

Handkerchief code

The **handkerchief code** (also known as the **hanky code**, the **bandana code**, and **flagging**^[1]) is a system of color-coded cloth handkerchief or bandanas for non-verbally communicating one's interests in sexual activities and fetishes. The color of the handkerchief identifies a particular activity, and the pocket it is worn in (left or right) identifies the wearer's preferred role in that activity. Wearing a handkerchief on the left side of the body typically indicates one is a "top" (considered *active* in the act/fetish indicated by the color of the handkerchief), while wearing it on the right side of the body would indicate one is a "bottom" (considered *passive* in it). For example, a dark blue handkerchief indicates an interest in anal sex, and wearing it in the left pocket indicates a preference for being the insertive partner. The code was most widely used in the 1970s in the United States, Canada, Australia, and Europe, by gay and bisexual men seeking casual sex, or BDSM practitioners.



An assortment of handkerchiefs

Contents

[Origin](#)

[Examples](#)

[Modern use](#)

[See also](#)

[References](#)

[Further reading](#)

Origin

The wearing of colored bandanas around the neck as a practical accessory was common in the mid- and late-nineteenth century among cowboys, steam railroad engineers, and miners in the Western United States. It is thought that the wearing of bandanas by gay men originated in San Francisco after the Gold Rush, when, because of a shortage of women, men dancing with each other in square dances developed a code wherein the man wearing the blue bandana took the male part in the square dance, and the man wearing the red bandana took the female part (these bandanas were usually worn around the arm or hanging from the belt or in the back pocket of one's jeans).^[2]

The modern hanky code is often reported to have started in New York City around 1970, when a journalist for the *Village Voice* joked that instead of simply wearing a set of keys on one side or the other (then a common code to indicate whether someone was a "top" or a "bottom"), it would be more efficient to subtly announce their particular sexual focus by wearing different colored handkerchiefs.^{[3][4][5]} Other sources attribute the expansion of the original red–blue system into today's code to marketing efforts around 1971 by The Trading Post, a San Francisco department store for erotic

merchandise, promoting handkerchiefs by printing cards listing the meanings of various colors.^[6]

Alan Selby, founder of Mr. S Leather in San Francisco, claimed that he created the first hanky code with his business partners at Leather 'n' Things in 1972, when their bandana supplier inadvertently doubled their order and the expanded code would help them sell the extra colors they had received.^[7]

Around 1980, *Bob Damron's Address Book* published a yearly chart for the meaning of each colored handkerchief.^[2]

Examples

There was no single authoritative standard for the code. This table is drawn from Larry Townsend's *The Leatherman's Handbook II* (the 1983 second edition; the 1972 first edition did not include this list) and is generally considered authoritative. Implicit in this list is the concept of left/right polarity, left as usual indicating the top, dominant, or active partner; right the bottom, submissive, or passive partner. Townsend noted that discussion with a prospective partner was still important because, people may wear a given color "only because the idea of the hankie turns them on" or "may not even know what it means".^[8]

Color	Meaning
<input type="checkbox"/> Black	<u>S&M</u>
<input type="checkbox"/> Blue (Dark)	<u>Anal sex</u>
<input type="checkbox"/> Blue (Light)	<u>Oral sex</u>
<input type="checkbox"/> Brown	<u>Scat</u>
<input type="checkbox"/> Green	<u>Hustler/prostitution</u>
<input type="checkbox"/> Grey	<u>Bondage</u>
<input type="checkbox"/> Orange	<u>Anything goes</u>
<input type="checkbox"/> Purple	<u>Piercing</u>
<input type="checkbox"/> Red	<u>Fisting</u>
<input type="checkbox"/> Yellow	<u>Watersports</u>

The longer lists found on the web are more elaborate and the many color codes in them are less often used in practice, although some of these colors are offered for sale at LGBT stores along with free cards listing their meanings.

Modern use



Hanky code

COLOR CODES (Handkerchiefs)		
Left	Color	Right
Greek Active	Dark Blue	Greek Passive
FFer	Red	FFA Receiver
Has 8" +	Mustard	Wants 8" +
offer	Light Blue	No 69
Anything	Orange	Nothing
Golden Showerer	Yellow	Receives G.S.
Has Uniform	Olive Drab	Wants Uniform
Hustler	Green	Buyer
Scat Top	Brown	Scat Bottom
Master	Gray	Slave
J/O	White	Gives J/O
Whipper	Black	Whipped

DOING AMERICA WITH BOB DAMRON is a new monthly column featuring updates on various cities of special interest through out the United States and locales covered in the ADDRESS BOOK. Watch for the column in your local gay newspaper or magazine.

Color Codes from *Bob Damron's Address Book* (1980)

See also

- ## References



1. Andrews, Vincent (2010). *The Leatherboy Handbook*. The Nazca Plains Corp. ISBN 978-1-61098-046-3.
2. Kacala, Alexander (April 25, 2019). "The Handkerchief Code, According to 'Bob Damron's Address Book' in 1980" (<https://www.thesaintfoundation.org/community/hanky-code-bob-damrons-address-book>). *The Saint Foundation*. The Saint. Retrieved March 30, 2021.
3. Stryker, Susan; Van Buskirk, Jim (1996). *Gay by the Bay: A History of Queer Culture in the San Francisco Bay Area*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books. p. 18. ISBN 0-8118-1187-5.
4. Hsieh, Carina (2020-07-02). "What Is the Hanky Code?" (<https://www.cosmopolitan.com/sex-love/a33078811/what-is-hanky-code-how-to-use/>). *Cosmopolitan*. Retrieved 2021-01-03.
5. "Fifty Shades of Gay - The Hanky Code" (<https://www.ambushmag.com/fifty-shades-of-gay-the-hanky-code/>). *Ambush Magazine*. 2019-04-23. Retrieved 2021-01-03.
6. Fischer, Hal (1977). *Gay Semiotics* ⚡ (<http://www.queerculturalcenter.org/Pages/HalPages/GaySempg2.html>). San Francisco: NFS Press. ISBN 0-917986-03-2. "In San Francisco, the signs began appearing around 1971. The Trading Post, a department store specializing in erotic merchandise, began promoting handkerchiefs in the store and printing cards with their meanings. The red and blue handkerchiefs and their significance were already in existence, and meanings were assigned to other colors as well."
7. Jones, Jordy (2017). *The Mayor of Folsom Street, The Auto/Biography of "Daddy Alan" Selby aka Mr. S*. Fair Page Media LLC. pp. 61-62. ISBN 978-0-9989098-0-6.
8. Townsend, Larry (1983). *The Leatherman's Handbook II*. New York: Modernismo Publications. p. 26. ISBN 0-89237-010-6.
9. Reilly, Andrew; Saethre, Eirik J. (2013-10-01). "The hankie code revisited: From function to fashion". *Critical Studies in Men's Fashion*. 1: 69-78. doi:10.1386/csmf.1.1.69_1 (https://doi.org/10.1386%2Fcsmf.1.1.69_1).
10. Filice, Eric; Raffoul, Amanda; Meyer, Samantha B.; Neiterman, Elena (2019-07-05). "The Impact of Social Media on Body Image Perceptions and Bodily Practices among Gay, Bisexual, and Other Men Who Have Sex with Men: A Critical Review of the Literature and Extension of Theory". *Sex Roles*. 82 (7-8): 387-410. doi:10.1007/s11199-019-01063-7 (<https://doi.org/10.1007%2Fs11199-019-01063-7>). ISSN 1573-2762 (<https://www.worldcat.org/issn/1573-2762>).

Further reading

- Jacques, Trevor H. (1993). *On the Safe Edge: A Manual for SM Play*. Toronto: Whole SM Publishing. ISBN 978-1-89585-705-4.
-

Retrieved from "https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Handkerchief_code&oldid=1015105465"

This page was last edited on 30 March 2021, at 17:19 (UTC).

Text is available under the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike License; additional terms may apply. By using this site, you agree to the Terms of Use and Privacy Policy. Wikipedia® is a registered trademark of the Wikimedia Foundation, Inc., a non-profit organization.