governance, cultivating visual literacy is a scholarly endeavour and a vital civic practice. However, this also entails recognising the ethical implications of these dynamics. The capacity for images to influence, particularly when algorithmically targeted and emotionally engineered, necessitates a call for greater transparency and accountability in digital platforms. Systems that shape public perception must be open to scrutiny, and users must be empowered with the tools to understand and challenge the visual messages they encounter. Through critical literacy, ethical design, and systemic oversight, societies can preserve democratic discourse in a media environment increasingly driven by invisible influence.

## **2.2. Historical and Contemporary Visual Strategies in Gay Activism**

Throughout the early to mid-20th century, LGBTQ+ individuals relied on coded symbols and visual strategies to communicate their identities while navigating a hostile legal and social environment. Before the emergence of open activism, representation was constrained by societal norms and direct government repression, forcing the community to adopt discrete but recognisable markers.

### **2.2.1. Early Visual Strategies (Pre-1969)**

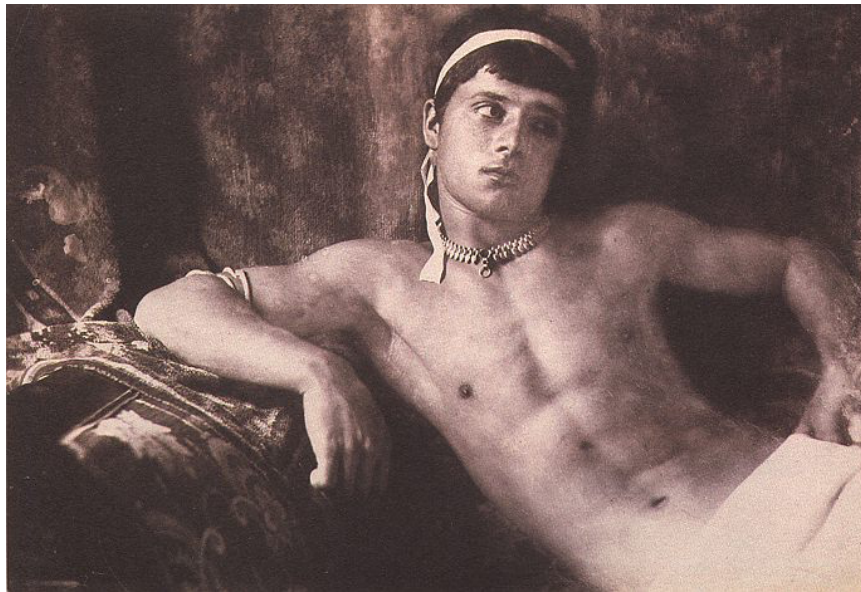
One of the most fraught symbols of LGBTQ+ history, the pink triangle, a symbol of persecution and erasure, originated as a Nazi-imposed marker for homosexual prisoners in concentration camps. Under Paragraph 175 of the German Criminal Code, which criminalised male homosexuality and according to Richard Plant, between 5,000 and 15,000 individuals were sent to camps and forced to wear an inverted pink triangle sewn onto their uniforms (Richard Plant, 1988).

Historian Eugen Kogon has concluded that the fate of the homosexuals in the camps can only be described as ghastly. Gay men were subject to sterilisation, often by castration and other medical experimentation. In the camps, they were assigned the most arduous tasks and were in danger of attacks not just from guards but also from other prisoners (Rapp, 2003, p. 1).

Following the war, the persecution of homosexuals continued, as those convicted under Paragraph 175 were not recognised as victims of the Holocaust and often remained legally stigmatised. Even in postwar Germany, “those who survived the war were kept in jail because Paragraph 175 remained in force” and due to the continued enforcement of anti-homosexual laws (Rapp, 2003, p. 1). “In Germany, there were about 45,000 convictions between 1950 and 1965 as opposed to about 10,000 in the Weimar Republic”, as stated by Paternotte and Tremblay (2015). This ongoing criminalisation reinforced the invisibility of LGBTQ+ individuals in historical narratives.

In contrast to its later use as a resistance symbol, the pink triangle remained an emblem of fear and oppression throughout the 1950s and 1960s, as homophile organisations hesitated to adopt a visual identity that might further marginalise the community. It was not until the 1970s that the pink triangle began to be reclaimed, but throughout the pre-1969 period, it remained a marker of forced invisibility rather than self-identification. According to Griffiths, during the 1950s and 1960s, the pink triangle symbolised fear and oppression, and homophile

organisations were cautious about adopting any visual identity that might further marginalise the community (Griffiths, 2021).



*Figure 1. Neapolitan boy wearing jewels and a headband [Photograph]. By W. von Gloeden, 1990. Twelvvetrees Press.*

Beyond explicit symbols, LGBTQ+ individuals developed visual codes within fashion, photography, and fine arts as a means of discreet self-expression. In photography, artists like Wilhelm von Gloeden employed classical imagery to depict male intimacy without provoking direct censorship and were “one of the founders of modern homosexual iconography” (Frankel, 2017, p. 166). His works, featuring young men in Greco-Roman settings, allowed for aestheticised representations of homoeroticism under the guise of historical idealism.

Fashion also served as a crucial marker of identity. Many gay men in the pre-1969 era utilised coded accessories, such as colour-specific handkerchiefs, to signal interest in particular same-sex encounters. Most gay men resorted to several subtle dress codes to identify themselves from other gay men, from Oscar Wilde's famous green carnation, which was still being worn in the 1930s, to suede shoes (Cole, 2000). However, the necessity for coded visuals reflected the broader social marginalisation and limited the community’s ability to express identity and demand rights openly.

### **2.2.2 Post-Stonewall Activism**

The Stonewall Riots of 1969 marked an important moment for LGBTQ+ activism because they shifted the movement from passive advocacy to radical, visible protest. Visual

rhetoric changed during the 1970s and 1980s when the movement took a combative position that questioned common stories with protest pictures and called for equal entitlements.

Activist groups such as the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) and the Gay Activists Alliance (GAA) realised visual representation could mobilise communities. Visual representation could confront institutional oppression, too. Key tools became public demonstrations, such as die-ins and sit-ins, reinforced through a visual language combining militant slogans with bold, graphic designs. For the public visionary,

GAA developed a unique style of street theatre protest — also known as agitprop (i.e., “agitation” and “propaganda”) — which GAA called zaps ... while the vision behind the zaps, which were playful, mischievous, and deadly serious, allowing good guys to publicly embarrass the bad guys. (Riemer & Brown, 2019, p. 88)

An increasing emphasis on street-level engagement arose from LGBTQ+ activists deliberately occupying public spaces to assert their visibility throughout.



*Figure 2. Gay Liberation Front pinback button [Pinback button]. ca. 1969. Private collection.*

In the 20th century's 1970s-1980s, LGBTQ+ people also relied upon coded symbols to communicate their identities and create community safely. The lambda, as a symbol, later became a gay liberation emblem. In 1970, the Gay Activists Alliance (GAA) officially adopted the lambda, explaining its representation of “a complete exchange of energy — that moment or period witness to absolute activity” in chemistry and physics (Rapp, 2003, p. 3). The symbol was also seen as representing “a commitment among men and women to achieve and defend their human rights as homosexual citizens” (Rapp, 2003, p. 3). The symbol gained further

recognition in 1974 when it was adopted at the first International Gay Rights Congress in Edinburgh as the official symbol of the gay rights movement, as stated by Rapp (2003).

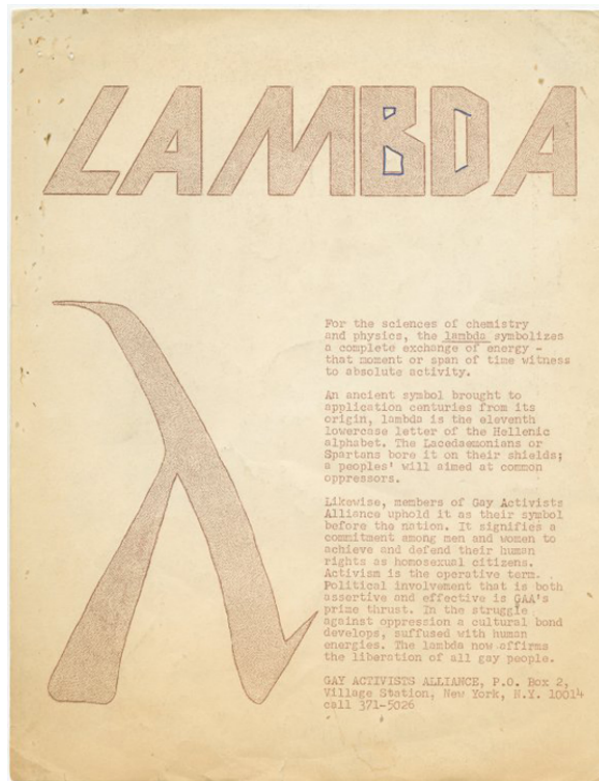


Figure 3. Lambda flyer [Flyer]. By Gay Activists Alliance, 1970. LGBTQ+ History Archive, New York Public Library.



Figure 4. Lambda (λ) symbol pinback button [Pinback button]. Designed by Tom Doerr, ca. 1970. Private collection.

One of the most enduring slogans of the early post-Stonewall era was “Gay is Good”, a phrase popularised by Frank Kameny, “who believed it was necessary to adopt a strongly

positive approach, a militant one, had something better” (Riemer & Brown, 2019, p. 32), as an innovating activist who sought to reframe homosexuality as pride, instead of shame. This slogan showed the shift toward more affirmative and defiant rhetoric, which contrasted sharply with earlier approaches that assimilated more.



*Figure 5. Pinback [Pinback button]. By R. Wicker, 1968. Private collection.*

In visual terms, “Gay is Good” became more than a phrase: it rallied many people and appeared on many banners, protest signs, and buttons, reinforcing its message through bold, declarative typography. Rainbow colours and LGBTQ+ pride symbols often did accompany the slogan, embedding the slogan into queer activism's visual lexicon. As it is a statement regarding identity and a call for action, this planned employment of visual culture did indeed strengthen “Gay is Good”, ensuring its impact lasted in the fight concerning LGBTQ+ rights.

In LGBTQ+ demonstrations, posters and banners served as rallying cries and tools for media visibility. These protest materials often featured provocative imagery along with statements, demanding keen attention since they were designed to be bold and direct. Graphic clarity was indeed emphasised to ensure the quick dissemination of each of these messages by televised reports as well as newspaper photographs.

LGBTQ+ protests' reach was significantly expanded by the rise of documentary photography as activism during the 1970s and 1980s. Diana Davies, being a photographer who “aligned herself with the Gay Liberation Front and contributed images to *Come Out!*, a magazine published by the GLF” (Palumbo, 2019), and Kay Tobin Lahusen captured demonstrations, sit-ins, and then public acts of defiance, ensuring in effect that these said

moments were indeed widely circulated and equally preserved. Their work provided a means by which mainstream media narratives could be countered that either ignored or misrepresented LGBTQ+ activism, as well as historical documentation.

LGBTQ+ activism photography humanised the movement particularly well. The equality battle's legitimacy was reinforced through these images showing joy, resistance, and candid solidarity. The invisibility imposed from heteronormative cultural forces was furthermore broken down via publishing these photographs in LGBTQ+ newspapers, zines and later mainstream media.



*Figure 6. Lynn Segerblom with one of the original rainbow flags she helped design [Photograph]. By J. McNamara, 1978. The LGBTQ History Project.*

The changing public perception and progression in the visual shift inevitably resulted in the need for a symbol representing the entire LGBTQ+ movement and standing out. Hence, the rainbow flag, perhaps the most enduring LGBTQ+ visual symbolism, came about. Designed in 1978 by artist Gilbert Baker after getting a request from the first open gay government official Harvey Milk, each color represented a different aspect of queer life (from sex to spirit) (Britannica, n.d.).

Each measuring 30- by 60-feet, the designs were hand-stitched and dyed with eight colored stripes: pink to symbolize sex, red for life, orange for healing, yellow for the sun, green for nature, turquoise for art and magic, blue for serenity, and purple for the spirit, according to the online exhibition. (McGreevy, 2021)

It was designed not simply for seeing but for recognition as pride, plurality, and presence. This has been accomplished because it has become shorthand for LGBTQ+ identity and is integral to global marches.

Throughout the 1970s, therefore, “gay liberation” visuals — proud marches, flags, and also slogans — did help to shift LGBTQ+ issues toward mainstream discourse from society’s very margins. Pride stated that visibility empowers people yearly, gradually chipping away at stigma. As a scholar observed, these years featured the first thorough set of polling questions on public attitudes about homosexuality, plus fundamental rights support grew considerably. This era presented bold activist imagery with stories. Although a state of full equality was still somewhat distant, they did sow the seeds in anticipation of later victories.



*Figure 7. Silence=Death [Poster]. By Silence=Death Project, 1986. The New York Public Library Digital Collections.*

LGBTQ+ activism gained a new urgency owing to the 1980s AIDS crisis, which led to the development of very advanced visual campaigns. ACT UP, that is the AIDS Coalition to

Unleash Power, became a central force for demanding medical intervention and for exposing government inaction through visual rhetoric. Gran Fury, the graphic design collective, heavily influenced ACT UP's visual strategies through provocative posters and street art that challenged public indifference. The Silence=Death poster, designed through collective effort by six artists during 1986, stands as one of the era's most iconic images. One single image challenges deeply ingrained prejudice in a magical way, or a narrative carefully crafts the challenge. These visuals are rebellious, subtly altering views, one individual at a time.

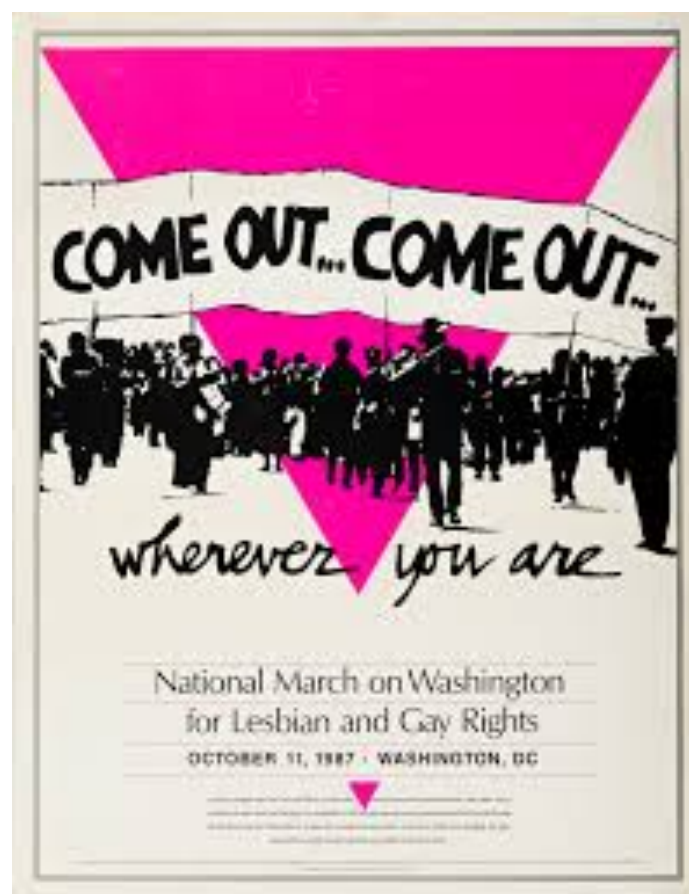
The pink triangle turned into a pretty impressive example. This did highlight the potential for a transformation. Initially used by the Nazis to mark homosexual men, this symbol of defiance and solidarity became what was intended as an “inescapable badge of shame” (Campbell, 2019, p. 69). The Collective adopted the inverted pink triangle, then combined it with the words “Silence=Death” on a black background. As activists demanded action from institutions, this graphic appeared throughout New York City institutions that ignored the AIDS epidemic and continued gay marginalisation. The banner motivated the community also with this strong message: “Use your power...Vote...Boycott...Defend yourselves...Turn your anger, fear, grief into action” (Brown & Riemer, 2019, p. 184). By appropriating the pink triangle to evoke LGBTQ+ people's historical trauma and resilience, this collective stressed that “the terms of liberation must be demanded and taken; for they are not generally given freely by those in positions of power” (Campbell, 2019, p. 11).



*Figure 8. Silencio = Muerte Argentina [Poster]. New York Public Library, ACT UP New York Records, Box 30 Folder 1, Latina/o Caucus. By Luis Vera, 1991.*

As it became a critical visual symbol in the community's fight for equality, the pink triangle is also prominently featured in LGBTQ+ protest posters. Symbols recontextualised for

creating powerful messages of defiance and pride exemplify the 1987 March on Washington poster, with its large pink triangle and silhouettes of people at a protest march. The pink triangle's reclamation, at one time intended as a mark of shame, highlights a shift in visual culture that now acknowledges that the symbol was recently reclaimed in the continuing gay liberation battle. This impressive, unique form is now not just a symbol of prior oppression. However, instead, it vividly proclaims identity and defiance. Pink and black posters seek to bring "attention to popular graphic representations of queerness", changing the triangle into a widely recognised symbol that resonates powerfully across generations plus mobilises a united front against discrimination (Campbell, 2019, p. 90).



*Figure 9. March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights [Poster]. By New York Organizing Committee, 1987. LGBTQ+ History Archive.*

As emblematic of a new era of queer resistance, this powerful emblem became both a call for action and a reminder of the past persecution. Arising from civil rights, the pink triangle's transformation formed part of a broader movement where visual symbols like the upraised fist and the equals sign represented LGBTQ+ struggles. In this manner, the pink

triangle signifies the detailed interaction of historical memory alongside activist design, revealing that visuals in queer activism do more than convey messages; they “amaze us, scare us, or delight us, but certainly open us to new worlds within our daily existence” (Campbell, 2019, p. 9).

These visual campaigns were intentionally designed for peak visibility. Posters wheat-pasted across important cities, stickers handed out at demonstrations, and T-shirts displaying activist slogans became commonplace. Keeping the AIDS crisis visible remained the aim, urging politicians and the public to confront the epidemic.



*Figure 10. The AIDS Memorial Quilt displayed in Washington, D.C. [Photograph]. Photographer unknown, 1987.*

The AIDS Memorial Quilt's creation, often known as the world's largest community art project, was among the AIDS epidemic's most powerful artistic responses. Art historian Julia Bryan-Wilson has described it as “the largest ongoing community arts project in the world” (Campbell, 2019, p. 72). However, it remains “vexed by logistical issues as well as ideological conflicts over its legacy and its ongoing purpose” (Campbell, 2019, p. 72). Despite these challenges, the quilt stands out as one of the most ambitious and coordinated memorial efforts in LGBTQ+ history. It transforms customarily feminised labour into a spectacle for public mourning and also into protest.

As an activist, Cleve Jones organised the AIDS Quilt's origination from a 1985 San Francisco candlelight vigil. At that point, Jones requested that participants inscribe the names of pals lost to AIDS on whiteboards. A spontaneous visual mass of loss did result, as these

makeshift memorials were taped upon the walls of the Department of Health and Human Services building. Jones later recalled standing in the rain watching the fluttering signs, “It looks like a quilt” (Campbell, 2019, p. 72). Because it evoked the homely warmth and familial closeness linked to quilts, this observation ignited the concept for a grand memorial: “I was flooded with memories of home and family and the warmth of a quilt when it was cold on a winter night” (Campbell, 2019, p. 72).



Figure 11. Alternate view of The AIDS Memorial Quilt displayed in Washington, D.C. [Photograph]. By unknown photographer, 1987.

Since artist Gilbert Baker and many volunteers assisted, Jones gave the structure form with each panel measuring about three by six feet like a grave, thereby realising his vision. After that, panels were sewn to create twelve-by-twelve-foot blocks, which were then folded in a ceremonial lotus fold. That explained the Quilt's ritual importance. Bryan-Wilson notes that the folding and the unfolding of that quilt adds “a performative and ceremonial dimension” (Campbell, 2019, p. 72).

The AIDS Quilt was initially displayed by people in 1987, but it achieved national fame in 1996 as it spread across Washington, D.C.'s National Mall from the Capitol to the Washington Monument. “The New York Times” wrote at the time: “A carpet of grief covered the nation’s front yard this weekend” (Campbell, 2019, p. 73). Because they walked amongst the quilt blocks, many visitors felt a deep emotional connection to the personal and collective

loss inflicted by the epidemic. Volunteers did help to locate the panels, which fostered individual remembrance and communal mourning.

Despite adhering to a standard format, the quilt allowed for a remarkable range of personal expression. Some panels honoured famous figures like Rock Hudson and Sylvester, but many more were dedicated to parents, siblings, lovers, and unnamed friends. The designs ranged from ornate and humorous to solemn and minimalist. Inside jokes, decorative elements, and carefully chosen clothing reflected the deceased's individuality, vividly presenting their personalities. "Each design decision acts as an important indicator of something related to the remembered person," the text explains (Campbell, 2019, p. 73).

The AIDS Quilt was, in addition, a political protest. At the 1987 March on Washington, some volunteers read nearly two thousand names from the panels. As a march speaker, Susan Cavin proclaimed "Gays have nothing to lose," articulating visibility's pressing demands alongside justice (Riemer & Brown, 2019, p. 190). As laid out upon the National Mall, the Quilt symbolised resistance. During the same event, Dick and Amy Ashworth spoke their son's name aloud. It was Tucker. He has recently died as a result of AIDS, and this has made private mourners publicly defy and remember him.

The quilt's symbolism had absolute power and forced viewers to confront the scale of the AIDS crisis that the government and the press often ignored. Each panel visually approximated lost lives, "charted using only a needle, some thread, and a bit of cloth" (Campbell, 2019, p. 73). As Bryan-Wilson notes, the quilt's warmth with familial ties reinforced its memorial purpose while its scale and context increased its political message.

The AIDS Memorial Quilt exemplifies such a merging of the process of mourning. It also symbolises the merging of activism and art. It strikingly testifies to its role in influencing public comprehension of LGBTQ+ struggles during the AIDS crisis, and it remains a moving archive of memory, as people collectively protest against indifference, visually.

LGBTQ+ activists employed guerrilla art tactics, challenging the dominant discourse and organised campaigns. Graffiti, stencil art, and unauthorised posters are commonly resisted, as they let activists reclaim public space. A primary goal regarding a lot of this effort involved unsettling convention. It required viewers to engage with issues that they may otherwise ignore. Street art in cities such as New York and San Francisco proved particularly compelling given the strong LGBTQ+ activist networks. Graffiti's and posters' fleeting nature also highlighted the messages' urgency. Activists employed a decentralised, often anonymous, mode for artistic resistance. This made sure their messages were not swiftly censored or co-opted.

### 2.2.3. Cultural Representation and Commercialization (1990s–2000s)

The 1990s and 2000s signified a shift regarding LGBTQ+ awareness since dominant media and business interests started integrating queer symbolism within their stories. Increased LGBTQ+ representation was seen in film and television in the early part of this period. Often, it was situated within a commercial context or one driven by entertainment instead of pure activism. Scholars argue that the sanitisation and depoliticisation of LGBTQ+ identities occurred as a result of this shift, allowing broader visibility.

Advertising in a vital way mediated the expansion as well as commodification of LGBTQ+ representation. LGBTQ+-oriented marketing was established by major brands such as Absolut Vodka, which began targeting gay consumers in and around the late 1980s. In the 1990s, companies like Levi's and IKEA began featuring same-sex couples in advertisements. It represented advancement plus the intended aim at a rich customer group. "Implicit gay-themed ads in gay media lead to higher purchase intention and more favourable advertising and brand evaluation" (Um, 2016). These drives frequently depended on aesthetic codes signalling queerness to LGBTQ+ audiences, yet stayed vague enough to avoid alienating mainstream consumers.



*Figure 12. IKEA "Dining Room" commercial featuring a gay couple, Mitch and Steve. [Screenshot from video]. Directed by P. O'Neill, 1994.*

This commercialisation saw Pride aesthetics develop essentially. Pride imagery, rainbow flags, slogans, and celebratory parades, transformed from radical protest to a recognisable and marketable symbol. Corporations were aligned with Pride events to an increasing extent, and their products were often branded with LGBTQ+ symbols during the Pride Month period. However, they did avoid any substantial political engagement. "Over the

past 50 years, and especially in the past decade, there has been a growing trend in what has become euphemistically termed “Marketing the Rainbow” (Verhoeven, 2022). Critics argue that corporate sponsorships often replaced grassroots efforts, and this shift ignited debates concerning the dilution of activism. These efforts muted the more radical demands within the LGBTQ+ movement.

While mainstream media absorbed LGBTQ+ imagery, queer artists in the 1990s and 2000s responded by creating work that challenged commercialised representations. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, for example, subverted the boundaries of minimalism and conceptual art by infusing his work with deeply personal and political themes related to queer identity and the AIDS crisis. His piece *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* (1991), consisting of a pile of candy that viewers could take, functioned as a metaphor for the slow deterioration of an AIDS-stricken body while maintaining a strikingly accessible and participatory form and “the work has been interpreted as an “allegorical portrait” of Laycock as his health deteriorated” (Gonzalez-Torres, Felix, 1991).



*Figure 13. Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) [Sculptural installation]. Art Institute of Chicago. By F. González-Torres, 1991.*

Catherine Opie's photography, likewise, explored alternative aesthetics via documenting subcultures and queer communities often absent from mainstream representation. Her series *Being and Having* (1991) and *Portraits* (1993) depicted butch and leather subcultures, presenting a counter-narrative to the sanitised and commodified images of queerness proliferating in popular culture and “looks at the outward portrayal of masculinity and is a

reference to 17th-century Old Master portraiture” (Guralnik, 2013). Opie’s work resisted mainstream notions of LGBTQ+ identity by emphasising subversive and non-normative embodiments of gender and sexuality. Queer artists also embraced pop culture as a tool of critique. Many utilised subversive strategies, appropriating mass media imagery and disrupting traditional narratives, to highlight the contradictions of corporate inclusivity.

The place where pop culture met queer activism was still negotiated. Queer artists as well as activists reclaimed radical aesthetics as mainstream media embraced LGBTQ+ imagery, ensuring visual rhetoric critiqued rather than merely assimilated into consumer culture.

#### 2.2.4. Digital Activism and Contemporary Strategies (2010s–Present)

The growth of social media in the 2010s provided LGBTQ+ activism with an unmatched forum for advocacy, mobilisation, and visibility. Digital spaces turned into key arenas to influence public discourse regarding LGBTQ+ rights, such as those exemplified within hashtag-driven campaigns, including #LoveWins and #ItGetsBetter. These campaigns told stories in a visual manner. They utilised user-generated videos, viral graphics, and branded content to foster emotional engagement and mobilise backing.



Figure 14. America should be very proud. #LoveWins [Tweet]. By The White House [@ObamaWhiteHouse], June 26, 2015.

Visual media is a powerful tool for mobilising social-mediated protests. Images and videos attract more audience engagement than text. The superior effects of visuals are generally more pronounced during the ignition phase of the protest than in the periods before and after. (Lu & Peng, 2024)

The #LoveWins campaign showed digital activism's power again in 2015 when the U.S. Supreme Court supported same-sex marriage. Users symbolised solidarity with others by overlaying rainbow filters upon their profile pictures, so a common visual trend increased the campaign's overall success. Digital platforms create an accessible participatory form of activism; this type of visual activism underscores images, acting as personal expression and collective action.

Social media has transformed protest aesthetics. Activist participation happens on sites like Instagram and TikTok, allowing the quick spread of instructive content, catchphrases and queer-affirming pictures. Memes are an effective instrument for political complexities that compress into digestible, shareable formats. LGBTQ+ activists frequently leverage meme culture via humour and satire to critique homophobia, challenge political narratives, and reclaim queer identities. These platforms are indeed accessible, enabling activism beyond geographical boundaries. Due to this, queer voices are increased, most especially in regions where customary protest is heavily censored.

One illustrative example shows how people responded online to the “gay rat wedding” in the children's TV show *Arthur*. Conservative media lashed out at the episode that depicted Mr. Ratburn marrying his male partner, as well as Alabama Public Television refusing to air it. Social media users, in response, transformed the controversy to a wave of memes as they turned the phrase “gay rat wedding” into a proud and playful banner for queer visibility. Irony and absurdity stoked a meme storm that recast outrage as celebration (Elder, 2019).

These moments present how memes function as jokes. They represent strong forms of digital protest. Memes are beyond mere entertainment; they remix cultural symbols, inject irony into political discourse, and subvert dominant narratives in accessible and engaging ways. They are intrinsically participatory, allowing users to copy, alter, and recirculate ideas with minimal effort. This speeds the concepts' dissemination through the worldwide web. Through their viral circulation, memes help cultivate a sense of solidarity among dispersed communities, they foster digital spaces for queer expression, and they invite critical reflection on issues of identity, power, and representation.

Importantly, this mode of communication aligns with the internet culture's logic, which is both playful and fast-paced, and humour plus brevity often carry much more weight than

formal argumentation within it. LGBTQ+ activists find meme culture to be a unique rhetorical strategy, as it has a purpose. Marginalisation becomes a punchline, outrage then transforms into creativity, and digital space reclaims wit with subversive impact. Protests exist as if they were pixels, hashtags, irony, and a modern, agile, and persistent resistance, such as the platforms they inhabit.



My big fat gay rat wedding



Figure 15. *My big fat gay rat wedding* [Tweet with image]. By G. Donovan [@Gracie\_Do], May 13, 2019. Twitter.

LGBTQ+ activism has seen a broader comprehension of intersectionality eased by the digital era. This facilitation is indeed of importance. Previous movements focused chiefly on

white, cisgender gay men, but present-day dialogue increasingly features transgender, non-binary, and racially varied viewpoints. Hashtags such as #TransRightsAreHumanRights and #BlackTransLivesMatter highlight the structural inequalities within the LGBTQ+ community itself, calling for activism that addresses more and includes racial and gender-based disparities. Marginalised voices challenge exclusionary narratives in mainstream LGBTQ+ representation. Consequently, social media offers a vital platform for these debates.

Discourse driven by images increases across digital spaces. Pride flags have thus proliferated in and have visually impacted LGBTQ+ representation tools. In LGBTQ+ communities, pride flags powerfully express personal identity and communicate symbolically in visual culture. The increased variety of flags since Gilbert Baker's initial rainbow flag appeared shows a visual language instead of division, and people use it to express subtle identities. As Campbell (2019) notes,

such identifications are important not only for the people who invest in them as a lived reality, but for those of us who do not — as oftentimes these categories help to raise awareness about the truly dazzling heterogeneity of our communities (p. 136).

These flags function much more as aesthetic expressions of selfhood and community belonging than as signs. Monica Helms, the creator of that transgender pride flag, likens the relationship between the different LGBTQ+ flags and Baker's original flag to that of national and state flags, suggesting each flag has been designed for a specific audience, with its political meaning, history, and also logic (Campbell, 2019). In this way, pride flags visualise identity claims, and queer people can communicate their identity alongside stating how they wish to be seen.

The intersex flag, an impressive purple circle upon a yellow background, exemplifies how visual design asserts specificity and independence. A clear, bold symbol is offered, created by Intersex Human Rights Australia. This symbol resists assimilation into broader categories such as transgender, creating space for distinct visibility (Schopper et al., 2024). This flag makes use of colour form and also symbolism. It also invites intersex people to find recognition and connection within a shared visual framework.

Digital platforms increasingly prioritise images, as visual identifiers permit self-expression and allow community building online. An expanding range of pride flags eases a richer, more inclusive visual culture instead of limiting or dividing. As per Campbell (2019), “we should expect more, and not fewer, flags, as they are ultimately evidence that we are continuing to find one another, to hone, define, and value our experiences within the long arc of LGBTQ history” (p. 137).



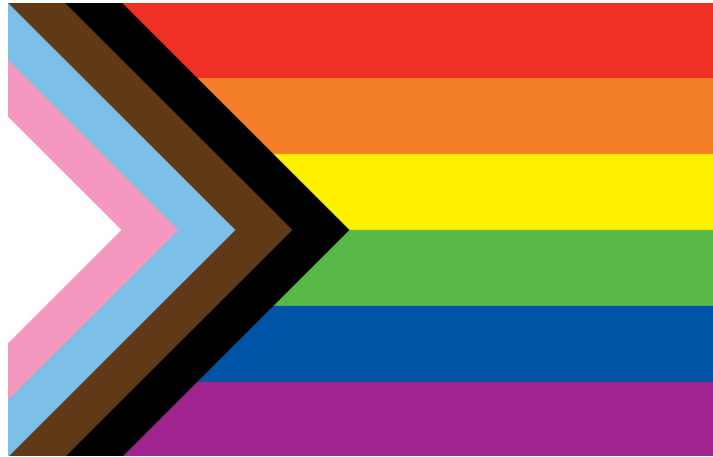
*Figure 16. Original Gilbert Baker Pride Flag [Flag design]. Gilbert Baker Foundation. By Gilbert Baker, 1978.*



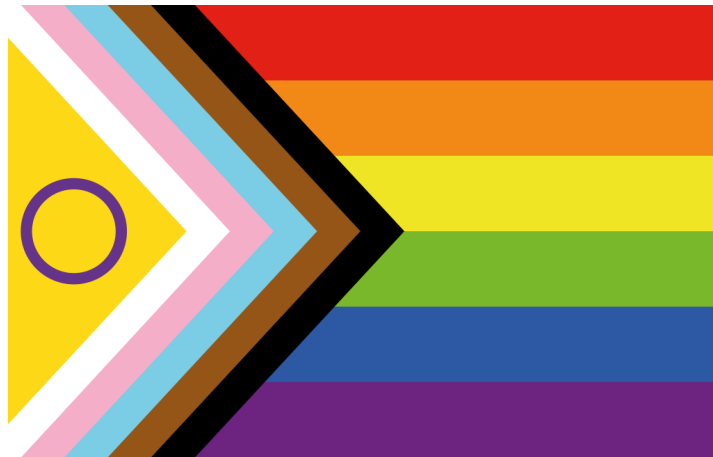
*Figure 17. Traditional Gay Pride Flag, post-1979 version with six colours [Flag design]. Adapted from Gilbert Baker's original design, post-1979.*



*Figure 18. Philadelphia Pride Flag [Flag design]. By Tierney Agency for Philadelphia's Office of LGBT Affairs, 2017.*



*Figure 19. Progress Pride Flag [Flag design]. By Daniel Quasar, 2018.*



*Figure 20. Intersex-inclusive Progress Pride Flag [Flag design]. By Valentino Vecchietti, 2021.*

Simultaneously, debate about corporate support's sincerity has been ignited by LGBTQ+ activism's commercialisation, mainly via “rainbow-washing”. Critics argue that many corporations fail to support LGBTQ+ communities beyond surface-level branding, with brands increasingly adopting Pride-themed marketing. This phenomenon is where businesses do remain complicit within exploitative labour practices and also political inaction, showing the tension between visibility and genuine advocacy as they capitalise upon queer imagery. This backlash does reflect a growing demand for corporate accountability. Brands are being pushed to make substantive policy changes instead of mere symbolic gestures. Images and symbols communicate messages and values via visual culture. Rainbow-washing entails using rainbow imagery to feign an inclusive appearance. Scepticism and criticism from the LGBTQ+ community can occur if authentic actions do not support these visuals (Schopper et al., 2024).

Through the democratisation of access to platforms, diversification of representation, and challenge of corporate appropriation, the digital age has ultimately expanded all of the possibilities for LGBTQ+ activism. Yet it has introduced its own challenges, too, given that the quick spread of digital activism risks reducing activism down to performative gestures or risks oversimplifying complex issues instead of any material change.

### **2.3. Impact Assessment: Public Opinion Shifts and Policy Changes Over Time**

Understanding whether visual and narrative strategies in LGBTQ+ activism require more than symbolic victories or anecdotal evidence toward meaningfully shifting public opinion. It is important to analyse measurable indicators to assess their actual impact. These indicators include legislative change, social media engagement patterns, shifts within media representation, and longitudinal polling data. Activist imagery and storytelling, these metrics reveal, have shaped institutional reforms, influenced public discourse, and broadened social acceptance.

#### **2.3.1. Historical Shifts in Perception and Policy**

Public attitudes and legal frameworks have evolved with the increase in LGBTQ+ activism, as evidenced by calculated uses of narrative and visual forms. These strategies have helped move LGBTQ+ identities toward broader acceptance and institutional recognition and transform social perceptions. Activist imagery and storytelling stood as powerful tools because they shaped opinion, prompted legal reform, and used visibility as both a tactic and a goal. As campaigns garnered cultural and political support, their aesthetic idioms permeated diverse areas of public life. LGBTQ+ narratives became embedded within the everyday consciousness as a result of that.

A prominent shift came about with this increasing influence when LGBTQ+ representation began to permeate consumer culture. Queer imagery entered into fashion, entertainment, advertising, and political branding, which signalled a historic normalisation of identities that people previously excluded. However, this cultural visibility led to tensions. Corporations have steadily appropriated the once-radical symbols of protest and pride. They were seeking to capitalise upon LGBTQ+ audiences, especially during Pride Month. Rainbow flags appeared on storefronts, packaging, and digital platforms, often disconnected from genuine advocacy or sustained engagement. This phenomenon, frequently called “rainbow-washing”, was criticised for reducing the movement's visual language to branding at a surface level. While commerce of that sort contributed to a broader type of recognition, it also risked

obscuring inequalities that people faced and their resistance. Maintaining the LGBTQ+ activism's political integrity became a balancing act of sorts. Its integration into mainstream consumer and media landscapes also had to be navigated.

1. Pre-1969: Homophile movement.

**Visual and Narrative Strategies:** Conservative look (suits/skirts); polite signs demanding rights; coined slogans like “Gay is Good” to counter shame as seen in the documentary film *Gay and Proud* (Vincenz, 1970).

**Public Opinion Shifts:** Little change in general sentiment initially — e.g., 1965 poll: 70% viewed homosexuals as harmful. (Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 2019). A small supportive subculture formed.

**Policy and Legislative Outcomes:** First legal footholds: *Gay Press Wins In SCOTUS' First-Ever Pro-Gay Ruling in 1958* (Stevenson, 2015); Illinois decriminalises homosexuality in 1961 (American Civil Liberties Union, 2003). Picketing tactics establish visibility for the first time.

2. 1970s: Gay Liberation & Pride

**Visual and Narrative Strategies:** Pride marches with vibrant outfits and chants “Gay Power!”; Rainbow flag was introduced as a symbol of pride in 1987 (Gonzalez, 2021); campaigns emphasising gay people as neighbours and citizens.

**Public Opinion Shifts:** Growing visibility correlates with softening attitudes: by 1977, 56% of Americans supported equal job opportunities for gays (Gallup, 2019); split (43%/43%) on legality of gay relationships — up from ~0% support earlier (Gallup, 2019).

**Policy and Legislative Outcomes:** Homosexuality removed from DSM in 1973; dozens of cities pass anti-discrimination ordinances, though some face repeal fights, e.g. Bryant’s 1977 campaign (Gallup, 2019). The Briggs Initiative in 1978 was defeated after an activist campaign flipped the polls from 61% approval to 45% (Gallup, 2019).

3. 1980s: AIDS activism

**Visual and Narrative Strategies:** Confrontational visuals: pink triangle “Silence=Death” posters plastered in cities; mass die-ins and protests targeting media coverage; AIDS Quilt personalised the narrative.

**Public Opinion Shifts:** Initially, fear and stigma were rampant — in 1985, 50% blamed people with AIDS for their illness (Gallup, 2019); but activism raised awareness — by 1987, AIDS was named the nation’s most urgent health issue by

68% of Americans (Gallup, 2019). Stigma indicators improved by the early 1990s, as support for the quarantine of AIDS patients dropped and compassion increased.

**Policy and Legislative Outcomes:** Policy responses accelerated: the FDA fast-tracked drug approvals between 1987 and 1989 under activist pressure; the CDC expanded the AIDS definition to include women in 1993. Congress passed the Ryan White CARE Act in 1990, including HIV under the Americans with Disabilities Act (Rose, 2019). Government and public health agencies dramatically increased AIDS funding and education by the late 1980s, mainly due to activist pressure (Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 1991).

#### 4. 1990s: Equality & visibility

**Visual and Narrative Strategies:** Personalised narratives played a key role in shifting public perception, with LGBTQ individuals coming out in the media, such as Ellen DeGeneres in 1997, and testifying in government hearings. Protests like the 1993 March on Washington carried powerful slogans such as “Equal Rights Now”. Visual strategies included images of gays in military uniform advocating to “Lift the Ban” and candlelight vigils held in memory of hate-crime victims.

**Public Opinion Shifts:** Public opinion undergoes rapid positive shift on many issues: support for gays in the military rose from ~40% in 1993 to majority by late '90s and over 60% by 2001 (Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 2019); by 1999, 83% of Americans said gay people should have equal job rights (Gallup, 2019). Knowing someone LGBTQ has become common, reducing prejudice.

**Policy and Legislative Outcomes:** Legal progress was uneven but notable: dozens of states and localities enacted anti-discrimination and hate crime laws. The federal “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy in 1993 allowed closeted military service, marking a partial improvement. The first federal hate-crimes bill, including sexual orientation, passed the House in the 1990s, though it did not become law until 2009. Internationally, several countries, such as Denmark in 1989 and Norway in 1993, introduced registered partnerships for same-sex couples, serving as stepping stones toward full marriage equality.

#### 5. 2000s: Marriage equality campaigns

**Visual and Narrative Strategies:** Heartfelt, family-oriented imagery became central to advocacy: ads featured loving same-sex couples and families; equality slogans like “Love is Love” and “Marriage = ♥ + ♥” reinforced emotional resonance. Campaigns such as NOH8 used powerful visuals, like taped mouths, to

symbolise silencing. Social media amplified these messages, with viral visuals like the Human Rights Campaign's red "=" profile pictures shared by millions in 2013 (Human Rights Campaign, 2013).

**Public Opinion Shifts:** Dramatic opinion shift on marriage: In 1996, only 27% of Americans favoured same-sex marriage; by 2015, ~60% did (Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 2019). Similar trends in Western Europe and the Americas. Polling in 2011 showed the tipping point, plurality/majority support, achieved in many countries. (Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 2019) Broader acceptance: by 2009, ~75% of Americans supported gay adoption rights, up from 14% in 1977 (Gallup, 2019).

**Policy and Legislative Outcomes:** Major legislative victories: The Netherlands first legalised marriage (2001), followed by Canada, Spain, etc. ~18 countries had marriage equality by 2015. The U.S. Supreme Court in 2015 legalised same-sex marriage nationwide after states like MA, NY, etc. did so from 2003 to 2012 due to activist litigation and campaigning (Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 2019). The visibility of gay families also helped the passage of adoption and partnership laws in many jurisdictions.

## 6. 2010s: Full inclusion & Pride mainstreaming

**Visual and Narrative Strategies:** Ubiquitous Pride imagery: rainbow flags on corporate logos, Pride parades televised; hashtags and viral visuals (#LoveWins trending globally with rainbow filters (Kelly, 2015); trans activists using trans flag and social media campaigns). Activists also push back on commercialisation with signs like "Pride is a Protest".

**Public Opinion Shifts:** Widespread support for LGBTQ rights in Western countries: e.g. ~80% of Americans by 2019 supported non-discrimination protections for LGBT people (NDN Collective, 2021); over 2/3 in many countries said same-sex relationships are acceptable. The visibility of trans issues increased public awareness (by 2019, ~60% of Americans supported allowing trans military service, though opinions on other trans issues remain divided).

**Policy and Legislative Outcomes:** Further policy gains: Many more countries (a total of 34 by 2025) enact marriage equality or gender-neutral partnership laws. Comprehensive anti-discrimination laws cover LGBT people in the EU, Canada, etc. Transgender rights: e.g. numerous countries add gender identity to protections, some allow gender "X" on passports. In the U.S., the Supreme Court's 2020

Bostock decision (protecting LGBT employees under the Civil Rights Act) was a milestone reflecting decades of advocacy. Backlash policies do emerge in some areas, but are met with intense activist and corporate pushback (e.g. the partial rollback of the trans military ban in 2017 led to public outcry and its reversal in 2021). Corporations increasingly act as allies (over 200 companies filed pro-LGBT legal briefs in major court cases). Pride celebrations become both celebratory and a platform to highlight ongoing issues (e.g. banners for racial justice in Pride 2020, highlighting intersectionality).

### **2.3.2. Survey Insights on Contemporary LGBTQ+ Representation**

To deepen the understanding of how visual culture shapes current perceptions of LGBTQ+ lives and identities, this study incorporated a mixed-method survey designed to complement the historical overview of representation and policy evolution. By bridging past and present, the research aimed to illuminate how individuals today respond to visual narratives in public life. The survey was conducted across Europe and North America, collecting 54 responses — 29 from LGBTQ+ individuals and 25 from non-LGBTQ+ participants. Its questions explored a range of dimensions, including emotional resonance, cognitive transformation, symbolic recognition, and broader social attitudes toward LGBTQ+ imagery in both media and everyday environments.

- 1. Quantitative and Thematic Insights.** What emerged was a compelling picture: visual culture holds weight. Nearly 79% of LGBTQ+ respondents affirmed that it can genuinely change public attitudes — a belief 56% of non-LGBTQ+ participants echoed. Interestingly, 39% of the latter group expressed uncertainty, while only 5% were dismissive, some citing ideological concerns or discomfort with LGBTQ+ visibility in children's media. Recognition of symbols was widespread. The rainbow flag, for instance, was almost universally recognised (96%). Nevertheless, its interpretation varied. LGBTQ+ participants often described it as a source of belonging and affirmation. At the same time, nearly 18% of non-LGBTQ+ respondents called it “overused” or “performative”, reflecting ambivalence or fatigue with what they saw as symbolic saturation. Emotional responses offer one of the most apparent divides. Over 70% of LGBTQ+ participants mentioned that campaigns such as IKEA’s ad featuring a gay couple, #LoveWins, or “Silence=Death” made them feel less isolated. These images validated their existence. One respondent described seeing a rainbow sticker in a

small-town cafe as “an anchor to safety”. Non-LGBTQ+ participants, meanwhile, often experienced visual culture cognitively, reflecting on social change, empathy, or discomfort. Roughly half admitted their perspectives had shifted positively because of LGBTQ+ media exposure. However, around a quarter viewed some campaigns as intrusive or politically loaded. As one U.S. respondent noted, “I don’t mind the imagery, but I don’t want it pushed onto kids”.

**Do you believe visual campaigns can realistically change public attitudes towards LGBTQ+ people?**

29 responses

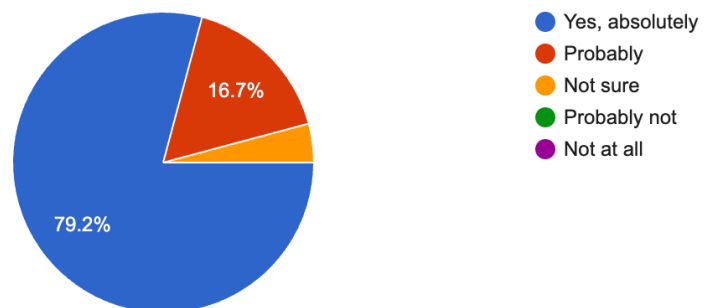


Figure 21. Survey responses from LGBTQ+ participants (n = 29) [Graph]. Data collected by the author, 2025.

**Do you think visual culture can change public opinion about LGBTQ+ people?**

25 responses

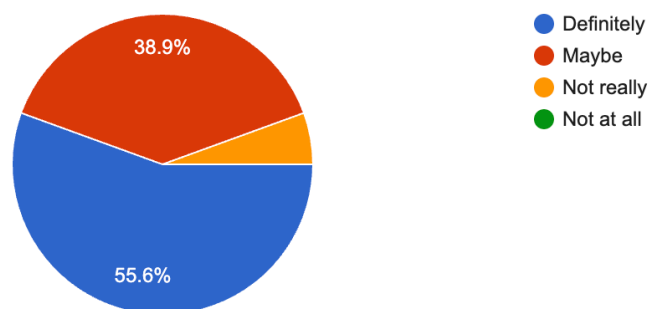


Figure 22. Survey responses from non-LGBTQ+ participants (n = 25) [Graph]. Data collected by the author, 2025.

2. **Powerful Symbols, Shallow Campaigns?** Despite high recognition rates — #LoveWins (89%), “Silence=Death” (70%), and “It Gets Better” (noted by 68% of LGBTQ+ respondents) — there was apparent concern about commercialisation. More than 64% of LGBTQ+ participants criticised what they called “rainbow capitalism”, where brands adopt LGBTQ+ symbols seasonally without tangible support. Corporate Pride campaigns were described as “shallow”, “inauthentic”, or “tone-deaf”. Representation, many felt, had become narrow. Participants from both groups pointed out the overrepresentation of urban, youthful, affluent, cisgender gay men. An Austrian respondent noted, “I see Pride and parties, but not what happens the rest of the year”. 80% of LGBTQ+ respondents wanted visual culture to portray the uncelebrated: aging, parenting, mental health, rural queer life, and intergenerational support.
3. **Bridging Differences through Daily Visuals.** When respondents described imagery that shifted their understanding, subtle moments stood out. A Polish participant recalled an ad showing two men holding hands in Warsaw — a small act of resistance in a politically tense context. A Canadian shared how a simple ad of a same-sex couple shopping together “normalised what I didn’t know could feel normal”. The desire for subtlety, complexity, and sincerity was strong. Participants called for less gloss and more grit, asking visual culture to celebrate and document. As one LGBTQ+ participant summarised: “We don’t just need flags and glitter. We need lives that look like ours”.

For many LGBTQ+ respondents, visual culture shaped their sense of belonging and personal development. Campaigns like “Silence=Death”, “#LoveWins”, and the IKEA ad featuring a gay couple were cited for their visibility and the emotional affirmation they offered. By seeing themselves reflected in mainstream media, participants described feeling less isolated and more accepted. While some also acknowledged that specific images challenged long-held assumptions or internalised biases, what stood out most was the sense of recognition and reassurance these visuals provided. For many, these images represent more than symbols: bridges to acceptance, tools for personal transformation, and invitations to social empathy.

### **2.3.3. From Visibility to Transformation: What the Data Reveals**

Over the past half-century, LGBTQ+ activists have shown the immense power of stories and images to achieve social change. Signs were held by the dignified 1960s picketers. Each generation then leveraged the available media to reframe the narrative concerning

LGBTQ+ people, from the militants within ACT UP in the 1980s who used graphic shock tactics to the rainbow-clad millions within the 2010s who shared hashtags through print, streets, television, and the internet.

These visual and narrative strategies had concrete and lasting effects confirmed by the combined historical and contemporary analysis: they educated the uninformed, challenged prejudice, comforted the isolated, and ultimately persuaded majorities. Within a few decades, the Western world's public largely supported instead of feeling hostile, and policy has followed. Activist campaigns advocating dignity plus equality in human terms are closely linked to decriminalisation, anti-discrimination laws, and marriage equality.

As icons, the pink triangle, the rainbow flag, and slogans like “Silence=Death” or “Love is Love” unified the movement and infiltrated mainstream consciousness. Since they are culturally ubiquitous, they succeed but face new challenges since others commercialise and tokenise them.

Visuals by an LGBTQ+ activist wield influence that goes far beyond their original context. Storytelling techniques such as personal coming-out narratives inspired movements that can advocate for disability rights or may make people aware of mental health. ACT UP's model of direct action with bold design has informed protests that range from Occupy Wall Street to climate justice. Corporations embrace Pride symbols even if shallow, revealing how activists “branded” equality as a social value.

The survey's findings further affirm something. Visual representation is continuing to influence public perception even today. It fosters emotional reassurance, visibility, and belonging for LGBTQ+ people. It may dispute prejudice and grow understanding for straight people. However, the reactions remain mixed, especially across different sociopolitical contexts. Deeper, more diverse, with more authentic representation was consistently expressed as a desire by participants across identities.

Ultimately, the LGBTQ+ community's adventure shows that social transformation happens in more places than courtrooms. This also occurs within the legislatures and the ideas marketplace. Stereotypes got dismantled by posters, banners, TV characters, protest signs, and Instagram filters. These items have also played a part in the building of empathy. The strategy is, in fact, clear even while that work remains unfinished. That is remarkably accurate for transgender subgroups and marginalised groups. When activists control their narrative with compelling visuals, they change how society sees reality. Policy follows in due course, with hearts and minds doing so too.

### **3. Conclusion and Future Directions**

#### **3.1. Summary of Key Findings**

This research reveals that visual and narrative strategies do not merely support LGBTQ+ activism — they constitute its very fabric. From semiotic resistance to symbolic affirmation, imagery has consistently functioned as a persuasive and political tool capable of transforming public attitudes and influencing socio-political structures. This study’s cross-method approach — drawing from rhetorical theory, cultural studies, semiotics, media analysis, historical case studies, and qualitative audience insights — confirms that visual culture is not a passive mirror but an active agent in meaning-making, identity formation, and ideological contestation.

The study demonstrates that LGBTQ+ visual activism historically moved from invisibility and encoded subtexts to assertive, emotionally charged, and widely circulated imagery. Visual strategies, such as recreating the pink triangle or the broad adoption of the rainbow flag, created symbolic shorthand for collective identity and resistance. Over time, these images gained cultural ubiquity, yet also encountered appropriation and dilution.

Empirical evidence makes clear that interpretation, not just representation, defines impact. While visuals like #LoveWins and “Silence=Death” foster emotional resonance and social solidarity among LGBTQ+ individuals, non-LGBTQ+ interpretations vary — from empathy to discomfort, from solidarity to resistance. This reveals the contested terrain of visual meaning and the need for strategic, context-aware image production and dissemination. Furthermore, as visual communication increasingly operates through algorithmic logics, power has shifted toward platform architectures that mediate visibility, engagement, and interpretation.

Thus, visual activism is never purely about what is shown — it is about how it is framed, who sees it, under what conditions, and what interpretive options are afforded. The following subsections address each dimension in depth.

##### **3.1.1. The Role of Visual Rhetoric in Shaping Public Perception**

Visual rhetoric shapes how queer existence is culturally encoded and socially legitimised. Drawing from Hall’s encoding/decoding model, Berger’s concept of the gaze, and Barthes’ myth theory, the study shows that images are not neutral transmitters of meaning — they are discursive constructs. The rainbow flag, for instance, is not inherently inclusive — its status as a symbol of pride is culturally produced and ideologically affirmed through repeated visual deployment, media uptake, and political ritual.

Moreover, classical rhetoric's ethos, pathos, and logos function dynamically in activist visuals. Protest banners appeal to logic and justice, AIDS-era posters evoke mourning and urgency, while personal portraits, from queer archives to Instagram, establish credibility and relatability. These appeals are designed not only to persuade but to counteract dominant narratives, reframe social hierarchies, and contest cultural myths that render LGBTQ+ lives marginal or deviant.

Media studies deepen this insight by showing how visual framing determines what enters the public discourse and how it is perceived. Protest imagery — whether celebratory, tragic, or subversive — becomes embedded in collective memory, helping to structure public moral frameworks. Iconic images of Pride, for example, have redefined public space, making queer joy visible and political. However, such images can also be reframed in conservative discourse as deviant or excessive, demonstrating the fragility of visual meaning.

The study ultimately affirms that visual rhetoric is not a peripheral concern but a core battleground in the struggle over meaning, identity, and power. Its effectiveness hinges not just on the content of images but also on their reception, repetition, and circulation within culturally encoded systems.

### **3.1.2. Historical and Contemporary Effectiveness of LGBTQ+ Visual Activism**

LGBTQ+ visual activism has evolved through distinct historical phases, each marked by a shift in visibility and rhetorical strategy. Early visual resistance, such as coded dress and photography in the pre-Stonewall era, operated within regimes of criminalisation and silence. These strategies, though discreet, laid the groundwork for visual language that was both subcultural and defiant.

Post-Stonewall, visibility became a radical gesture. The emergence of symbols like the lambda, slogans like “Gay is Good”, and public demonstrations transformed LGBTQ+ identity from pathology to pride. Visual culture during the AIDS crisis, particularly the use of the pink triangle and the Silence=Death poster, marked a turn toward highly confrontational and affectively charged imagery. These visuals challenged institutional neglect and framed queer death as a political failure.

The 1990s–2000s saw a transition into cultural representation and commercialisation. LGBTQ+ imagery entered advertising, film, and consumer spaces, leading to broader visibility and increased assimilation. Visual strategies became more polished, often aligning with middle-class, cisgender, and white narratives of queerness. While this facilitated some legal reforms and mainstream acceptance, it also excluded more radical or marginal identities.

Contemporary digital strategies rely on viral imagery, meme culture, and participatory aesthetics. Hashtag campaigns such as #LoveWins and #ItGetsBetter demonstrate that images are now tools of emotional mobilisation and identity politics on a transnational scale. However, this study finds that digital circulation does not equal political efficacy. Images must compete for attention in saturated media environments, and their meanings are frequently co-opted or undermined by commercial or political interests.

Effectiveness, then, is not merely a product of visual design but of strategic contextualisation. The most successful visual campaigns are those rooted in lived experience, capable of balancing emotional appeal with rhetorical complexity, and attentive to their social and technological conditions of circulation.

### **3.1.3. Impact of Audience Interpretation and Digital Distribution Mechanisms**

Audience interpretation emerged as one of the most decisive variables in visual impact. The survey findings confirm that LGBTQ+ individuals often experience activist imagery as affirming, emotionally resonant, and identity-validating. Such imagery provides symbolic refuge in environments of hostility, conveying presence, normalcy, and solidarity. For many respondents, even minor visual cues — a sticker, a pin, a social media post — are anchors of belonging.

Reactions of non-LGBTQ+ participants are more varied. Some report increased empathy and understanding; others describe discomfort, ideological resistance, or fatigue. This divergence illustrates the encoding/decoding process theorised by Hall: creators do not control meaning; viewers negotiate it through their own frameworks.

Digital infrastructures further mediate this process. TDSI reveals that algorithmic systems amplify emotionally potent and ideologically aligned imagery, often reinforcing confirmation bias and polarisation. Shadow banning, rainbow-washing, and commercial hijacking of activist aesthetics distort visibility and dilute meaning. This creates new asymmetries of power: images that could provoke reflection may be filtered out, while those that confirm dominant views are boosted.

Moreover, platform logics reward simplicity over complexity, emotional clarity over ambiguity, and positivity over dissent. This favours celebratory imagery, such as rainbow filters or pride-themed marketing, over more disruptive or critical visuals that question structural inequality. Consequently, audience interpretation is constrained by ideology and the design and governance of media platforms.

Visual activism must therefore account for emotional resonance and structural legibility to maximise impact. It must be context-aware, reflexive, and strategically distributed. Notably, the study calls for greater investment in visual literacy: the capacity to decode images critically, understand their ideological framing, and recognise their role in shaping belief systems.

In sum, audience interpretation and algorithmic distribution are not secondary concerns — they are integral to understanding why specific images succeed, why others fail, and how visual culture contributes to or resists social change.

### **3.2. Theoretical and Practical Implications**

The findings of this study contribute meaningfully to the continuing debates in visual culture, media theory, and activist praxis, yet they are also relevant well beyond the academic area. This research provides insight into critical perceptions. It also directly guides one on just how they can leverage visual communication in order to transform. The study reveals that images are not just instruments for representation, but active agents in shaping identity, fostering solidarity, and contesting exclusion because it traces the rhetorical, historical, and sociotechnical dimensions of LGBTQ+ visual activism. This renders the work highly applicable since it can act as a roadmap. Activists, designers, institutions, and educators can use it tactically so they understand visual culture as a force for social change. This research analyses layers and finds real-world evidence to present a clear, actionable framework for those navigating the challenges and potentials of LGBTQ+ visibility in contemporary media environments.

1. **For Media and Cultural Studies:** this research strengthens the core assertion that visual culture shapes existing values rather than simply mirroring them. The study builds on the work of Hall, Barthes, and Berger. It asserts that images work as ideological texts that play a part in building public consciousness. Scholarly attention needs to be renewed on how visibility is managed, monetised, and contested because of the interplay between representation, reception, and distribution mechanisms (especially under digital capitalism). Furthermore, incorporation of the framework's TDSI extends existing theories. It does this by displaying how algorithmic systems actively shape interpretive possibilities instead of passively distributing content. That semiotics, media studies, and data politics intersect underscores a need for updated critical methodologies examining how visual communication is symbolic and infrastructural. The research foregrounds audience interpretation as within a site of meaning-making, aligning with cultural

studies' emphasis on negotiated readings. Empirical data on how these negotiations play out in real-world conditions is also offered. Scholars are invited to consider platform logic, ambiguity, and affect as central to any analysis of contemporary visual rhetoric.

2. **For LGBTQ+ Activism:** the study both affirms and challenges all LGBTQ+ activists. It affirms that visual culture is still a powerful tool because it alters public sentiment, encourages unity, and depicts queer lives. However, it brings to light the stresses of increased exposure. Dangers of tokenism, co-optation and depoliticisation are key for queer representation's future. These risks are not just secondary. Visual strategies are refined by activists, with intersectionality, emotional depth, and narrative complexity embraced by them. This means including queer experiences from a broader spectrum particularly from trans, from non-binary, from disabled, from Black, and working-class people whilst resisting any generic, or polished, or commodified imagery. According to the research, emotional truth, specificity, and authenticity possess a deeper resonance than abstract symbols when trying to alter policy and perception. Furthermore, the findings support activist experimentation in hybrid strategies because activists blend customary protest aesthetics with viral digital formats, pair emotional appeals with political clarity, and use visual culture to affirm identity and critique the systems that commodify it. This requires visually rooted literacy in the analysis of power and art.
3. **For Institutions and Brands:** in the event that institutions, organisations, and brands represent LGBTQ+ people, the implications become clear: representation must go beyond seasonal slogans as well as rainbow logos. Audiences, especially LGBTQ+ communities, increasingly attune themselves to authenticity as well as criticise surface-level inclusion. The study shows symbolic gestures without structural change often face scepticism or backlash. Representation must now include varied lived realities and address power imbalances to be effective. Instead of just one-time campaigns, it must be within a continuing commitment. This means we should support queer creators, fund long-term advocacy, as well as avoid appropriating activist symbols without accountability. Institutions must also reflect: Are internal practices aligned fully with their visual messages? Do hierarchies come to be replicated, or do marginalised voices come to be heard? The

findings do indicate that meaningful representation is not solely about the image. Infrastructure, intention, and follow-through are also of key importance.

This research offers an integrative and highly applicable framework. It ultimately bridges theory with practice and critique with possibility. It reveals visual culture's operation not only as an aesthetic form or academic subject but also as a concrete arena in which identities are formed, public values are shaped, and power is negotiated. The study affirms that images do not merely accompany activism, but it does so by its thorough analysis of visual rhetoric. The analysis included audience perception and historical case studies, confirming that images are activism. This finding demands that the visual strategy be regarded seriously in deliberate political design.

It gives researchers a guide to probe further into how models of representation and media technologies affect public awareness. Activists can utilise it to fashion visual campaigns with greater intersectionality, emotional depth, and calculated subtlety. It presents a hurdle for brands and institutions: to match visual communication with real ethical pledges and structural responsibility.

In the end, this particular work positions visual culture as a foundational site at which battle, meaning, and transformation occur. It encourages all working in the field of representation to act with greater awareness. Whether scholarship, protest, policymaking, or branding, people must have clearer intentions toward justice, inclusion, and truth.

### **3.3. Limitations of the Study**

This research offers quite a thorough and multi-dimensional account of how visual rhetoric operates within LGBTQ+ activism because it combines historical depth, theoretical sophistication, and empirical evidence. Nonetheless, every study has limits, of course. Acknowledging the limitations of this work is not simply an academic formality but a critical part of practical relevance and scholarly integrity. This section outlines the boundaries and blind spots that shaped the study's scope. The aim is to have transparency concerning what this work can claim and what it is not. Recognising these limits sets the stage for innovation in research and activism. This chapter ensures the presented perceptions discuss representation, visibility, and power within a broader continuing discussion by pinpointing gaps regarding method, context, and interpretation.

1. **Scope of Case Studies.** The historical and contemporary case studies selected for analysis, including protest symbols, activist posters, digital memes, and corporate campaigns, were deliberately chosen for their visibility, symbolic weight, and

documented influence. However, this selection inevitably omits many grassroots, regional, or less-publicised examples of LGBTQ+ visual activism, particularly if they are from non-Western contexts. The researcher's location and the accessibility of materials in both English and Portuguese are reflected in the focus upon North America and parts of Europe, potentially limiting the global representativeness of the findings. For future studies, researchers shall incorporate more diverse geopolitical case studies. They should examine especially regions wherein queer activists operate under extreme repression or regions displaying unique cultural codes.

2. **Language and Cultural Translation.** Visual rhetoric functions via culturally specific codes and meanings, which need consideration. This study relied upon English-language and Western-centric visual materials, potentially biasing interpretations. Semiotics and media studies are theoretical frameworks seeking to offer universal tools. The researcher's cultural standpoint inevitably shapes how they apply these frameworks. Investigators endeavoured to lessen this by contextualising and reading comparatively, yet linguistic and cultural fluency constraints could have affected how deeply they understood non-English sources.
3. **Survey Sample Limitations.** The audience reception element gave worthwhile perceptions according to a qualitative survey. Diverse people interpret and respond to LGBTQ+ visual culture in ways that this component elucidates. However, the survey sample was relatively small (n=54) and self-selected, since it relied upon online distribution channels such as social media and academic networks. This introduces some potential biases in demographic representation, for sure. It particularly concerns younger, more digitally literate, and possibly more socially progressive people. Respondents from countries lacking LGBTQ+ acceptance were underrepresented, which possibly skews interpretations of resistance and reception in more hostile environments. Non-binary and trans perspectives were not reflected in proportion; furthermore, even though present.
4. **Ephemeral and Evolving Nature of Visual Culture.** Visual activism is fast-changing and highly contextual, especially in the digital age. Memes and viral images, as well as videos, do quickly circulate and then often disappear just as quickly. The research captures current and historical trends but cannot account for ephemeral forms or future shifts that leave little archival trace. Technological innovation's speed will also continue to reshape the visual activist landscape. This

includes AI-generated content, deepfakes, and new platform-specific aesthetics; this study can only gesture towards how it will do so.

5. **Interpretive Subjectivity.** The researcher's positionality shapes a qualitative visual analysis because such analysis is interpretive. Some analyses may reflect subjective readings, though efforts were made to triangulate with empirical data and ground interpretations in theoretical frameworks. Whilst cultural studies acknowledge this subjectivity as quite a strength, understanding that meaning is being negotiated and contested, it also limits generalisability. Readers from differing cultural, political, or disciplinary perspectives may realise visual texts differently. These readers could have different understandings of the same texts.

Rather than weakening the importance of such findings, these limitations situate them within an active scholarly dialogue along with critical awareness. Importantly, they remind people that knowledge producers remain partial, situated, and open to revision. Given that we recognise these constraints, humility is more important within research, not because it is a weakness but because it strengthens integrity and clarifies understanding.

Furthermore, these limitations highlight how visual culture is dynamic and how we need an agile methodological approach to address it. The call for technological responsiveness, intersectional representation, and more global inclusion is a forward-looking imperative, not a footnote. Future research must move ahead of activism's and media's visible epicentres, to uncover the overlooked, the suppressed, and the emergent. This does involve expanding the geographic and demographic scope. Furthermore, it means collaborating among disciplines, co-creating via communities, and ethically engaging with shifting digital landscapes. This study welcomes scholars, activists, and practitioners to push its boundaries further, clarifying what it offers by identifying its boundaries. It allows scope for discussion, alteration and testing. These are indeed vital components within academic inquiry and also social transformation.

### **3.4. Future Research Directions**

The findings and limitations of this study open essential avenues for activism's practical work, as well as academic research, design, education and policy-making's further exploration. As visual culture boundaries continue expanding, particularly as digital technology, globalised media flows, and algorithmic infrastructures exert influence, researchers need to research with subtlety, intersectionality, and interdisciplinarity more urgently than ever. Visual activism is

not isolated but embedded within broader struggles over rights, representation, legitimacy and identity. A scholarly question involves understanding how visual strategies succeed or fail in different sociopolitical environments and their real-world consequences.

This study, furthermore, lays the groundwork toward future research that is directly usable, not purely analytical. Since the conceptual tools and case perceptions have been presented in this instance, they can function as a helpful guide for activists, designers, educators, and institutional actors who are seeking to build visual campaigns that are more effective and ethically grounded. This is especially critical at such a time when visual messaging is indeed a tool of liberation. Visual messaging can also be seen as a site of commodification. For the field to meaningfully advance, future work must tackle the gaps and possibilities that this study identifies. Key directions for any future inquiry are proposed within the following areas.

1. **Intersectional Visuality:** Future research must more closely examine how LGBTQ+ identities connect up with race, ethnicity, disability, age, class, religion, and gender identity. Despite this study's acknowledgement of intersectionality, the visual strategies examined often focused on urban, white, cisgender gay stories. Exploring how multiply marginalised people utilise visual activism is critical. To ensure queer representation, it is vital to explore how these people respond to visual activism, thus avoiding broader patterns of exclusion. How do visual narratives of Black trans women diverge concerning their form, or in how they are received, or in their political function from mainstream gay imagery? What does an intersectional aesthetics of resistance look like?
2. **Global and Non-Western Perspectives:** A broader global lens is required, highlighting the dominance of Western case studies in both this literature and existing literature. Visual activism comes in different shapes because it depends upon local norms, religious pressures, legal frameworks, and cultural symbolism. It shall be of assistance for more studies to examine how LGBTQ+ communities handle visibility, censorship, and solidarity within repressive regimes or non-Western contexts. Research might investigate how diasporic queer communities produce hybrid visual identities around national boundaries, or examine the role of coded imagery within dangerous open advocacy contexts.
3. **Digital Methodologies and Platform-Specific Activism:** Digital tools and methodologies become important for understanding reach and resonance, as visual activism increasingly unfolds online. In order to trace the spread and mutation of

activist imagery across platforms, future research could employ data visualisation, social media analytics or AI image recognition. In contrast with Instagram and Twitter, how do TikTok aesthetics change queer messaging's tone? What types of images gain traction? Determining the reasons behind this phenomenon remains. Computational approaches help in revealing patterns that manual analysis cannot detect. These approaches thus provide a more precise picture of visual activism's digital ecology.

4. **Longitudinal Impact Studies.** Even though many campaigns visibly generate or emotionally resonate immediately, their long-term influence is less well-known. Future studies could trace how specific visual campaigns affect public policy, voting behaviour, education, or institutional reform if conducted over months or years. Might campaigns with strong emotional components produce more lasting shifts within perception or behaviour? Are these shifts lasting longer than campaigns focusing on logic or affirming identity? Which visual tactics best maintain the public's focus? What strategies generate policy change as well?
5. **Participatory and Community-Based Visual Research:** Visual research may also offer more participatory approaches for you. These approaches engage with LGBTQ+ communities, who are not just subjects of analysis but co-creators of knowledge. This may well involve collaborative image-making or community exhibitions. It is also possible to hold visual storytelling workshops focusing on local knowledge and experience. Such methods can ensure grounded perceptions, situated perceptions, and socially accountable perceptions are yielded and can ensure the research process is democratised.

In order to satisfy the complexity of our current media landscape, future LGBTQ+ visual activism research must evolve in depth and breadth. Visual culture must expand right across social categories such as race, class, age, ability, and gender identity if it is indeed to ensure it does not reproduce the same exclusions it seeks to challenge. Geographic diversification outside Western frameworks can show how visual resistance adapts to and arises from radically different sociopolitical conditions.

Technological systems — including algorithmic curation, data visualisation, and platform-specific aesthetics — must be critically examined not only for the power they hold in disseminating images but also for how perception is shaped and interpretive possibilities are limited. Tracking is needed by longitudinal approaches influencing visual campaigns over time to distinguish between short-term visibility and lasting social transformation.

In the end, such pathways are not only abstract quests. Scholars, activists, and practitioners should heed such a call to action. Everyone should collaborate on a fairer, more inclusive visual future. This includes designing campaigns that are emotionally resonant yet critically informed and inclusive, without being tokenistic. The campaigns also must be resistant to commodification, without any loss of cultural traction. We move deeper into a visually mediated world, meaning queer representation must be understood, critiqued along with reimagined. That particular understanding becomes a truly vital civic, ethical responsibility, and a scholarly endeavour.

### **3.5. Final Reflections on Visual Rhetoric and Social Change**

Social change does not happen solely in courtrooms or parliaments, for it unfolds in the symbols people wear, stories, posters, and images. The visual does not act to supplement activism but instead powerfully shapes the terrain thereof. LGBTQ+ communities, in the process of using early codes of resistance to the act of employing digital memes and raising transnational pride flags, have mobilised the visual rhetoric's power in order to survive, speak, and envision new opportunities. These images, which are helping enact change, do not merely depict it, whether they shock, soothe, provoke, or inspire.

It has always been a radical act to claim visual space, especially for those whose identities have historically been suppressed or misrepresented. The LGBTQ+ movement has demonstrated that visibility means recognition on individual terms, not mere observation. Shared memory is constructed through visual storytelling, which heightens solidarity. It also fosters the empathy that is required to challenge systemic injustice. It is not accidental that icons, for example, the pink triangle, the rainbow flag, and hashtag campaigns possess symbolic power; they result from emotional, collective, planned labour.

Nonetheless, mere visibility is not enough. Further effort is needed for the adventure to come. As this study has demonstrated, representation alone does not ensure justice. Visual culture must evolve beyond polished branding as well as celebratory clichés. It should embrace narratives of complexity, intersectionality, and lived reality. Those still marginalised within queer spaces — namely trans people, racialised communities, the disabled, the poor, and the undocumented — must be prioritised. Embrace these multiplicities for the achievement of true transformation. Depicting battle, contradiction, and resilience is better than merely showing pride. Activists, artists, and communicators will proceed to define just how LGBTQ+ people live. They will also affect how LGBTQ+ people are perceived, living with respect, power, and acceptance. Visual rhetoric persuades in addition to building worlds. It becomes a

transformative language of aspiration and progress for people who have long been refused self-expression.

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## 5. Appendices

### 5.1. Visual Materials Referenced in Case Studies



Figure 23. *Gay Liberation* [Offset lithograph poster, 22 × 17 in.]. Times Change Press. By S. Negrin, P. Hujar, & S. Bevier, 1970.



*Figure 24. Gay Liberation Front (GLF) banner carried during the Gay Liberation March, Greenwich Village, New York City, July 27, 1969 [Photograph]. By F. W. McDarrah. © Getty Images and the Estate of Fred W. McDarrah.*

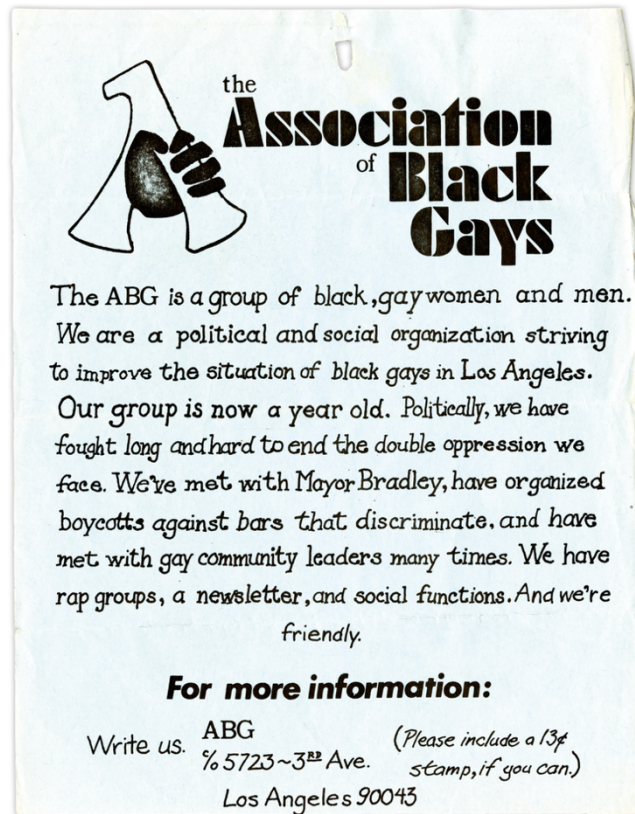


Figure 25. Flyer for the Association of Black Gays featuring a lambda clenched fist symbol, Los Angeles [Flyer]. ca. 1970s. Creator unknown.



Figure 26. Badge from Gay Pride Week 1976, worn by Mike Ashdown during London Pride [Pinback button]. Creator unknown, 1976.



*Figure 27. Commemorative Rainbow Flag for the 35th anniversary of the original 1978 design [Flag]. By Gilbert Baker, 1978.*



*Figure 28. Gilbert Baker with the first rainbow Pride flag, created for the 1978 Gay Freedom Day in San Francisco [Photograph]. Photographer unknown, 1978.*



Figure 29. *The first Pride flag being raised by Gilbert Baker and collaborators in San Francisco [Photograph]. Photographer unknown, 1978.*



Figure 30. *Steve Gendon, Mark Aurigemma, Douglas Montgomery, Charles Stinson, Frank O'Dowd, and Avram Finkelstein at an ACT UP protest [Photograph]. By Donna Binder, 1987. Courtesy of the artist.*

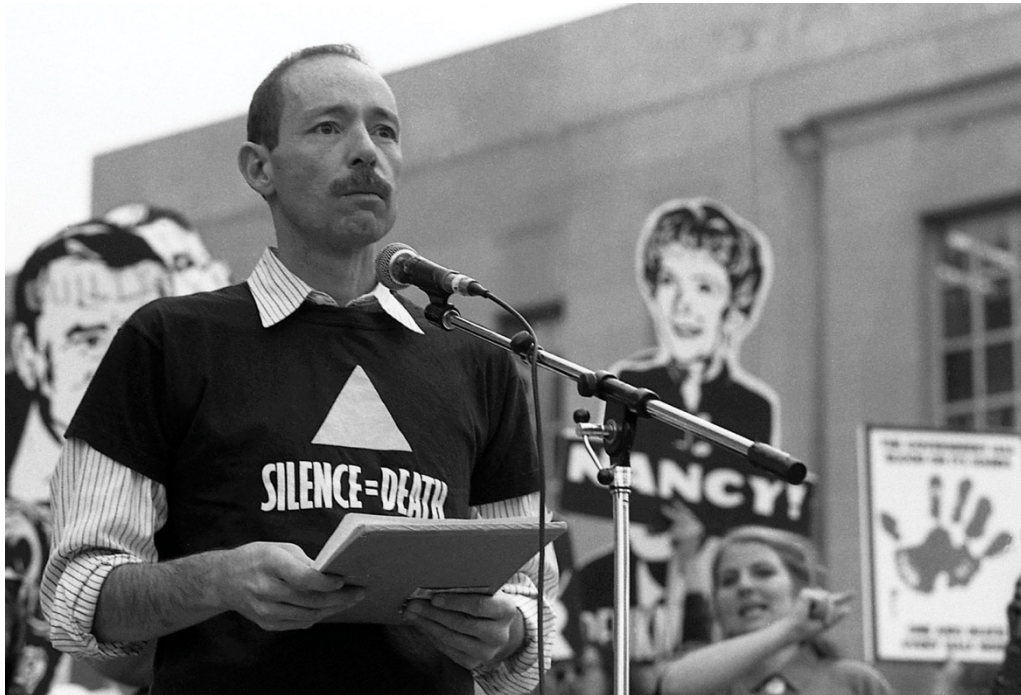


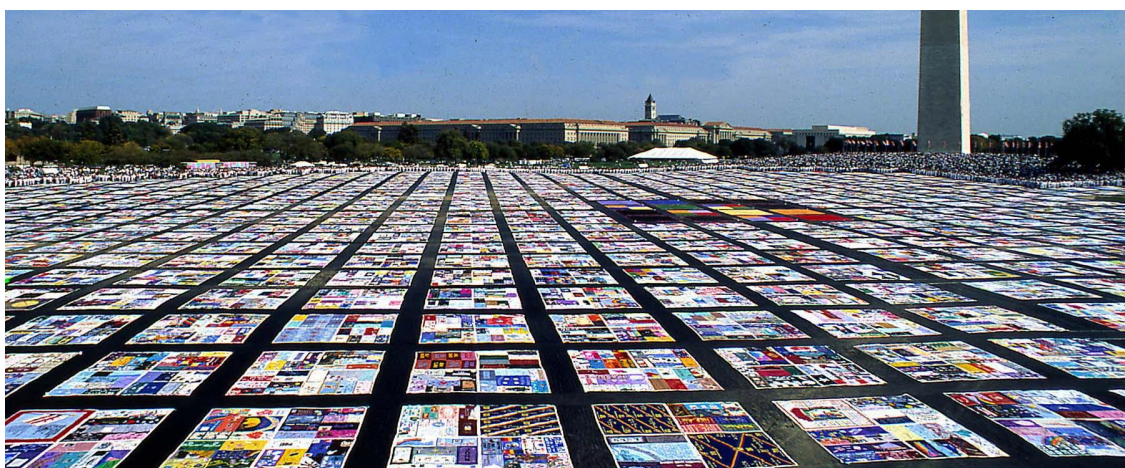
Figure 31. Vito Russo delivering his “Why We Fight” speech at a rally in Washington, D.C. [Photograph]. By Rick Gerharter, October 10, 1988. © Rick Gerharter.



Figure 32. ACT UP protest at the U.S. Food and Drug Administration in Rockville, Maryland [Photograph]. By J. Scott Applewhite, October 11, 1988. © Associated Press.



*Figure 33. The AIDS Memorial Quilt displayed in Washington, D.C., with a panel dedicated to Dr. Tom Waddell in the foreground [Photograph]. Photographer unknown, October 1988.*



*Figure 34. The AIDS Memorial Quilt on display at the National Mall in Washington, D.C. [Photograph]. Courtesy of the National Institutes of Health, 1987.*



*Figure 35. The AIDS Memorial Quilt on display at the National Mall in Washington, D.C. [Photograph]. By Peter Gridley, 1987. Reprinted with permission from Getty Images.*



Figure 36. “Absolut Spada” advertisement for Absolut Vodka [Advertisement]. By David Spada, ca. 1990s.



Figure 37. Members of the Levi's Lesbian and Gay Employee Association marching in a Pride parade, San Francisco [Photograph]. Image via Out Magazine, ca. 1990s.



Figure 38. #LoveWins [Instagram post]. By Lady Gaga [@ladygaga], June 26, 2015.



Figure 39. São Paulo LGBT+ Pride Parade, São Paulo, Brazil [Photograph]. Courtesy of Getty Images, June 2, 2024.



*Figure 40. Presenting, the Pride serves of the century! [Instagram post]. By LGBT [@lgbt], June 13, 2022.*