



Color Coded Classification

In Counterculture Communities

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Abstract

Fashion has been used to reflect the life of the person who wears them since the beginning of time, whether that be through showing distinctions of class and culture. One of the most historic ways of distinction between groups was color. Groups, such as the Punks and members of the LGBTQ+ community, have been using color coding practices as a language with messages seen through the “flagging” of different colors. For the Punk Community, this coding is called Lace Laws and for the LGBTQ+ Community this coding is known as Hanky Code. The practice were quite popular during the 1970s and throughout the 80s and 90s but seem to have loss popularity in the past decades. The purpose of this study is to discuss whether or not these practices are “dead” through a series of interviews and an examination of social media forums focused on these debates.

Background

Clothing reflects life

For centuries, clothing has been used as a form of communication. Clothing has been used to show a person’s status, ideologies, and interests. One of the most historic ways of distinction between groups was color. These Color Coding practices have been used for thousands of years and can be seen through lens such as the nobility versus the peasants of Europe where colors such as purple were reserved for royalty or even through modern lens such as the meaning of red ballcaps in the U.S. since the election of 2016. Even though theses systems that were mentioned use color to show identity they do not use color coding practices as a language with messages seen through flagging different colors, like what can be seen within counter-culture groups can be seen through clothing details such as Lace Laws with the Punks and Hanky Code for the LGBTQ+ Community.

Lace Laws

For the Punk Community, Lace Laws became relevant in the 1970s. They came from a group called the skinheads, who were working class individuals who rejected conservatism and commonly wore short hair. There were (are) two main groups of skinheads: the anarchist and the neo-fascist (Visnovsky 2019). These two groups had identical aesthetics in dress and style, but very conflicting ideologies. Due to this circumstance, a way that could be used to give distinction to each group was developed, this became known as lace laws. These laws would use laces to display one’s views.

Hanky Code

For the LGBTQ+ Community, Hanky Code became relevant in the 1960s. Hanky Code started as a covert way to show your sexual interest in the LGBTQ+ community, due to the long-standing danger associated with homosexuality throughout time. Hanky code, as described by Cornier is “a complex queer sartorial coding system employing the use of bandanas to communicate sexual orientation, availability, the sexual fetish of interest, and role in said fetish”. These hankies would be place in the back pockets of pants and display one's interest in a sexual partner



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Conclusions

Are color coding practices dead?

That depends on who you ask

Punks

Some say yes, the practice is alive and growing. Many believe it is needed in today's political/social climate with the rise of racism in both the Punk community as well as in the U.S.

Some say no, the practice died in the 90s and 2000s. Many people in this category believe these rules to be restrictive and going against the “ideals” of punk culture, where the rules are made to be broken and people should express themselves as they see fit.

Some say that it is alive but regional. These people don't see Lace Laws strictly enforced in their community but know of places where lace code is strict and taken seriously

Some say no but be careful, because many people think they are still relevant and if you wear the wrong colors around the wrong people you could be in trouble. These people usually mention the violent past of it, where people wearing the wrong colors have been jumped, beaten, and even killed.

Hanky Code

Most say yes, they are usually people who actively practice Hanky code or people who just acknowledge that it is still common practice. They do not see it as restrictive because the colors are ever growing and have even expanded to specific fabrics, patterns, and placements.

Some say no, they see it as a dying practice or as dead. These people tend to think it died during the AIDs epidemic and shouldn't come back because there are easier and better ways to display one's sexual interest with social media and dating apps.

Some say it is alive but not as big as it once was due to the AIDs epidemic in the 80s-90s

In my opinion, if these debates are happening and people are still following these codes, the practice is still alive in some form, whether that be online or in physical spaces like concerts and clubs.

Should they die?

Methodology

To collect data on the subject of color coding within these communities, I set out to hold multiple interviews with people on all sides of each of these debates who have different perspectives based on age and experience.

However, this process of looking for individuals to interview came with multiple challenges including difficulty finding people to interview due to restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic. In an ideal setting this research and data would have been collected in the field. In this case, the “field” would be to go to places where this color coding is practiced. Such as, going to a local punk show/concert and interviewing multiple people of their stance involving Lace Laws as well as going to a local LGBTQ+ club and interviewing multiple people of their stance involving Hanky Code.

Due to this difficulty, I expanded my study to include the online discussions and debates on differing social media platforms such as Reddit and TikTok. From these discussions, I collected quantitative data based on the number of people who said; It is relevant, It is dead, It is regional, and Its dead but be careful (meaning some people still take it seriously but I do not).

Even though there were many difficulties, I was able to interview 4 people (The participants were connected with me through mutual contacts). For this interview, I collected qualitative data to discuss the modern relevance of these color-coding systems. This data will be received through these interviews with people who have been within their perspective communities (Punk or LGBTQ+) for an extended time and with people who are new to their perspective communities.

The people who I interviewed include: a woman who started using hanky code in the 70s who will be discussed under the name Marsha, a nonbinary individual who is just beginning to explore Hanky Code who will be discussed under the name Montero, a woman who joined the Punk community in the 80s who will be discussed under the name Debbie, a woman who joined the Punk community in the past 4 years who will be discussed under the name Haley.

Results

Hanky Code

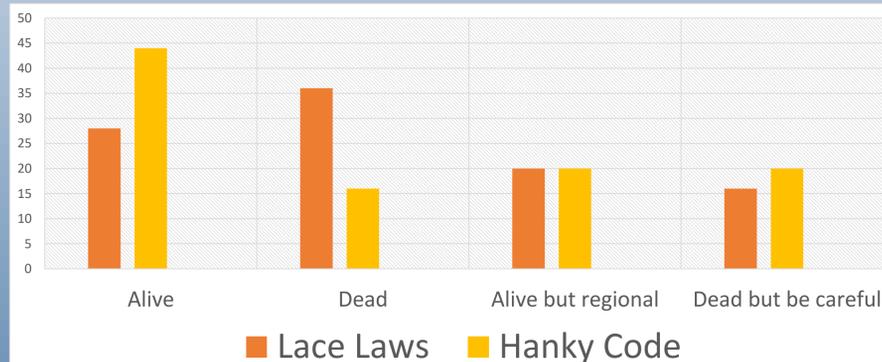
In the interviews with Marsha and Montero about Hanky Code we discussed their understandings of hanky code with both the history of the practice and its current state. Marsha experienced the beginnings of Hanky Code when she moved to San Francisco in the 1970's. In the interview she said that Hanky Code never died but instead it had died down after the AIDs epidemic that plagued the LGBTQ+ Community in the 1980s. She also mentions that in recent years she has started seeing a resurgence. In this resurgence we see our other participant, Montero. Montero is just joining the Hanky community this year, but before this year they did not see the importance or need for the code, because there are now plenty of alternatives for showing one's sexual interest through dating apps, social media, and in open conversation. None of these which were options in the 70s. However, Montero started to become interested when they watched a video on the social media platform that discussed the historic importance.

Lace Laws

In the interviews with Debbie and Haley about Lace Laws we discussed their understandings of Lace Law with both the history of the practice and its current state. Similarly, to Marsha, Debbie was an early adapter to their practice. Debbie joined her local punk scene in Pittsburgh in the mid-80s. In the interview, Debbie discussed her journey with Lace Laws. In the beginning of her time, she was a member of the “Skin Heads Against Racial Prejudice” aka SHARPs. This group was known to wear yellow laces to show their stance on antiracism and the group dictated what colors were acceptable and which were not acceptable. However, she stopped using lace code in the 2000s because she thought it had died and was also against the idea of it becoming a strict rule because “to be punk, is to break the rules, not make them”. Since 2010, Debbie saw the resurgence of Lace Laws and has started to participate because she saw a rise of racism within the community and reflected her ideas from her early years. Haley joined the punk community in 2016. When discussing Lace Laws, she also discussed her journey. In the beginning of her time Haley followed Lace Laws but over the years began to see them as a hassle. Now, She does think they are dead or at least should die but she still acknowledged that they are serious to some so she leans on the side of caution

Social Media Survey

In the survey I went through online forums which discussed either practice and collected the responses of 100 people per community. For the Lace Laws, the online forum has a focus of the Punk Community, and the forum was started in 2008. For Hanky code I focused on a thread that discussed LGBTQ+ history. This forum was started in 2012. However, the specific threads that I examined were all posted in the past year. This data was collected and then was put into a graph to show the similarities and differences between the two groups and whether they see their respective practices as dead or alive. This graph shows that majority people of the punk forum believe Lace Code is dead in some form but a majority of people of the LGBTQ+ forum believe hanky code is alive and is growing.



References

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