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Seeing red and wearing pink: Trajectories of cultural power in the AIDS and breast cancer ribbons☆

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ABSTRACT

How does the cultural power of a public symbol shift over time? The public retrievability of the iconic red and pink ribbons followed very different paths: red ribbons rose rapidly and fell out of favor just as quickly, whereas the presence of the pink ribbon grew steadily over time. What explains these different trajectories? We identify and explain these differences through an analysis of archival newspaper data from 1991 to 2014 and through the use of secondary sources to create case studies of important moments in the histories of these symbols. The paper makes three interventions. 1) It elaborates and extends Schudson's (1989) discussion of cultural power, refining the mechanism of retrievability and adding recognizability. 2) It demonstrates the importance of organizations in maintaining high retrievability and recognizability in the face of criticism and controversy, along with politicians, celebrities, and corporations. 3) It introduces "genre violation" as a mechanism undermining a symbol's cultural power.

1. Introduction

One and a half years after the Visual AIDS Artists' Caucus created the red ribbon in 1991, *BrandWeek* magazine presumptively asked whether it was "The Most Powerful Icon of the '90s?" (November 30, 1992). Overnight the red ribbon became the most recognized symbol of AIDS. Celebrities and politicians wore the red ribbon, helping to move AIDS from the shadows to the mainstream. Less than a year after *BrandWeek's* declaration, the *Washington Post* described the AIDS ribbon as "meaningless," "banal," "cliché," and "predictable" (Kantor, 1993). Though omnipresent in the early 1990s, red ribbons have disappeared from public use except as AIDS organization logos or at sparsely attended World AIDS Day events.[1] At the height of the symbol's visibility, people in urban centers like New York and San Francisco wore red ribbons in public. Today, you'd be hard pressed to find someone wearing one on their lapel. As fast as the red ribbon rose, its decline was even swifter.

By contrast, the rise of the pink ribbon has been steady. The pink ribbon was first promoted nationally by *Self* magazine and Estee Lauder cosmetics in 1992. By 1996, journalist Lisa Belkin deemed it "the darling of corporate America," referencing

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[1] There was a resurgence of the use of red with the Product Red or (RED) campaign, beginning in 2002 and promoted by Bono and corporations like Gap. This campaign appears to have avoided using red ribbons, preferring to color products red that raised money for the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria.

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the extensive pink ribbon cause-marketing and partnerships between Susan G. Komen for the Cure (hereafter Komen) and corporations that raise funds through the sale of pink ribbon products (Moore, 2010; Sulik, 2012). People display the symbol using pink ribbon pins, car magnets, and immeasurable other ephemera to present day. Presently, pink ribbons appear in the public sphere more often than red ribbons, even as the pink ribbon has increasingly come under attack.

With the introduction of red and pink ribbons, the single-looped ribbon became synonymous with awareness campaigns around social issues (Moore, 2010). While similar in form and function, these symbols have had different trajectories of cultural power – their "capacity to shape belief and behavior" (McDonnell, 2010). What explains the divergent trajectories of these two ribbons? To answer this question, we take up Schudson's (1989) "retrievability" – that culture is more likely to influence belief and behavior the more available it is to people. While this insight is crucial for understanding the cultural power of symbols, it is incomplete. Before a retrievable symbol becomes powerful, we argue, it must also be *recognizable*. Highly retrievable awareness ribbons remind people of an issue, so long as people *recognize* and *remember* what cause the color is meant to represent.

This paper, then, seeks to explain the different trajectories of public retrievability and recognizability. We examine the ribbons' historical development, public dissemination, subsequent public contestation, and organizational responses to explain how the red ribbon rose and fell so quickly and how the pink ribbon maintained a positive trajectory in the face of contestation. We discuss how red and pink ribbons overcame competition from rival symbols and how ribbons became open to *genre violations.* We conclude by comparing their *trajectories of cultural power,* as patterned, path-dependent, chains of Schudson's mechanisms.

2. Trajectories of cultural power

The widespread circulation of the red and pink ribbons suggests these symbols have had "cultural power" (Griswold, 1987a; Schudson, 1989; Swidler, 1995).[2] Cultural power is "the capacity for an object to affect belief and behavior" (McDonnell, 2010, 1804). Objects with cultural power retain salience over time (Armstrong & Crage, 2006). Cultural power is an important, but under studied concept in social movements research. Rather than focusing on framing processes (Snow, Rochford, Worden, & Robert, 1986; Benford & Snow, 2000), Swidler (1995) uses cultural power to theorize how movements motivate people to act by mobilizing the culture of codes, contexts, and institutions. The cultural power of movement symbols are not guaranteed, but are instead an achievement (Armstrong & Crage, 2006), requiring "cultural entrepreneurs" (DiMaggio 1982) that champion symbols as they compete in the public arena (Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988).

The most systematic and generative theory of cultural power comes from Schudson's (1989) theories of how culture "works." Schudson articulated five mechanisms of cultural power: retrievability (i.e. the symbol's reach), rhetorical force (i.e. the symbol's effectiveness), resonance (i.e. the symbol's alignment with audiences), institutional retention (i.e. the degree to which institutions reinforce the symbol), and resolution (i.e. whether a symbol makes clear what it wants the audience to do). These five "Rs" offer an important framework for understanding how and when public symbols have effects on belief and behavior. Though this paper's primary contribution is to extend retrievability, the cases of the red and pink ribbons speak to Schudson's other mechanisms as well.

As Schudson (1989: 174) argues, "Generally, culture acts as a reminder, a sign that makes us mindful—and mindful of some things more than others." Awareness ribbons do this work of reminding, calling on people to think, consider, and reflect on an idea. Seeing someone wearing a red or pink ribbon encourages reflection on the wearer's relationship to the disease—have they been diagnosed with HIV or breast cancer? Are they memorializing a loved one? When ribbons appear on products, in advertisements or in the media, they may remind people of the presence of the disease, the effects on society, and the need for support. What ribbons remind people of, and why, is certainly important in understanding their effects – especially through mechanisms of resonance and institutional retention – though a reception analysis is beyond the scope of this paper. This paper is more narrowly interested in the symbols' retrievability.[3]

For symbols to have cultural power, they need to be publicly available (Schudson 1989). As Schudson notes, "If culture is to influence a person, it must reach the person . . . an advertisement is of little use . . . if the consumer never sees it" (1989: 160). The more visible a ribbon is, the more people are reminded of its meaning, and the more importance the issue seems to have. For our purposes, we define retrievability as the frequent appearance of a symbol in the public sphere or at sites of high public attention. As people regularly interact with highly visible symbols, the schema they represent become more cognitively accessible and more likely to influence action (DiMaggio, 1997)—so long as people know the symbol's meaning. While retrievability is necessary, it is insufficient as an explanation for when symbols have effects—symbols, we argue, must first be *recognizable* in order to have cultural power.

[2] For this paper, we narrowly focus on public objects, symbols, and codes operating in the public sphere and their capacity to influence behavior.

[3] Analyzing the full range of connotations evoked by these symbols is beyond the scope of this paper, as our primary focus is in measuring and explaining the availability of symbols in the public sphere and how they are denotatively linked to causes. We are interested in what the symbol connotes in limited situations, especially when connotations encourage or suppress the retrievability and recognizability of these symbols. We should note ribbons work not only through the meanings they connote but also the meanings they suppress or obscure. Ribbons don't say much about the causes and effects of diseases and can't on their own serve as a substitute for health literacy.