

Narratives of Memory and Loss: An Analysis of The Digital Aids Memorial

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Research Methods For Public Relations and Advertising

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Executive Summary

This Study analyzes 10 posts from the digital Aids Memorial using narrative qualitative analysis. This analysis revealed three major themes: family shame and denial, loss of love and generations of the queer community, and addiction and structural vulnerability. These findings reveal that stigma not only influences the individual experience. Rather it highlights how stigma shaped emotional expression, communication patterns, and collective memory. Two key insights include the importance of storytelling in preserving erased history and the lasting impact of silence. These insights are crucial for Public Relations and Advertising professionals, as they highlight the need for narrative driven campaigns that are centered around lived experience and dignity.

Introduction

Narrative research plays a crucial role in Public Relations. It provides insight on how people make meaning out of their experiences, and how that meaning shapes the way they interact with the world around them. Stories provide a deeper insight into emotions, identity, stigma, and cultural memory. These raw insights provide contextual information that Quantitative research alone can not always provide. In the context of the Aids Memorial, qualitative research provides a deeper look into the human impact that surrounds a crisis.

The Aids epidemic was not just a public health crisis. It was a crisis that was driven by a lack of communication and regulation. Stigma surrounding HIV has historically influenced how people talk- or do not talk about sickness or stigma. Narrative research helps us better understand how this lack of communication affected the victims and their families.

This study covers what narratives from the Aids Memorial reveal about stigma, communication, and the collective memory of the queer community. By analyzing personal narratives, key insights are identified. Those insights lead to communication efforts that highlight the needs of the communities affected by this crisis.

Methods

This study used a qualitative narrative analysis approach to examine ten posts from the digital Aids Memorial. To effectively represent as many groups as possible, purposive sampling was implemented into this study. This means that the data set was chosen with the intent to highlight diverse experiences across identity, time periods, and personal circumstances. This allows for a more insightful understanding of how HIV narratives differ in certain contexts. Data collection involved recording summaries and key quotes. Images were treated as the meaningful pieces of data that they are so they were also used. They provide further context into the selected

narrative. All images are included in the appendices with contextual evidence for accessibility and context.

The analysis process took place over three main stages, the first being open coding. Open Coding was done to identify recurring themes and ideas within each person's narrative. Next, similar codes were grouped together into clusters to form broader categories within each narrative. Lastly, these categories were grouped into three main themes. Ethical considerations play a vital role in research of this nature. When handling sensitive, personal narratives, my approach was to lead with sensitivity and represent each narrative with a sense of humanity.

Findings Theme One

The first main theme that was revealed through this analysis was family shame and denial. This theme reflects how the stigma of a HIV diagnosis led people to respond with denial or rejection rather than empathy and support. Many people isolated themselves from their loved ones during illness, or felt a sense of abandonment from their families. One narrative highlighted how her family responded with fear, “As a kid my cousin and I of course were sheltered a lot when he (uncle) became sick. FEAR led. No hospital visits to see him or funeral. No more hugs or kisses.” (Post 7) This narrative highlights how many people replaced care with avoidance. Other narratives highlighted that losing their parents to HIV had a profound impact on their life. “My sister and I were left to fend for ourselves because no one wanted to take us on because they thought we had aids too.” an additional narrative said. (Post 2) These children often felt shamed or rejected by their family members. This highlights how the stigmas around HIV not only affect those with the disease. Stigmas affect the entire family system, leading children to have little to no knowledge of their familial history.

Theme 2: The Loss of Love and Generational Ties in the Queer Community

This theme highlights how the HIV crisis disrupted relationships and intergenerational connections within the queer community. The loss of friends, partners, chosen family, and elders led to a cultural gap within this community. “How long have you two known each other” “Only a couple years” Mark and Marjan said. The stranger replied, “I promise you it has been lifetimes.” This quote highlights the depth of some of these relationships that were cut short by HIV. It also highlights how strong some of these bonds created under compressed timelines were. An HIV diagnosis added a sense of urgency and loss to already lively relationships. “We were doing our best to hold onto the liberated gay culture that we knew was being decimated one person at a time.” (Gamson, 2017, p.34) The loss of generational ties had a profound effect on the queer community as a whole. Gamson highlights how it is difficult for the queer community to advocate for people affected by AIDS because they are still actively recovering from the trauma of it. These two pieces of evidence provide key context into the impact this has on queer relationships, and the aftermath of this crisis.

Theme 3: Institutional Mistrust

The last major theme revealed through this study is that many people who received an HIV diagnosis were also navigating issues with larger institutions. A narrative in my data set revealed the story about a woman's sister who had a disability. Her sister fell into the wrong crowd of people after a period of instability and unfortunately turned to a life of drugs and prostitution. The writer of the post (post eight) wrote that she found out from a reporter that her sister had passed away from aids. “Growing up in the 1960s was not easy for someone with special needs.” she said. The memorial account also shared the story of a Trans woman named Victoria. She was in custody of ICE for being in this country undocumented. The detainment center refused to get her the treatment she urgently needed. Her condition quickly worsened and Victoria ultimately

died at the hands of ICE. Government institutions failed to serve their people when they needed it the most.

Audience Insights

People feel silenced and avoidant towards family members with HIV because stigma often prevents open communication about health, this affects their ability to process grief and communicate openly about a diagnosis. The narratives researched revealed many accounts of familial rejection after diagnoses. This leads to more shame, isolation, and the stigmatization of HIV as a whole.

Second, people feel a sense of erasure in the queer identity because entire generations of people were lost in the community. This deeply affects the ability to transcend community legacy and generational knowledge. The data revealed the stories of many lovers who felt their love stories ended too soon. The reality is that these personal narratives of love and life never ended. They were disrupted and cut short which makes it more difficult for these stories to be preserved and passed down to the next generation.

People feel that larger institutions are untrustworthy because they failed to protect and care for the people affected. This affects how people engage with institutional messaging, healthcare, and government. The data set revealed that there were not a lot of resources for marginalized communities at this time. This made it more difficult for them to put their trust in institutions like hospitals and the government. It also made it more difficult for people to understand their diagnoses and seek the proper treatment for it.

Strategic Recommendations

The first strategic recommendation would be to design a remembrance centered story telling initiative website. My target audience would be the elders of LGBTQ+ community. The

messaging strategy I would implement would be a memorial based tone- very similar to the aids memorial we collected our data from. Only this would be a website where people can share more longform stories, reply to comments, and do follow up posts. “Narratives help individuals make sense of their trauma.” (Trees, 2006) This paper highlights how story telling can be a powerful tool for people who have experienced traumatic events like loss of a loved one. This connects closely to one of my major insights which was the erasure of queer community and history. I believe this would be a great way to form new bonds between the elders of the community, as well as a great educational tool for the younger generations.

My second action would be for healthcare communication to implement stigma reduction messaging that addresses the misinformation about HIV. The target audience for this would be the general public, more specifically young people. The tone would be very neutral and direct, as this serves as an educational resource. I would like it to emphasize that HIV can affect anyone who is not properly educated on the ways to contract it. Education and support from health institutions plays a key role in reducing the stigma. I think de-stigmatization & open conversation from healthcare institutions would also help people better acknowledge and care for people struggling with HIV.

My last recommendation would be for public health officials to adopt narrative storytelling when creating campaigns. Campaigns centered around lived experience help humanize issues that sometimes seem complex. Hinyard and Kreuter emphasize narrative communication and the idea that it can better transport consumers into the story or campaign. (Hinyard & Krueter, 2007) A compassionate, story telling tone would allow for the campaign to move people by experiences of love and loss. It would also allow for larger institutions to re-establish their trust and credibility with marginalized communities.

Policy Context and Data Erasure

The issue of data erasure is extremely relevant when doing an analysis of the AIDS Memorial Project. Firstly, it contributes to harmful stigmas. It perpetuates the idea that institutions still do not care to intently cover these topics. It also perpetuates the idea that HIV is directly tied to the LGBTQ+ community as a lot of the erasure has to do with those two topics. Lastly, The NPR article mentions how a huge subset of data on adolescent health has gone missing. This is one of the most important, target demographics for issues concerning health and sexuality. It is reported that 1.2 million Americans are HIV positive, data erasure does not seem like an action that will help prevent the rising of this number. ([Hiv.gov](#), 2026)

This issue is also problematic for PRAD because erasure creates gaps in information. The lack of data makes it more difficult to understand the full picture within an issue. This is why narrative data becomes increasingly important. It helps PR practitioners fill in the gaps, which in turn helps them better understand how to represent the issue at hand. Qualitative data provides a “Keen sensitive appreciation of a fragment of the human picture.” (Pomper 147) At a time where the digital landscape often feels heavy, qualitative data provides a humanistic approach that can help shed light on issues in a more engaging way.

Ethical Considerations

This research was done with a strong commitment to respecting the dignity of all the people represented. Narratives were approached and analyzed with empathy and care. Instead of creating assumptions, I looked at the key contextual evidence provided in the examined posts. It is important to note that there is a lot of historical and emotional weight when discussing this subject. Even though we live in a more informed time, there are still discrepancies and stigmas that contribute to harmful rhetoric. It is important to lead with empathy and understanding when discussing subjects that are emotionally heavy.

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The Aids Memorial. (2024, February 24). 30 years ago while resting safely in my arms, my heart crumbled as my life. [Photograph]. Instagram.

https://www.instagram.com/p/C3uvyx4ots8/?img_index=1&igsh=bm50aDdvcW0zZTE0

The Aids Memorial. (2025, August 2). My mom Helen Brinkley died from AIDS in 1994 she resided in east Orange County. [Photograph]. Instagram.

https://www.instagram.com/p/DM3gbHhSD9V/?img_index=3&igsh=MWVhcGo3N3Y2YTczcA

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The Aids Memorial. (2025, March 15). This is my mother Sophie and my father Thierry, they both discovered they had HIV. [Photograph]. Instagram.

<https://www.instagram.com/p/Cp01sBzoDgG/?igsh=MWxtb2N5dms3MmJoZQ==>

The Aids Memorial. (2025, May 19). This year marks 35 years since Ronald W. Dekock, my older brother, passed. [Photograph]. Instagram.

<https://www.instagram.com/p/DJ1oH9AIuX8/?igsh=MTdnZGh0aTBmeWppdA==>

The Aids Memorial. (2025, April 11). I first met you on Halloween 1992. You died in April 11 1995 at most we shared 2.5. [Photograph]. Instagram.

<https://www.instagram.com/p/DIUqfG6ImbQ/?igsh=amZmc3M3ZGZpeGsz>

The Aids Memorial. (2024, August 1). I don't talk much about my parents much, In all

Honestly, it's because I don't know very much . [Photograph]. Instagram.

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C-Iu7MyIWQh/?igsh=ajVhcXZsdnpqdXZ1>

The Aids Memorial. (2026, February 2).I didn't know Thomas struggled with addiction the last time I saw him was in. [Photograph]. Instagram.

<https://www.instagram.com/p/DVHf8tjgjk/?igsh=MTBINmM1OGZnY2txdA==>

The Aids Memorial. (2025, December 1). My great uncle James Arthur London passed on April 4th 1991 he was a US postman. [Photograph]. Instagram.

<https://www.instagram.com/p/DRvZzKfgjLH/?igsh=MTJraG1rY2ZkNzdxaQ==>

The Aids Memorial. (2023, May 2).My sister Cynthia Jean(May 2 1957 - June 20 1997) became ill with encephalitis. [Photograph]. Instagram.

https://www.instagram.com/p/Crw2Y_1ILW2/?igsh=OWFvZjR5NmVxcnNi

The Aids Memorial. (2025, March 15).Victoria Arellano (October 10, 1983 to July 20 2007) was a trans woman who died in. [Photograph]. Instagram.

<https://www.instagram.com/p/CyOIM3kInha/?igsh=MXdncTI1NnJ1d29lZA==>

Appendices

Instagram Photos



Image 1: Dr Robert Clarke pictured with his lover Clark



Image 2: Helen, Mother of 2 pictured smiling



Image 3: Sophie and Thierry holding their two daughters

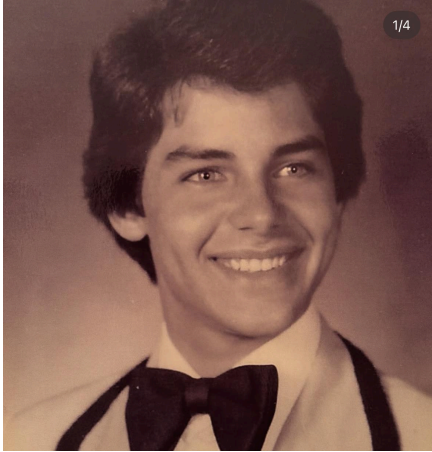


Image 4: Ronald pictured smiling, the beloved brother of 3 siblings



Image 5: Mark smiling for his partner behind a door way



Image 6: Britt shared this photo of her beloved parents smiling together



Image 7: Thom pictured happily with his friend



Image 8: James Arthur pictured holding his two young nieces



Image 9: Cynthia Jean pictured for her schools picture day

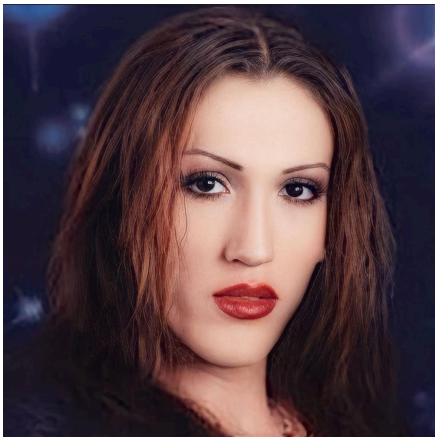


Image 10: Victoria Arellano as pictured in a headshot

Data Log Template

Post #	Date	Person	Photo Description	Summary	Key Quotes	Notes
1	2/24/2024	Robert	Clark with his late partner Robert	Dr. Robert and his husband Clark met in Milwaukee, they resided there and even had a secret marriage and vows before the equality act.	“Robert and I lived our very best lives, refusing to accept that our love story would be cut short by HIV/AIDS, until death do us part just isn't long enough	-Robert died incredibly young -Discovered unconditional love during a time of rampant prejudice.
2	8/2/2025	Helen	The photo depicts Bonitas Mom Helen sitting in her office smiling.	Helen was abandoned by $\frac{3}{4}$ of her sisters, and mother due to the shame and stigma around aids.	“My sister and I were left to fend for ourselves because no one wanted to take us on because they thought we had aids too”	-Children were abandoned by family due to stigma -Mom was not supported by her family for the same reasons
3	3/15/2023	Sophie & Thierry	The photo depicts Sophie & Thierry holding their two daughters (Charlie)	Sophie & Thierry both were sick with Aids. They split up when their daughters were young. Not much is mentioned about the father but Sophie confided in her father over her condition. He rejected her even after being labeled the favorite child.	“As I considered the loneliness and rejection they experienced, it breaks my heart not to be able to do anything to help them anymore.	-both parents died of aids - family rejected sophie for her condition -not known if Aids diagnoses caused the couple to split up -Daughters felt abandoned and scared
4	5/19/2025	Ronald	The photo depicts a headshot of Ronald with a beaming smile.	Rondald was the first to come out between his two other openly gay siblings . He was a headstrong man who danced to the beat of his own drum. He felt distanced from his family when they wouldn't accept that he was gay. After a visit with his sister, he was checked into the icu and later passed from HIV	“I miss Ron, I am angry that the world missed out on my amazing brother.”	-very quickly went from high functional to very sick -shamed by his family and community for being gay -had a very close and formative relationship with his siblings
5	4/11/2025	Mark	The photo depicts	Marjan (the	-”How long	-marjan was

			Mark smiling behind a doorway.	writer) details a beautiful love story between her and Mark. She highlights how strong their connection was, and how it felt like they knew each other for a lifetime. She cared for him until his last breath.	have you two known each other” “only a couple years” Mark and Marjan said. The stranger replied, “I promise you it has been a lifetime.”	happy to care for Mark until he left this world, she highlights how this was something no one should have to go through alone. She highlights how Mark’s diagnoses stripped him of all the things he loved in the world.
6	8/1/2024	Written by Britt	The photo depicts Britt’s parents happily smiling	Britt never knew her parents that well. Her dad died when she was barely 1 years old, and her mom passed away when she was 4. She highlights the loss of not only her own parents but the loss of an entire generation of Queer people.	“I don’t talk about my parents much, in all honesty I don’t know much about them.	Britt tells us about how she had no relationship or recollection of her parents due to them passing from HIV. She highlights not only her familial loss but also the loss of generations of the queer community.
7	12/1/2025	James	The photo depicts James with his two nieces on his lap. Everyone is smiling.	Kawanda first highlights how her family did not acknowledge his uncle’s passing from Aids. This digital memorial is the first time she has talked about it publicly. She highlights how she felt like she needed permission from her family to even acknowledge his passing.	“As a kid my cousin and I of course were sheltered a lot when he (uncle) became sick. FEAR led. No hospital visits to see him or funeral. No more hugs or kisses.”	Kawanda tells us how her uncle was a lively person, she talks about how his death was never fully acknowledged within their family. She also talks about how posting it makes it feel more real. Her relationship with her uncle drastically changed after his diagnosis. She was not allowed to visit him nor did they have a funeral for him.
8	5/2/2023	Cynthia	The image is a school photo of Cynthia smiling.	Cynthia suffered numerous health issues as a child. She went on to graduate high school through a special education program, after graduation she went on to work at a hospital. In 1977 she disappeared and	“Growing up in the 1960s was not easy for someone with special needs.” “She turned to a life of drugs and prostitution”	-highlights how many people caught HIV through substance abuse -highlights the difficulties someone with special needs faced in the 60s & 70s

				got involved with a bad crowd of people. It is believed she contracted HIV through substance use leading to her death in 1986.		
9	10/10/2023	Victoria	The photo depicts a headshot of Victoria.	Victoria was a trans woman who died of Aids while in the custody of ICE. In 2007 she was caught living in the US undocumented. As her case worsened she went to the hospital for a mere 24 hours. When returning to the custody of ice, she was handcuffed to her bed. She died at the age of 23 chained up to her bed guarded by immigration agents.	”Advocates for immigrants and the LGBTQ+ community criticized her medical care whilst in ICE detention.	Victoria's story highlights the struggles trans women face in healthcare. Also highlights the lack of care and treatment people in ICE custody receive.
10	2/23/2026	Thomas	The photo depicts Thomas smiling and hugging a woman.	Thom came from a large catholic family. Christi (an old friend of Thom) reconnected with him after a high school reunion. She spent time with his family, recalling that it felt like paradise compared to the family she grew up in. She told him she loved him and never heard from him again.	“I didn't know Thomas struggled with addiction.”	Thomas' story is a reminder that everyone has their struggles. Highlights how people who struggled with addiction were also victims of the AIDS crisis.

Open Coding Grid

Post #	Open Codes
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The death of someone very young - A relationship cut short
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Familial rejection due to HIV diagnoses - Abandonment of children due to the stigma of the diagnoses

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Secrecy and shame
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Familial rejection due to HIV diagnoses - Abandonment of children due to the stigma
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Stigmatized for being openly gay - Condition quickly worsened due to lack of treatment - Life cut short
5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Highlights how HIV stripped Mark of all the things he loved - A loving relationship that was cut short
6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Familial shame around the stigma of HIV - Shame - Lack of family relationship
7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Familial shame around the stigma of HIV - Denial of the diagnoses as a whole - Relationship ended due to diagnoses - Lack of understanding
8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of institutional support - Lack of resources for people with disabilities - Shame - resentment
9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Discrepancies in care for LGBTQ+ people - Stigma - Loss of older generations of queer people - Lack of institutional support
10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Addiction and mental health aspect of the HIV epidemic - Didn't fit assumptions - Stigma around addiction

Code Consolidation Table

Theme/Category	Supporting Codes	Example Quote
Family shame and Denial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Familial shame around the stigma of HIV - Denial of the diagnoses as a whole - Relationship ended due to diagnoses - Lack of understanding 	<p>“As a kid my cousin and I of course were sheltered a lot when he (uncle) became sick. FEAR led. No hospital visits to see him or funeral. No more hugs or kisses.”</p>
Institutional Issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Addiction and mental health aspect of the HIV epidemic - Lack of resources for people with disabilities or mental health struggles - Unassuming victims - Resentment - Lack of institutional support 	<p>“I didn't know Thomas struggled with addiction.”</p> <p>“Growing up in the 1960s was not easy for someone with special needs.”</p>
Loss of love and generational ties in the queer community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Discrepancies in care for LGBTQ+ people - Stigma 	<p>“Robert and I lived our very best lives, refusing to accept that our love story would be cut short by HIV/AIDS, until death do us</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Loss of older generations of queer people - Erasure of queer culture 	part just isn't long enough.”
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D. Final Themes

Theme 1: Family shame and Denial

Justification: This theme emerged from repeated displays of family abandonment and rejection as a response to a HIV diagnosis.

Them 2: Loss of love and generational ties in the queer community

Justification: This theme emerged from repeated narratives of love stories cut too short, which partly led to the erasure and loss of generation ties in the queer community.

Theme 3: Institutional Issues

Justification: This theme emerged from common notions of institutional mistreatment and the lack of resources provided for marginalized communities at this time.