



“I’m so into voguing right now” An exploration into drag culture’s shift from fringes to mainstream.

William Sidi

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree BA (Hons)

Communication and Media

School of Media and Communication, University of Leeds

May 2018

Word count: 11,998

ABSTRACT

In this dissertation, I explore drag culture's shift from its fringe origins to the thriving mainstream scene it has become. Through a range of interviews conducted with drag queens of various backgrounds, I find out how their experiences in contemporary drag culture have been shaped by influential factors such as the popularity of the reality television show *RuPaul's Drag Race*, societal developments towards the LGBT community, and a proliferation of online platforms. Based on the data, I argue that drag's shift to mainstream has led to the scene becoming dominated by a hyper-feminine Americanized style of drag heavily endorsed by the *RuPaul's Drag Race* brand. Whilst this leads to drag queens either compromising their style to fit in with the mainstream, or resisting conformity by protecting their creative integrity, the original fringe identity of drag being driven by political and artistic intentions remains constant.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION5

LITERATURE REVIEW8

METHODOLOGY18

FINDINGS

CHAPTER 1: Now more than ever23

CHAPTER 2: Everyone’s an expert29

CHAPTER 3: Is there room for everyone on the runway?.....35

CONCLUSION41

BIBLIOGRAPHY43

APPENDICES47

INTRODUCTION

Drag as a queer art form has moved from transgressive female impersonation to a new mainstream cabaret for all to enjoy. And yet, its rise in popularity and acceptance in the media is perhaps not as simple as the typical consumer may ascertain. Even professional drag queens themselves are cynical.

“There is a downside to it though, which is perfectly summarised by Vanessa Hudgens. “I’m totally into voguing right now”. Oh are you, hun? Ok. And I bet you saw this documentary called ‘Paris Is Burning’ and you’ll tell us all to watch that ‘cause we’ve never heard of that before!” (Angel).

On the premiere episode of *RuPaul’s Drag Race: All Stars* (2018), the third series of the *RuPaul’s Drag Race* spin-off show, American actress and singer Vanessa Hudgens appeared as a guest judge. In her critique of one contestant’s performance in the talent show, she said "I'm so into voguing right now, so that gave me life." On the surface this was a throwaway comment by Hudgens expressing her excitement and enthusiasm for drag. But when considering that the comment was made by a young, straight, white woman talking about a style of dance that has for decades been used as an outlet of expression for LGBT youth at underground events in New York City known as ‘Balls’ (Chauncey, 1994, p228), it symbolised the shift in drag culture between then and now. To many, Hudgens’ critique represented drag culture becoming normalised and appropriated by mainstream society.

Once an art form exclusive to the underground gay culture of London Molly Houses and New York clubs, has now become a widely recognised form of popular entertainment that is televised every Thursday on the cable network channel *VH1* and able to be instantly streamed on *Netflix* from the comfort of one’s home. Not only does drag appear more frequently on television, but digital media has given both performers and fans of drag a variety of ways to engage with the art form. This is evident on *Instagram*, where a number

of drag queens such as Trixie Mattel, Bianca Del Rio, and Adore Delano, have each amassed over a million followers (2018), and the official page of *RuPaul's Drag Race* is 'liked' by over 2 million people (2018). Popular drag queen 'YouTuber', Coco Peru, has received over 5 million views with 120,000 fans subscribed to her channel (*Miss Coco Peru*, 2012), and Trixie and Katya's web series *UNHhhh*, which was initially broadcasted on *WOWPresents's YouTube* channel (2016), became so popular that it was commissioned for a full series on the cable network channel *VICELAND* (*The Trixie & Katya Show*, 2017).

With these huge social and technological developments in the world of drag allowing it to be accessed from around the world by millions of fans, it raises many questions as to how this might affect what was originally seen as a subculture founded upon challenging the heteronormative status quo. In a world where drag is just as visible and accepted as many other forms of entertainment, how does it preserve its cultural integrity? Or better yet, does it still need to?

As one delves deeper, there are a wealth more of unanswered questions, highlighting the need for more academic attention to be paid to this highly contemporary issue:

As more people want to do drag and the art form becomes a more marketable form of entertainment, how does this affect its artistic and political value? Are the politically charged drag queens able to spread their messages of challenging gender stereotypes to an even greater audience? Or does the over-saturation of drag lead to it attempting to appeal to the 'common denominator' audience in order to make the highest profits?

Furthermore, as the audiences for drag become more mixed, does this have a positive or negative effect on queer spaces? Does this promote a greater sense of equality between

straights and the LGBT community? Or does it take away from drag's individualistic identity and sense of community, by being a place that caters for the masses?

With the increasing popularity of *RuPaul's Drag Race* endorsing over a dozen American drag queens every year to its millions of fans from around the world, what does this mean for drag queens who do not fit the mould carved out by these drag celebrities? Does it create more opportunities for them in their local area? Or does it create a narrow perception of drag that excludes them?

The aims of my research were to find out how live performers of drag, otherwise known as drag queens, perceive drag culture's shift from fringes to mainstream and to gather an insight from their perspectives as to what may be the positive and negative aspects of this shift. Through finding drag queens willing to take part in my research and organising semi-structured interviews with them, I wanted to find out whether an increase in popularity and proliferation of a previously niche art form could lead to an increase in tolerance and artistic production.

LITERATURE REVIEW

MAINSTREAM

Before looking at how drag has been critiqued in academic fields, the concept of the term 'mainstream' should be clarified in this context. Chandler and Munday's *Dictionary of Media and Communications* (2016) defines 'mainstream media' as 'Broadcasting and publishing run for profit or funded by the state, seen as favouring the market model and unchallenging, conformist content; as distinguished from counter-hegemonic alternative media'. Klaich (2015) notes that gay and lesbian folk have experienced an 'assimilation into the social mainstream' in major areas such as marriage, military, psychiatry, books and academia (p16). She critiques the cost of this assimilation, claiming that while one should not 'begrudge the millions of gay men and lesbians who have joyfully embraced mainstream values and norms, even at the cost of jettisoning aspects of their lives that don't fit the mould' there are still 'many people who question these values and norms, including those who continue to be on the side of re-envisioning more progressive societal constructs by acting to change the status quo' (ibid).

DEFINING DRAG

When exploring the shift in drag culture, it is important to look at how 'drag' has been defined. Newton (1979) clarifies the term, stating that a drag queen is 'the homosexual term for a transvestite'. She goes on to define the words separately, saying 'Queen' is a generic noun for any homosexual man. 'Drag' can be used as an adjective or a noun. As a noun it means the clothing of one's sex when worn by the other sex'. Newton establishes drag as a pastime mostly enjoyed by homosexuals, saying that the ability to 'do drag' is widespread in the 'gay world', and many social events within this world include or focus on drag' (p3).

Newton's research into drag during the late 1960s and early 1970s highlights its fringe appeal of the time, referencing what she describes as a 'very knowledgeable informant' who had 'been in the business for fifteen years and knew many other performers' estimating that as of July 1966, there were only '500 full-time, currently active professional female impersonators' in the USA, although this number was increasing (p5).

Contemporary research has also defined drag as being exclusively linked to the gay community, but with some variations, such as Rupp et al (2010) defining drag queens as 'gay men who perform in women's clothing, although they are not necessarily female impersonators' (p276), whilst Moncrieff and Lienard (2017) do not distinguish between the two, and say both terms can apply to 'gay individuals who don female clothing with the explicit goal of performing in front of audiences' (p2). Schacht and Underwood (2004) are somewhat less exclusive in their defining of drag queens as 'individuals who publicly perform being women in front of an audience that knows they are "men," regardless of how compellingly female—"real"—they might otherwise appear' (p4). They highlight drag's shift to mainstream through a 'proliferation of interest in drag queens in recent years' in the form of drag queen movies (*Priscilla*, *Birdcage*, *Paris Is Burning*), drag queens as celebrated cultural icons (The Lady Chablis, RuPaul), non-fiction popular press books on drag queens such as *Drag Diaries* (Chermayeff, David, and Richardson, 1995) and *The Drag Queens of New York* (Fleisher, 1996), as well as the subject of important academic texts, such as *Gender Trouble* (Butler, 1990) and *Paradoxes of Gender* (Lorber, 1994, cited in Schacht and Underwood, 2004, p3).

Drag's former status as an art form for the outliers of society is further supported by Newton (1979), who suggests drag is an example of Lemert's theory of 'secondary deviants',

which are a 'special class of socially defined responses which people make to problems created by the societal reaction to their deviance' (1972, p73). Newton applies this theory to drag queens, saying that to become a female impersonator is a status choice in the 'deviant career of the homosexual in the homosexual community' making it, in Lemert's terms, a 'secondary deviant' (1979, p31). Newton highlights the stigma attached to female impersonators, both from the straight world as well as some parts of the gay community, and thus pushing it further away from the mainstream, saying 'one can remain a respectable homosexual (to other homosexuals) when getting in drag for a camp (for fun, informally), but to perform professionally (in public) in women's clothing stigmatizes impersonators within the gay world. At the same time [...] within the show business world' (p7). However, more recent research by Hopkins (2004) finds that many drag queens are 'empowered by the experience of doing drag, gain contextual status, wield considerable power in their own communities, and, in general, are well-adjusted individuals' (p137).

DEPICTING THE 'FEMININE'

The ways in which drag queens depict femininity have been widely critiqued, with some suggesting they portray misogynistic images of women, whilst others suggesting they are a form of political theatre critiquing misogynistic standards of women. Ferris (1993) sees contemporary drag as an answer to a 'viable gay aesthetic while simultaneously promulgating misogynistic images of women' (p9). Munk (1985) notes that men's impersonation of women is not 'putting on jeans and tennis shoes', rather 'the staple image making of male drag performers relies on grotesque caricature' (cited in Ferris, 1993, p9). Dolan (1985) sees drag as a means of reflecting the gender construct of femininity, stating 'women are non-existent in drag performance, but woman as myth, as a cultural, ideological

objects, is constructed in an agreed upon exchange between male performer and the usually male spectator. Male drag mirrors women's socially constructed roles' (p8). Charles Ludlam, an American actor who often played female roles in plays, claimed drag's relation to feminism.

'You're looked down on if you feel becoming a woman is something to be attained. To defiantly do that and say women are worthwhile creatures, and to put my whole soul and being into creating this woman and to give her everything I have, including my emotions, and to take myself seriously in the face of ridicule was the highest statement' (1992, p19).

Ludlam's description of the controversy that surrounds wanting to portray a woman conveys the stigma attached to being a drag queen, and links to Ferris' idea that one of the greatest taboos is experiencing feminine emotions (1993, p13). However, whilst there is a clear acknowledgment of drag's use of irony to critique misogyny in society, it must be said that critiques are made without experiencing the reality of misogyny, as Ferris states 'once the cross-dressed male actor leaves that playground he gets to step back into the patriarchal world that supports and elevates him for his maleness' (p13). Dolan claims that 'the stakes in the gender game aren't as high for these particular gay men. They can easily assume female roles, knowing that offstage, they wear the clothes of the social elite' (1985, p8).

The responsibility of drag artists to consider the representations of women they put across is highlighted by Schacht (2002), who notes that 'many camp performers take special delight in making fun of women and the feminine in a manner that reifies both women's subordination and men's superiority in society, and this is obviously anything but subversive' (cited in Schacht and Underwood, 2004, p11). As drag moves from the fringes to the mainstream, does the increased visibility of critiquing gender make it become less of a taboo-breaking art form, thus losing its political edge?

ORIGINS

Before looking at drag culture's shift to its more mainstream form in the present day, it's important to look at what has been written in regards to its fringe origins. One of the earliest emergences of the female impersonator can be found in men playing female roles in the Elizabethan playhouses in 17th century England (Schacht and Underwood, 2004, p5). However, the contemporary drag queen that is often associated with gay establishments can be traced back to the Molly Houses of London in the 1700s (Baker, 1994, p106-7), drag balls in Europe and the US in the 1800s (Chauncey, 1994, p1) and from then on undertaken in theatre settings in England, and in burlesque and vaudeville shows in the US (Ackroyd, 1979, p112). The mid 1800s saw the interest in authenticity combined with a new cohesive homosexual subculture to create a new genre of men dressing as women. With this new genre, men impersonated lively, young women as opposed to the traditional pantomime Dame (Senelick, cited in Ferris, p17).

Up until the 1930s, female impersonation was seen as wholesome amusement and its practitioners were amongst the most popular performers in vaudeville, with a few even entering into motion pictures (Hamilton, 1993, p108). The turning point came in the 1920s, when Mae West, one of Broadway's most notorious playwrights and actresses, staged *Pleasure Man*, her most controversial piece, a 'deliberately sensational play that toyed with the meaning of female impersonation, explicitly linking this respectable tradition to the styles and manners of New York's gay subculture' (ibid). Billboard described the show as 'a libellous and treacherous portrayal of show people, and one that demands retraction to the thousands it so falsely paints and so grossly insults' (13 October, 1928, p42, cited in

Hamilton, 1993, p111). The reaction stemmed from the previous assumption that female impersonators were 'female illusionists' in a similar vein to skilled magicians, and were able to 'conjure themselves across gender boundaries that all observers believed to be fixed and immutable' (Hamilton, 1993, p111). Therefore, when *Pleasure Man* subverted the vaudeville tradition of crossing the rigid gender divide, it caused outrage and confusion by showing its female impersonators were effeminate before their transformation and that their portrayal of women was no act of magic, but an expression of a 'womanly' sexual self (ibid). Not only did West's play uncover the style and slang of New York's gay community on a Broadway stage, but it uncovered an underground tradition of female impersonation, one that had existed as long as vaudeville's but had previously been hidden from the mainstream, and in 1928, New York state law forbade any open stage depiction of homosexuality (p114). By the late 1930s, female impersonation was seen simply as an act of 'degeneracy', as government legislators now understood it as 'a vehicle of homosexual nightlife' and thus by banning female impersonation, they could keep that nightlife to a minimum (p119).

By the mid-20th century, drag was not only a fringe art form but an activity associated with crime, making it a 'target of vice crime enforcement, an overt symbol of gay identity, and a trigger of repressive police behaviour aimed at the suppression of gender role non-conformity' (Arriola, 1995, p37). However, the relationship of gay people being intimidated by the law enforcement changed dramatically on 28th June 1969 at the Stonewall Inn, when drag queens who were arrested and escorted out of the bar started posing for a crowd gathering outside. The officers used violence to force the patrons into submission, which led to the crowd throwing bottles and coins at them, shouting "you got your payoff, here's some more" in reference to the money that was used to bribe the police so they would not shut down the bar. With just eight officers struggling to control the commotion, they were

forced back into the Stonewall Inn, and the fight continued through the entire weekend (p75). It was this moment of resilience led by openly cross-dressing individuals that 'defied the dominant value system' which in turn led to a proliferation of LGBT safe spaces in city bars, forging a foundation for 'post-Stonewall political growth' (p77).

GLOBALISATION AND COMMERCIALISATION

Some suggest that the most influential factors that have led to drag becoming more mainstream are the processes of cultural globalization described as Westernization, Americanization or 'McWorld Culture' (Berger, 1997, p26). Altman (1996) described this more specifically as the 'internationalisation of postmodern gay identities (p77). The western gay movement can be found to have had an impact on local transgender cultures from all around the world. In Thailand, their third gender is locally referred to as 'kathoei', but in recent has changed to 'lady boy' and 'drag queen' in some urban areas such as Bangkok (Brummelhuis, 1999, p123). The Westernization is also evident in Samoa, where a proportion of their transgender culture who perform in the traditional Samoan theatre 'fa'afafine' now refer to themselves as drag queens and perform in cosmopolitan discotheques (Mageo, 1996, p601). In Brazil, Balzer (2004) found a coexistence between the traditional transgender subculture 'travestis/transsformistas' and the more modern, western-influenced transgender subculture of drag queens.

Balzer's (2004) ethnographic study looked into the divided coexistence in Berlin between the traditional Tunten and contemporary drag queens within the context of cultural changes in the city. Balzer notes that Tunten tend to dress in a 'somewhat trashy [...] theatrical or grotesque way' and 'use their gender performativity as a means of political protest/statement and to distinguish themselves from the German mainstream female

impersonation' (2004, p60). Berlin drag queens, however, generally dress more glamorous than Tunten in order to be integrated into the mainstream media and be celebrated as admired divas (p61), taking their main inspiration from the 'success orientated and commercialised American drag queens of the 1990s' such as US drag icon 'RuPaul' (ibid). Balzer suggests the drag queen phenomenon promotes a more isolated lifestyle, stating 'while Tunten tend to organize collectively within their community (e.g. in ensembles, and political groups), drag queens tend to be loners trying to start solo careers in the mainstream business' (p62). The 1970s saw Tunten dominate the emerging gay culture in Berlin through fun politically motivated performances at demonstrations, such as performances criticising mainstream drag shows that present female illusion to a high-paying heterosexual audience (Bermudaas, 1985, cited in Balzer, 2004, p63). The fall of the Berlin wall in November 1989 is seen as a turning-point in which a German youth culture that was heterogeneous, individualistic and more fun-and-consumption orientated emerged in the 'New Berlin' (Balzer, 2004, p64). This led to an increased popularity in 'Christopher Street Day', Berlin's annual parade commemorating the Stonewall riots, which changed from a political demonstration in the 1980s to a 'partly commercialized Gay Parade along the same lines as the (heterosexually dominated) 'Love Parade' in the 1990s' (p65).

The increasing acceptance of gay people by the broader society led to an increased tendency of large parts of the gay community conforming to 'heterosexual society' (Hinzpeter, 1997, p. 160) which in turn led to a marginalisation of alternative political subcultures, such as Tunten culture, and a proliferation of drag queens in the wake of 'popular drag queen movies, the success of the self-proclaimed "supermodel of the world" RuPaul (RuPaul, 1995) and the media coverage about New York drag queens' (Balzer, 2004, p65). The case of Berlin's gay culture reflects a larger picture of drag becoming more

mainstream, as the vast diversity of contemporary New York drag queens is underrepresented due to the limiting stereotypes of the media (Fleisher, 1996, p. 39). Whilst the media's platforming of the New York drag queen scene had an Americanization effect on Berlin's gay culture, the socio-historical context of Berlin's changing youth culture also plays a key role in the mainstreaming of drag.

RuPaul's impact on drag becoming more mainstream has seen a particular spike in the past decade through the success of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, the first reality television show featuring drag queens. Its popularity is evident in the ratings for the premiere of its ninth season which drew nearly one million viewers, making it the show's most watched episode ever (Petski, 27 March 2017, *Deadline*). On top of this, the show won its first *Primetime Emmy* award in 2016 for 'Outstanding Host for a Reality or Reality-Competition Program', and then won three more in 2017 for the same award as well as 'Outstanding Costume' and 'Outstanding Editing', proving drag's entry into the mainstream of entertainment to be on the rise (*Emmys*). The show usually consists of fourteen contestants from across the United States who compete in various challenges on a weekly basis, testing their skills in performance, fashion sense, humour, and teamwork. However, in the end, only one will win the title of 'America's Next Drag Superstar' which in the past has resulted in variations of a prize package including \$100,000, a lifetime supply of cosmetics, and a spot headlining the *Drag Race Tour* (Simmons, 2013, p632). Simmons's article looks at speech patterns amongst the drag queen contestants and examines the specific agendas and ideas of drag that the show constructs. Something that is valued amongst the contestants is being 'fishy' which is another way of saying 'like a girl' and is perceived as a quality one must possess in order to be 'America's Next Drag Superstar' (p636). The judges, as well as contestants, would reinforce the cultural norm that drag queens must look like believable women by pointing

out their mistakes, such as 'you read dude in a dress', which means 'you look like a man in a dress' (p636-7). Simmons concludes that the contestants are looked up at as 'drag celebrities' by the show's wide fanbase, giving them unprecedented influence over drag rhetoric and values (p645). The success of *RuPaul's Drag Race* highlights how far drag has come from its former underground vaudevillian days, although does the heavy reinforcement of feminine, glamorous, and American drag queens in the mainstream media create a narrow perspective of drag?

As this short history has shown, drag culture's shift from fringes to mainstream generally reflects the social changes occurring in society, as Schacht and Underwood (2004) suggest drag queens have both 'reflected and sustained men's images of what a woman is, or should be, and other important cultural values of the given society, and in this sense, are very much symbols of the politics of the times' (p6). However, as drag becomes an art form more accessible and visible to everyone, is there space for drag queens to also reflect *women's* images of what a woman is? They also raise the concern that whilst many drag queens seem quite successful in 'questioning and challenging notions of heterosexism, especially straight male privilege' they are far less subversive when it comes to 'other oppressive inequalities, such as sexism, racism, and classism' (p12). In light of the increasing acceptance of LGBT people in mainstream society, Moncrief and Lienard (2017) suggest that this generally relaxes 'the costs of advertising one's sexual orientation in public', posing the question 'will a drag queen persona no longer be costly enough to allow social outliers to gain capital by adopting it?' Or will drag queens be reinterpreted into simply a 'theatrical vestige of the gay community's former conditions?' (p10).

METHODOLOGY

To explore drag culture's shift from fringes to mainstream, I led semi-structured interviews with British drag queens to find out if this shift has affected them as individuals as well as the broader culture of drag, and if so, how?

As my question is looking at how drag queens interpret the recent developments in drag culture due to the social structures of mainstream media, I approached my research with a critical realist perspective, which is 'concerned with the underlying formations that organise meaning-making as well as with how people make sense of their world on a day-to-day basis [...] exploring how everyday communicative activity is shaped' (Deacon et al. 1999, p11).

This perspective allowed me to compare the data produced by the participants to the socio-economic contexts that surround drag becoming more mainstream. This perspective involved an inductive approach, as well as a 'retroductive' approach, which is a 'use of reason and imagination to create a picture or model of the structures [...] responsible for producing observed phenomena' (Blaikie, 2007, p3). Throughout my research, the data produced from the interviews was taken into account with the wider social factors of the phenomenon of *RuPaul's Drag Race* (which from here on will be referred to as *Drag Race*) and society's more recent liberal attitudes towards the LGBT community, to form a fully-realised exploration of drag culture's shift to the mainstream.

Whilst drag's popularity may be ever increasing, as a career it is still occupied by a very small section of society. On top of this, it would have been difficult to conduct interview research to every section of the UK that has a drag culture. In response to this, I had to find a way for my sample to still be representative of British drag culture despite its limited size. I employed a 'purposive' sampling method by actively seeking out drag queens of various

backgrounds from London and Leeds. The cities were chosen on the basis that they were more conveniently reachable in relation to where I live and study, allowing for easier flexibility when organising interviews with my participants.

When finding drag queens for my sample, I had to use a range of resources to gather a group of 6 participants. I started by exhausting my network of friends and family who happen to know people that are drag queens, and used the information provided by them to get in touch and organise my interviews. My sampling took on a 'snowballing' effect when drag queens I interviewed were also able to provide me the names of other drag queens in their network that I could interview. Social media was also a useful tool for finding drag queens and using the contact details in their profiles to get in touch with them. Whilst this provided a wealth of contactable drag queens from around the UK, it proved difficult persuading them to give up their time for an interview. Many did not respond, and one even replied "Hi babe sorry I only really participate in academic projects for students in their masters / PhD research. I get inundated with requests and if I did everything I wouldn't have time to poop" whilst I would have preferred an interview, this reply still served as a finding, highlighting the current significant interest in academic research towards drag queens.

The limited size of my sample was compensated by the fact that it covered a diversity of drag in age, gender, style, and nationality, providing interesting data that captured a wide-range of perspectives. It was also compensated by the use of a semi-structured interview technique which allowed me to ask specified questions that surround drag's shift from fringes to mainstream and then probe with follow-up questions to interesting points made by the participants, allowing them to 'answer more on their own terms than the

standardized interview permits' whilst still providing a 'greater structure for comparability over that of a the focused or unstructured interview' (May, 2011, p135).

A more rigorous method of surveying drag queens was considered, although without a large enough sample, the results would lack the depth required for a meaningful analysis. On top of this, the true essence of my research being an 'exploration' required a method of 'qualitative depth' which allowed the respondent to 'answer without feeling constrained by pre-formulated questions with a limited range of answers' (May, 2011, p132). The interview process proved to be complimentary to the inductive approach, as the drag queens I interviewed who shared their many experiences of the scene initiated questions that I, as a spectator, had not even considered before. This relates to May's idea that the open-ended nature of semi-structured and unstructured interviewing does not just 'provide it with an ability to challenge the preconceptions that the researcher may bring to the interaction' but also to 'enable the interviewee to answer questions within their own frame of mind' (p136).

Establishing a rapport with the participants was essential to the interview process in making them feel comfortable enough to open up their thoughts to me. This was initially built up through the necessary condition of 'cognition' by telling the participant what the research is about, the style of the interview, and the topics that will appear in the questions being asked, giving them a full clarification of what is expected of them (May, 2011, p141). The type of questions asked in the interviews was also intrinsic to building rapport, such as asking descriptive questions that allowed them to talk freely about the smaller details of their lives as opposed to evaluative questions that may be too big to answer (Whyte, 1984, p104). The method of sequential interviewing was a useful way of building rapport with the interviewees at the beginning of the interview, such as asking 'when did you start doing

drag?’ which allowed the respondents to reflect on their experiences chronologically, whilst simultaneously reflecting the social changes that happened around them (May, 2011, p146). I wanted my research to be a form of action research by giving a voice to drag queens who have less visibility due to their lack of mainstream appeal, which can be compared to how Oakley (1990) regards her feminist work as a way of ‘giving the subjective position of women not only greater visibility in sociology, but, more importantly, in society, than it has traditionally had’ (p48).

Once all the interviews had been recorded, I had to make sense of the raw data by coding the open-ended responses from my participants. My coding reflected Strauss’s definition of the term, which is ‘conceptualising data; thus, coding includes raising question and giving provisional answers (hypotheses) about categories and about their relations’ (1988, p20-1). This was achieved by comparing the interviews to find similarities between them and then categorising them under specific headings. The focus on comparison is ideal for semi-structured interviewing, as Gerson and Horowitz (2002) state ‘only by comparing a series of interviews can the significance of any one of them be fully understood. And, in the long run, each of them will add to the final story’ (p211). Clarifying the ways in which drag culture has shifted to the mainstream, the headings for my three distinct categories were ‘politics’, ‘audience’, and ‘power’.

After transcribing the interviews and coding the data into distinct categories, I was now ready to analyse. Discourse analysis was the most suitable method for this type of data as it uses discourse to ‘refer to all forms of talk and texts’ (Gill, 1996, p141). This method of analysis also compliments my critical realist approach, as not only is ‘language viewed as the topic of the research’ in discourse analysis, but the analyst is ‘interested in how people use

language to construct their accounts of the social world' (Tonkiss, 1998, p247-8). When analysing the data, I considered how the participants' use of persuasive language conveyed their feelings and experiences in light of drag culture's shift from fringes to mainstream, and how these were influenced by the wider social structures.

FINDINGS

CHAPTER 1

Shift in politics: Now more than ever

As drag becomes more mainstream through its increasing commercialisation, it still maintains a distinct relation to politics, either through a conscious effort on the part of the performer, or organically as a subconscious reaction to a current political environment of hostility. Angel, who uses their drag to critique religion by performing as a caricature of the Virgin Mary, practices the former approach in their performances, but also strongly believes in the latter.

“Drag is playing with a physical perception ... It’s just a physical transformation that elicits some kind of political reaction from society” (Angel).

This idea of the ‘transformation’ bringing out a ‘political reaction’ is reminiscent of Mae West’s controversial *Pleasure Man* (1928), highlighting the function of drag to be provocative has not changed but the reactions to it may have become more varied.

“It always seems to be pointing to something that says ‘Ok this is challenging, you don’t necessarily expect this but it’s right in front of you. What are you gonna do?’ Are you gonna applaud it? Flick money at it? Are you gonna think ‘oh that’s a nice dress’ or is it gonna piss you off? So it’s still confrontational in that sense” (ibid).

Bella, a drag character comedian who has performed a number of times at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, the world’s largest arts festival (2018), echoes a similar recognition of drag being inherently political through its confrontational nature.

“You are, as a man, dressing up as a woman in a public environment. That is a very political thing in our society, and it shouldn’t be, but that’s how it was established, people were like ‘hey we’re here! We’re queer’ [...] I think it’s necessary to have drag, I think it’s a tool in the sense that I’ve dragged up and gone on fun gay nights out and you kind of do feel like you’re making a political statement by going ‘I don’t care what anyone thinks, this is what I’m wearing” (Bella).

Bella claims that to simply *be* in drag is still a political statement, and their acknowledgement of how it was 'established' appears to inspire contemporary drag rather than be seen as a relic of the past. However, whilst recognising that drag is still fundamentally a political art form, they did not identify as being political in their drag, when I asked 'is there a political function to your drag?'

"I've never written a female character and been like 'I'm gonna be political' it's always just been what I've observed, which is, I suppose, the difference between a comedy character or like 'hey! I'm screaming to be accepted!'" (ibid).

This raises the idea that as drag enters into mainstream comedy environments, it is more concerned with making a largely straight audience laugh than being politically challenging. Coco, a stand-up comedian who performs in drag, states that politics is still very much an important part of their routine due to the current political landscape. They note that telling jokes about current political leaders, such as Theresa May, is mostly appreciated amongst young LGBT audiences, although audiences becoming more mixed due to drag's shift to mainstream has led to more variation in political beliefs from the audiences.

"If, like me, you tend to do a lot of gigs where a lot of students turn up – easiest target in the world. She voted against nearly every LGBT passed rights bill [...] And I have hecklers who are of more advanced years than I, saying 'oh you're just mad at her 'cause you're young' and I'm like 'yeah and you just love her 'cause you're old and she's not ruining your life' [...] If people don't wanna hear jokes about right wing politicians, then they probably shouldn't come to a show that involves a crossdressing someone in their 20s, 'cause you can guarantee that we don't like them very much" (Coco).

Although as audience members with alternative political beliefs to that of a standard LGBT audience continues to grow, that 'guarantee' becomes less valid, and the ideology of the environment less united. Electra, a young drag artist from Leeds, notices there is a danger in more varied audiences who might not respect the purpose behind politically motivated drag shows and rather exploit these events for their own superficial pleasure.

“Private drag shows that are protests about Trans rights and anti-homophobia should be protected from bigotry and homophobic people, using pride as a dress up party instead of a protest for people’s lives. But some shows should be in the mainstream to give the public a general idea of drag” (Electra).

Angel, however, welcomes audiences with alternate political beliefs, and claims that drag can be a force for educating and empathising, making it particularly relevant in the current political climate.

“I don’t care if you’re conservative, or democrat, in fact please let’s get the conservatives, maybe they’ll learn something, or maybe they’ll have compassion for something they didn’t necessarily have before [...] it’s still absolutely relevant. The conversations might have shifted but the need for confrontational art is still as important now as it was even then, if not even more important. I mean look who’s running Brexit and Theresa May and Donald Trump” (Angel).

Angel’s insistence on drag’s political function being ‘as important now as it was then’ conveys the reality of these problematic political situations that deserve to be confronted as drag becomes more mainstream and reaches wider audiences who may have anti-LGBT beliefs. Coco suggests the mainstreaming of drag potentially evokes more hostility from that part of society by showing its acceptance into mainstream media.

“It’s definitely more mainstream than it used to be if we mean popular amongst the general population. But the people who hate the LGBT community still hate us just as much so it’s not that mainstream. If anything, they hate us more because it looks like we’re getting accepted by everyone else” (Coco).

Here, Coco’s idea of drag becoming truly mainstream is having total acceptance from society, demonstrating a correlation between the ‘mainstream’ and approval from straight people, which can link to Klaich’s idea of the LGBT community moving into the mainstream through processes of being accepted into heteronormative society (2015, p16).

“Drag will always have to come back to its subversive underground roots because that’s where its identity is. And if that root isn’t there, it’s like, what is this? Where did it come from? It has to be challenging something. If it’s just vastly and widely accepted, it’s no longer, as RuPaul says, ‘punk rock’” (Angel).

Angel argues that drag will lose its 'identity' if it becomes 'widely accepted', demonstrating the paradox of the mainstreaming of drag; that is to say that an art form whose identity, style and content is founded upon fighting for acceptance could arguably become void once widespread acceptance has been won. On the subject of whether this 'root' will remain, Angel goes on to note the 'punk rock' identity of drag will not disappear so long as there are still social inequalities.

"Until there is complete equality between all genders, drag will always be political [...] Drag is a reflection of society and I don't see us reaching societal equality in 10 years' time" (ibid).

Whilst drag is an art form that is intrinsically linked to fighting for equality, Schacht and Underwood's idea of drag sometimes overlooking the misogynistic portrayals of women it endorses, somewhat contradicts the total societal equality drag is supposedly 'reaching' for when it may not be challenging all social inequalities (2004, p12). For instance, Bella notes that their depictions of women are not driven by feminism despite the characters having some feminist tendencies.

"All the women that I portray are quite powerful I suppose, I've got big diva singers, they all know who they are, I'm not sure with the whole feminism thing if they are all feminists? I guess I never really think about gender until I've developed the character a bit more and I can be like 'oh that's probably a bit more of a female role in society' and I'll get a stereotypical female wig" (Bella).

Bella's process of creating a drag character links to Dolan's idea that male drag performers reflect women's socially constructed roles (1985, p80), showing that drag still operates in the style of men performing as stereotypical women. However, the participation from female drag queens critiquing gender roles projects a more balanced image of the modern day drag scene. Felicity, a female drag queen, cabaret, and burlesque performer, who portrays female characters, opens up the definition of drag which many academics have

restricted to the traditional 'female impersonation' definition, expressing their more politically focused definition of the art form.

*"There's some people I've seen perform who call it drag and I don't think it is in terms of I don't think it has any element of gender f*****y or critiquing gender stereotypes, and for me that is the only requirement for it to be drag [...] but I don't think the requirement for that actually has any bearing on what genitals you have" (Felicity).*

Here, Felicity demonstrates that the increased diversity in the participation of drag is not automatically a detriment to the art form's political value. Contrary to the academics who have claimed drag caricatures of women can be harmful, Felicity expresses her feeling of empowerment in appearing as a 'grotesque' woman.

"It's fun to play an unattractive woman in a disgusting grotesque way, which does exist in burlesque and cabaret obviously, but my movement into drag is to do with moving away from that into a more grotesque aesthetic" (ibid).

One could argue that Felicity portraying the 'grotesque' is an escape from society's gender inequalities, in which Dolan (1985) notes that men who impersonate women can return to wearing the clothes of the 'social elite' afterwards (p8), whereas women cannot. This imbalance is summarised by an article Felicity found interesting.

"it isn't safe for women to go out dressed like drag queens' in that women get cat-called and harassed all the time, and accused of being a slut or whatever for wearing ostentatious things. I don't always feel comfortable wearing heels and loads of makeup out, I do it, but I notice that people stare at you and not always in a way you want that to be" (ibid).

Despite the empowering benefits that come from Felicity's use of drag, they note that it is harder for them to participate in the more mainstream side of the scene.

"Being a woman who often plays a female character or androgynous character is not something drag in the mainstream culture is accepting of" (ibid).

This demonstrates the irony in drag becoming mainstream, as it projects a message of tolerance and diversity, but in doing so, discriminates between who can participate in it.

Angel notes that they are becoming more self-aware of these imbalances by reflecting on

the content that they have produced in the past and realising some problematic aspects of it that they were not aware of at the time.

*“There are songs that I choose not to do anymore [...] times change and suddenly you look at something and think ‘ah s***’ unbeknownst to me that was a little misogynistic or transphobic. I didn’t realise it was when I said that joke, but now people have woken up to new things and we’re all having much different discussions that we weren’t having 4 years ago. It informs the editing of the work” (Angel).*

In this respect, drag has become even more of a reflection on society by becoming more self-aware as it reaches a wider, more socially-conscious audience. On top of this, whilst the greater participation of audiences of opposing political beliefs could propose a danger to a vulnerable community, it opens the floor to debate and empathy between different perspectives, as well as motivates drag to continue fulfilling its purpose of being confrontational. However, mainstream drag cannot truly be a reflection of society until it becomes more accepting of women’s participation in the art form and therefore reflective of women’s notions of gender.

CHAPTER 2

Shift in Audience: Everyone's an expert

One of the most evidential changes in drag culture becoming more mainstream can be found in drag's audience, both in the live setting of clubs and bars or the millions that tune into *Drag Race* every week. During this change, the knowledge and skills that come with being a drag queen have dispersed into their audiences, empowering them with a greater understanding of the art form, but with the danger of being used as a tool for abuse. Angel believes the general population's perception is dependent on the television phenomenon.

*"Drag Race has changed people's perception of drag, especially since it moved to VH1. I'm not saying it's bad in any way shape or form, I'm always for art forms becoming mainstream because it just thrusts something even more into the collective consciousness and I think for drag to be in the collective consciousness is a good thing because it's about freedom and it's about not giving a f***! ...but it does change things!" (Angel).*

Angel not clarifying how it 'does changes things' suggests that there is an unidentifiable quality to how television consumption has altered the industry, inferring that all these changes are not positive ones. They go on to express their gratitude for the popularity of the show, saying it has provided a wealth of opportunities for them.

"I'm very grateful for drag race – I work because of drag race. I came into the scene around season 6 when Bianca Del Rio won [...] it was really between season 4 and 6 it was at its height [...] it was invaluable because there were so many gigs! People were like 'Yes drag!' It's made it a mainstream art form, now who knows where the hell it's gonna go?" (ibid).

The uncertainty in their conclusion expresses a mixture of concern and optimism as to whether this popularity will sustain. Bella similarly believes that a combination of a more accepting society and *Drag Race's* impact on audiences has led to its immersion into mainstream comedy circuits.

"I'd like to think there was (more drag in comedy) because of everyone watching Drag Race now [...] I took my mum and my sister to one in Brighton and they just were literally howling,

just the comedy of it has become more mainstream because of Drag Race? People just accept anything anyway because it's a more accepting society?" (Bella).

Bella similarly conveys the indistinguishable nature of this shift and uses the example of their family being interested in it as a sign of drag becoming more mainstream, illustrating its appeal beyond the LGBT community. They go on to suggest there has been a shift in society that now views drag as 'fun' and 'cool'.

'There's just a thing in society now where it's fun to go and see drag. It's cool to go and see drag. There was a weird shift, well it's not a weird shift, it's a nice shift" (ibid).

Switching from 'weird' to 'nice' demonstrates their idea of the shift being fundamentally positive, but unpredictable due to its similarity to that of a fashion trend. This increase of interest from audiences has also helped humanise drag queens and the wider LGBT community to non-LGBT audiences.

*"You're now more likely to get non-LGBT people coming to the show, which is brilliant because the only way for a minority group to stop getting persecuted is if they are open and welcoming and let everyone see they are not the monsters the media use to make them out to be [...] but obviously the other thing is that now drag's becoming mainstream everyone's a f***** expert" (Coco).*

Coco's affirmation that a danger of drag becoming mainstream being the audience becoming too involved highlights their desire to protect the fringe quality of drag being appreciated by a small community. Bella also believes there is an educational value in straight people attending drag shows as well as drag being put on mainstream television shows with wide appeal, such as *Celebrity Big Brother* (2018), linking back to the idea that a more politically diverse audience can be beneficial.

"It's bringing in people who are not as open-minded and don't traditionally watch drag, but then I suppose it can't be a bad thing because if you watched Big Brother, Courtney Act was a very intellectual drag queen and was actually teaching them" (Bella).

Bella considers the *Drag Race* star Courtney Act's involvement with the programme as educational to her fellow contestants and viewers of the show, but can one highly privileged voice speaking on behalf of the entire drag community educate an audience on such a diverse culture in a truly representative way? Coco expands on their concerns over audiences becoming too informed and behaving like 'experts'.

*"You will normally get some 19/20 year old twink who has never done drag in his life, he will walk up to a drag queen, he will speak in an American accents, he will start throwing Drag Race American slang at you, even though he was probably born in Yorkshire, and basically start saying 'oh your makeup's a mess, you're busted' this that or the other, and I'm just like 'who the f*** do you think you are?'" (Coco).*

This links to Blazer's research into the Americanization of drag which also referenced RuPaul as a contributor (2004, p65), as it illustrates the language and mannerisms of *Drag Race* being adopted by local audiences and highlights their susceptibility to believing that the show's criteria for drag is the only criteria. It also proves Simmons' theory of the 'drag celebrities' from the *Drag Race* having an unprecedented influence over drag rhetoric and values (p645). However, Dionne, a young drag queen from Brighton, believes the impact of American drag is a positive thing for society by helping people discover drag, including themselves.

"The US is a big part of all western culture and I feel like parts of that are trickling into UK culture. It's helping people find drag in ways that they weren't akin to before [...] I found more of what I was looking for in my own art and creative passions from US queens, and I don't feel like that's a bad thing that's come over here [...] So many young queens, makeup is their thing ... but makeup in drag isn't a big thing here, so if it gives you something to connect to and unlocks an outlet you didn't know you had then I don't think that's to anyone's detriment" (Dionne).

Whilst Dionne expresses her agency in adopting a more American style, one could argue that the abundance of American drag culture in the media conditions young queens to subconsciously 'choose' that style. Angel responds positively towards welcoming more

diverse audiences who can sometimes be easier to impress than an audience that is mostly LGBT, and notes a prominence in the '18 year old straight girl' demographic.

*"They come out in droves, and it's cool, look, if someone is willing to pay for a ticket, I don't care if you're a boy or girl [...] Often I find that performing to straighter audiences is more enjoyable because they've not seen this s*** before, whereas the LGBT community has seen it so much and it's part of our DNA [...] Definitely a lot more straight people in general are becoming a bit more open to Drag Race" (Angel).*

Angel covets their protection over drag to the LGBT community, claiming it as part of their 'DNA', whilst simultaneously suggesting the benefits that come with sharing it with straight audiences, from a perspective of both business and pleasure. This portrays Angel's balanced view that increased straight participation in drag has the potential to allow the scene to flourish even further. They go on to note that the younger audience also has a greater access to drag than before through social media providing a platform for non-performing queens to publish their 'looks'.

"There are queens out there who are Instagram queens who don't perform and they do looks and that's entirely valid if that's what they want to do" (ibid).

However, Angel goes on to talk about the darker side of the thriving online drag community and the potentially negative effects it can have on queens that take part in *Drag Race*.

*"You better be prepared for the way the mainstream society is going to view you. And I don't know if I'm made for that. I don't know if I have that thick skin. I don't know if I can deal with death threats in my inbox. All that s*** that these girls have to go through" (ibid).*

This demonstrates the concern in Angel's uncertainty, depicting the 'mainstream society' as a dangerous zone in which only the strongest survive. Dionne looks further into the online community and the 'hate culture' that comes with being a famous drag queen.

"The online community is problematic, it's not so bad for me because in the grand scheme of things I'm relatively unknown [...] But if you look at more popular queens on or off the show you'll see the hate culture that comes from being behind a keyboard where you're not confronted with the artist in person [...] Understanding the art form, you think 'who am I to

critique someone else?’ But because some of these fans are so far removed from it and they only see it under the lens of a television show or they know a few local queens in their area. Now they know it, it gives them an opinion on it” (subject D).

Dionne suggests that television has made the ‘distance’ between the performer and audience widen, leading to audience responses that are impersonal and made without responsibility. They explain that a certain demographic of *Drag Race* fans, that only watch drag on the show and do not usually engage with drag in a real life setting, form a superficial perspective of the art form.

“Any big queen will tell you most of the hate comes from irrational thirteen/fourteen year olds who would never have been to a gay club themselves, so that’s probably why they can’t connect to that part of queer culture that well, because how often will they have ever seen a drag queen in real life?” (ibid)

This raises a point about the danger of drag’s audience becoming more diverse in age through *Drag Race*, as whilst it might be educating them about the culture, many struggle to realise that the editing of the show constructs an identity of drag that does not always apply to real life. Dionne makes this point and goes on to say how P.O.C (people of colour) queens tend to be the most vulnerable to this online hate.

“first and foremost, it is a reality tv show, and you’re conditioned to dislike some people because it makes good television and you have to be rational enough to remove yourself from what the TV is showing you vs what they are showing you of that person [...] But you see these 15/16 year olds who are so quick to slam on that keyboard being like ‘you’re disgusting’ etc and there’s been a real rise of it. And you shouldn’t generalise this, but a lot of hate gets engineered towards black queens. And as a queer P.O.C, that is something I worry about as my presence in the scene grows. How that could possibly start trickling into my life” (ibid).

The greater quantity and diversity in drag’s audience, largely due to *Drag Race*, has brought about more opportunities for drag queens and a higher level of respect from mainstream society towards the art form. But in doing so, has nurtured an online culture of criticism and overly fierce competitiveness that somewhat contradicts the idea that drag should take place in a ‘safe space’. As drag enters further into the mainstream, it leaves behind the

safety net of being enjoyed by an underground community, and exposes itself on a global stage to be analysed and dissected by a ruthless online and televisual community.

CHAPTER 3

Shift in Power: Is there room for everyone on the runway?

The increasing opportunities for drag queens through more platforms, be it live, online or on television, as well as a general societal interest and acceptance of drag, have led to a dramatically altered environment. However, these opportunities from drag becoming more mainstream may not be available to all. Most of the interviewees suggest there is a specific commercialised style of drag that has been endorsed by *Drag Race* and now dominates the scene.

"[Drag] has definitely been homogenised. It's been made to be a cookie cutter art form. And that has to do with RuPaul and how he defines drag [...] but he's looking at a very specific type of drag queen. A queen like me would not get very far on Drag Race, because I won't shave ... it's not part of my identity [...] that now means that society perceives that as a drag queen and it has so many tick boxes: it's female impersonations, it's padded, it wears the wig with the lace-front, it's expensive, very airbrushed makeup, very clean and colourful and camp, and as far as I'm concerned, without much substance" (Angel).

Angel affirms their resistance to this style despite its hegemonic power, showing that drag queens still wield their active agency during this shift to the mainstream and should not be taken for granted as puppets of commercialism. In accordance with Angel, Coco finds that this style has immersed itself into the criteria for the type of drag queen a venue will hire.

"There's a very specific type of drag that a lot of venues are expecting to see now. So if you don't do that you might struggle [...] because you say 'I'm a drag queen' and they go 'oh what tracks will you be lip-syncing to?' 'I don't lip-sync, I'm a live singer and comedian' 'Oh, maybe not then'. I've had the response a couple times now" (Coco).

Coco highlights the *Drag Race* influenced perception of drag creates a picture of what 'popular' drag looks like and filters it into more local drag scenes. They attribute this to a style within the 'American style' of drag.

“That very, I don’t want to say American style of drag ‘cause it’s only one style of American drag, because that’s what’s on the television and that is what’s mostly in the mainstream view. That is what a lot of people expect to see. So it does create more of a hunger for drag but it means that people who don’t do that specific type of drag have to work harder to prove that theirs is just as valid” (ibid).

Dionne can be considered to be part of the new generation of drag queens inspired by *Drag Race* and the style of drag it promotes. They defend the *Drag Race* style’s popularity against criticisms that the art form is losing its ‘richness’.

*“I have respect for the generation of drag that’s come before me, but I personally never really connected to that. I am one of those queens that started doing drag from watching *Drag Race*, and I thought I see something that is now engaging me. I know for a lot people the richness of the art is being lost as it’s brought further into the mainstream, but I also think you can argue that thank god it’s being brought into the mainstream and bringing more attention to the art” (Dionne).*

Dionne referencing this belief that ‘the richness of the art is being lost’ conveys fears within the community over drag losing its artistic integrity as it becomes more mainstream.

However, their argument that increased visibility is surely a positive milestone demonstrates there is a divide in beliefs. As a queen who started doing drag two years ago, Dionne has experienced the privilege of entering the scene at a very popular time, albeit with some criticism from the older queens who had been working long before the mainstreaming of drag.

“When I first started getting into it, some queens told me they’d worked for up to a couple years with just free drinks from the bar, but for me, I started in the June of 2016 and I started getting pay checks by about December. So a lot of people felt like I was undercutting them, and I do understand, like I’d be gagging if someone did that to me. But what am I supposed to say? ‘You’re right I won’t take the money!’ [...] Some of these older queens, they’ve been working since before drag was a mainstream popular thing, so they’ve really had to work themselves from the ground up” (ibid).

Dionne’s successful entry into drag highlights the benefits there are for young queens as the culture becomes more mainstream, but in light of the popularity of the *Drag Race* style of drag that caters to a young audience, are there enough mainstream opportunities for older

drag queens, recognising it was their generation that allowed drag to become the commercial success it is today? Electra also highlights the influx of younger queens entering the scene, showing drag has tapped into the mainstream, but in doing so, has made the culture more competitive.

“Drag has become mainstream in the fact that it’s popular among a younger audience. Now younger people want to get involved, this is good for the community but makes it a more competitive field” (Electra).

Angel looks deeper into the dangers of the over-concentration of young queens entering the scene and being exploited by drag’s increasing commercialisation.

*“Because drag is so mainstream and people wanna do it so badly, people are willing to do an awful lot for a despicably low amount of money. This is very concerning [and] detrimental to the scene as a whole, because it lessens the value of artists [...] these queens who are literally turning out looks week in and week out with the promise of being paid and the venues just don’t pay them ... ‘cause the girls will keep showing up and they’ll hold their part time jobs and pour all that f***** money into that new lace-front or those rhinestones and they’re being exploited [...] all they see is the opportunity. All they see is ‘yass I’m on stage, I get the selfie, I’m living the fantasy’ and it’s bullshit” (Angel).*

Angel’s summary of the situation shows that *Drag Race* projects the glamorous ‘fantasy’ of being a successful drag queen onto its impressionable fans without educating them on the realities and hardships of entering the drag scene. Angel points out there is a lack of industry standards due to it not being recognised as a ‘legitimate art form’, highlighting drag’s increasing popularity is still not enough for it to be considered a mainstream career. In effect, inexperienced queens are taken advantage of in the promise that they will be able to network with ‘*Drag Race* girls’.

*“There’s no standards because it’s not really considered to be a legitimate art form [...] most drag queens are very young ... and they get a big promoters that tell them *Drag Race* girls will be there and we’ll pay for your travel but we can’t pay you a fee. And these girls don’t know any better and they just think ‘I really want this opportunity’” (ibid).*

As the show continues to hit new rating highs and more young queens enter the industry, how much will the value of networking with the stars of *Drag Race* and living the 'fantasy' become a substitute for an actual fair wage for these newcomers?

Bella notes that another vulnerable group that could be negatively affected by an increased visibility of drag is the Trans community. They note that a wider acceptance of drag as a popular form of entertainment could undermine Trans people by projecting the idea that switching gender is glamorous and fun. Once again, they reference the *Celebrity Big Brother* series featuring *Drag Race* star Courtney Act and Trans newsreader India Willoughby (2018).

"I feel like at the moment Trans people are very ostracised in society and people find it ok to just go 'well...they're not a real human being' there's a lot of transphobia at the moment and I think India had a point in that people look at drag and think 'well that's ok, but not that [Trans]', 'drag's ok cos they can take it off at the end of the day and it's all really fun' [...] I think that a lot of Trans people will think that it doesn't help because people look at them and go 'well you're just a man in a dress'" (Bella).

It relates to Schacht and Underwood's idea that as drag attempts to subvert notions of gender, in the process it can overlook other societal inequalities (2004, p12), though Bella's acknowledgement of this inequality highlights there is a conscious desire from drag queens to be respectful towards the Trans community. With that in mind, one should not undermine the overwhelming societal benefits that come from drag becoming more mainstream. As Dionne noted earlier, they would not have discovered their passion for the craft if not for *Drag Race* and being encouraged by one of the show's stars visiting their hometown.

"Kim Chi from the show was coming over to Brighton for a gig, and I'd paid for the meet and greet anyway so I was like 'I'm gonna go in drag for the gag!' and no matter what you look like, because it's such a bold statement to do, people applaud you for it, and you'll quickly fall in love with that applause" (Dionne).

Dionne illustrates that *Drag Race* not only has the ability to be extremely lucrative through 'meet & greet' experiences, but also the ability to persuade young people to take up drag, creating wider participation of the art, but also populating the scene with new queens inspired by the same representation of drag, which could lead to a deficit in creativity. Dionne notes that the rapid trajectory of some of the show's stars should encourage people to see local up-and-coming queens.

"There was a point in time where you could see Shea, Trixie, Pearl, and Kim Chi, all for a fiver on the same night. And now if you wanna see them and get the meet and greet, you'll pay like 50 quid! So support local queens because they are the queens that will become superstars" (ibid).

Sharon Needles is particularly remembered by a few interviewees as one of the most successful rags-to-riches stories in the show's history, through her humble origins in Pittsburgh performing alternative horror inspired drag to small audiences, to entering *Drag Race* and winning the crown. However, they consider how much she has had to compromise her unique artistic integrity to fit in with RuPaul's brand.

"You look back to season 4 when Sharon Needles, the spooky bitch, won. But before she got there, they still made her come out looking all tanned and blonde, natural and like a beautiful woman. They make them all do RuPaul's style of drag, 'cause it's RuPaul's brand" (Coco).

Felicity notes that whilst Needles showed fans that an imperfect drag queen like her can become 'America's Next Drag Superstar', the impressive amount of money she now earns contradicts the modesty of her style that made her win in the first place.

"Her big USP was that she was this trashy queen who wore bin bags and was disgusting, and you look at her now and she's had loads of plastic surgery and really expensive clothes and I'm sure someone else does her makeup. And I'm not necessarily saying that's a bad thing, but it's like 'has she sold out?'" (Felicity).

Money being one of the determining factors of drag culture's shift from fringes to mainstream is summarised by Felicity who notes that drag's extreme wealth gap is hidden

beneath the dominating image in the media of drag becoming a mainstream success for everyone.

“I think there’s this gap. There’s the Drag Race level and then the other level of famous queens who aren’t necessarily associated with the show, and then there’s everyone down [...] I just think everyone’s down here and there’s a few people up here and I think the gap in between that is so massive [...] The RuPaul thing makes it look like there’s so much going on but the money involved at this level is so inaccessible. If you’ve got someone from RuPaul charging six grand for an hour and then we’re getting by on forty quid for five hours work” (ibid).

This discrepancy within the industry demonstrates drag’s movement into mainstream is reserved for the privileged few who fit the *Drag Race* mould constructed by RuPaul’s brand, leaving the ones who do not to continue having to work harder in the underfunded fringe circuit. With that being said, there are still drag queens that express their resistance to conforming to the mainstream, showing that the fringe identity of drag still persists and is sought to be protected, despite the evolving environment.

CONCLUSION

This research set out to determine drag culture's shift from fringes to mainstream; nevertheless my findings led to the conclusion that its movement within the frame of entertainment has experienced more than a mere 'shift'. Drag may have become a thriving form of entertainment that is widely distributed through television and online platforms, but this is not representative of the culture of drag as a whole. It would make more sense to say a specific *style* of drag has shifted from fringes to mainstream. This would be the Americanized *RuPaul's Drag Race* style of drag, which has filtered into the popular perception of drag and become seen as a benchmark for many aspiring young drag queens. Whilst RuPaul and his brand must be commended for producing a phenomenon that has helped turn what was once an underground fringe art form into a widely-recognised form of entertainment and introduced it to an increasingly diverse audience, it has come with its drawbacks. It has arguably widened the gap between what is 'successful drag' and what is 'alternative drag', by heavily endorsing a single style of drag that depicts a pristine, glamorous, male-to-female illusion, thus restricting other forms of drag to the fringe and promulgating the idea that these forms are less valid. In doing so, it has inspired many more people to take up drag, but as Angel warns, venues exploiting their artists by not paying them and relying on their blind determination, combined with the expensive standards set by popular drag in the media, has a potentially damaging effect on the creative value of the scene.

Whilst the mainstreaming of drag excludes those that do not fit the newly-prescribed hyper-feminised mould, it would be narrow-minded to assume every drag queen, professional or otherwise, *wants* to be mainstream. The waves of online criticism that popular drag queens

are routinely subject to and the potential compromising of one's art in return for greater exposure is something that fringe drag queens seek to resist. As drag becomes more mainstream, RuPaul and other key influencers could use their powers to promote alternative forms of drag, as opposed to invalidating other styles through a dominating process of promoting a single form of drag.

My research could not cover every form of drag and every drag scene in Britain, and the nature of drag being a highly individualistic art form meant that my findings cannot be truly representative of drag culture as a whole. Despite these limitations, the semi-structured interviewing aspect allowed for a deeper exploration into how drag queens' feel towards their culture adapting to the wider-societal changes and how their experiences reflect the wider social structures. A larger sample and breadth in age, gender, race, and nationality, would have formed a more representative result, but the quality of the interviews compensated for this, and allowed for an honest exploration into contemporary drag that truly captured the unpredictable and anarchic essence of drag. Whilst mainstreaming may occur, the vital transgressive rebelliousness of drag culture, both historically and socially, will struggle to be entirely eradicated.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ackroyd, P. 1979. *Dressing up: Transvestism and drag: The history of an obsession*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Altman, D. 1996. Rupture or continuity. The internationalization of gay identities. *Social Text*, 48. pp77-94.
- Arriola, E. R. 1995. Faeries, Marimachas, Queens, and Lezzies: The Construction of Homosexuality before the 1969 Stonewall Riots. *Columbia Journal of Gender and the Law*, Volume 5, Issue 1. Heinonline.
- Baker R. 1994. *Drag: A history of female impersonation in the performing arts*. New York: New York University Press.
- Balzer, C. 2004. The Beauty and the Beast: Reflections About the Socio-Historical and Subcultural Context of Drag Queens and "Tunten" in Berlin. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 46:3-4. Routledge.
- Berger, P.L. 1997. The four faces of global culture. *National Interest*, 49:23-30.
- Blaikie, N. 2007. *Approaches to Social Enquiry: Advancing Knowledge*. Polity.
- Brummelhuis, H. 1999. Transformations of transgender: The case of the Thai kathoey. In Jackson, P.A. & Sullivan, G. (Eds.), *Lady boys, tom boys, rent boys: Male and female homosexualities in contemporary Thailand* (pp. 121-139). New York: Haworth Press.
- Butler, J. 1990. *Gender trouble : feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York ; London: Routledge.
- Celebrity Big Brother*. 2018. Channel 5. 2 January, 21.00.
- Chandler, D. Munday, Rod. 2016. *A Dictionary of media and communications*. S.v Mainstream media. Available from: <http://0-www.oxfordreference.com.wam.leeds.ac.uk/view/10.1093/acref/9780191800986.001.0001/acref-9780191800986-e-3244?rskey=cYXqg0&result=1>
- Chauncey, G. 1994. *Gay New York: Gender, urban culture, and the making of the gay male world, 1890–1940*. New York: Basic Books.
- Chermayeff, C. David, J. Richardson, N. 1995. *Drag diaries*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books.
- Deacon, D. Pickering, M. Golding, P. Murdock, G. 1999. *Researching communications: A practical guide to methods in media and cultural analysis*. London: Bloomsbury Academic. pp. 1–13.
- Dolan, J. 1985. Gender Impersonation onstage: destroying or maintaining the mirror of gender roles? *Women and Performance* 2. 2:4-11.
- Edinburgh Festival Fringe. 2018. *What is the Edinburgh Festival Fringe?* [Online]. [Accessed 13 March 2018]. Available from: <https://www.edfringe.com/experience/what-is-the-fringe-festival>

- Ferris, L. 1993. *Crossing the stage: controversies on cross-dressing*. London: Routledge.
- Fleisher, J. 1996. *The drag queens of New York: An illustrated field guide*. New York: Riverhead Books.
- Gerson, K. Horowitz, R. 2002. Observation and Interviewing: options and choices in qualitative research. In T.May (Ed.) *Qualitative Research in Action*. London: Sage.
- Gill, R. 1996. Discourse Analysis: practical implementation. In J.T.E Richardson (Ed.) *Handbook of Qualitative Methods for Psychology and the Social Sciences*. Leicester: British Psychology Society. pp141-56.
- Hamilton, M. 1993. "I'm the queen of the bitches" Female Impersonation and Mae West's *Pleasure Man*. In Ferris, L (Ed.) *Crossing the stage: controversies on cross-dressing*. London: Routledge.
- Hinzpeter, W. 1997. *Schöne schwule welt. Der schlussverkauf einer bewegung*. Berlin: Querverlag.
- Hopkins, S.J. 2004. "Let the Drag Race Begin". *Journal of Homosexuality*, 46:3-4, 135-149. Routledge.
- Instagram. 2018. *Adoredelano*. [Online]. [Accessed 20 April 2018]. Available from: <https://www.instagram.com/adoredelano/?hl=en>
- Instagram. 2018. *Thebiancadelrio*. [Online]. [Accessed 20 April 2018]. Available from: <https://www.instagram.com/thebiancadelrio/?hl=en>
- Instagram. 2018. *Trixiemattel*. [Online]. [Accessed 20 April 2018]. Available from: <https://www.instagram.com/trixiemattel/?hl=en>
- Klaich, Dolores. 2015. The price of going mainstream. *The Gay & Lesbian Review Worldwide*. 22:3.
- Lemert, E. 1972. *Human deviance, social problems, and social control*. Englewood Cliffs ; Hemel Hempstead: Prentice-Hall.
- Lorber, J. 1994. *Paradoxes of gender*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press
- Ludlam, C. 1992. Charles Ludlam: in his own words. *Theatreweek*.
- Mageo, J.M. 1996. Samoa, on the wilde side: Male transvestism, Oscar Wilde, and liminality in making gender. *Ethos*, 24(4). pp588-627.
- May, T. 2011. *Social research: issues, methods and process*, 4th ed. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Miss Coco Peru*. 2012. [Online]. [Accessed 11 March 2018]. Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/user/themisscocoperu>
- Moncrieff, M. Lienard, P. 2017. A Natural History of the Drag Queen Phenomenon. *Evolutionary Psychology*. Sage.

- Munk, E. 1985. Cross left-drag: 1. Men. *The Village Voice*. pp89-90.
- Newton, E. 1972. *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Oakley, A. 1990. Interviewing Women: A contradiction in terms, in H. Roberts (Ed.) *Doing Feminist Research*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Paris Is Burning*. 1991. [Film]. Jennie Livingston. Dir. New York: Academy Entertainment. Off White Productions.
- Petski, D. 2017. 'RuPaul's Drag Race' Draws Nearly 1M Viewers In VH1 Debut. *Deadline*. [Online]. [Accessed 5 March 2018]. Available from: <http://deadline.com/2017/03/rupauls-drag-race-ratings-records-1-million-viewers-season-9-premiere-vh1-1202053113/>
- Rose, G. 2001. *Visual methodologies: an introduction to the interpretation of visual materials*. London: Sage. pp135-164.
- RuPaul. 1995. *Letting it all hang out. An autobiography*. New York: Hyperion.
- RuPaul's Drag Race*. 2009. Logo 2 February, 20.00.
- RuPaul's Drag Race. 2016. 68th Emmy Awards Nominees and Winners. *Emmys*. [Online]. [Accessed 2 March 2018]. Available from: <https://www.emmys.com/awards/nominees-winners/2016/outstanding-host-for-a-reality-or-reality-competition-program>
- RuPaul's Drag Race. 2017. 69th Emmy Awards Nominees and Winners. *Emmys*. [Online]. [Accessed 2 March 2018]. Available from: <https://www.emmys.com/awards/nominees-winners/2017/outstanding-host-for-a-reality-or-reality-competition-program>
- RuPaul's Drag Race*. 2018. [Facebook]. [Accessed 11 March 2018]. Available from: https://www.facebook.com/pg/rupaulsdragrace/about/?ref=page_internal
- RuPaul's Drag Race: All Stars, Episode 1, All-Star Variety Show*. 2018. VH1. 25 January, 20.00.
- Rupp, L.J. Taylor, V. Shapiro, E.I. 2010. Drag queens and drag kings: The difference gender makes. *Sexualities*, 13. Sage. pp275–294.
- Schacht, S.P. 2002. Four renditions of doing female drag: Feminine appearing conceptual variations of a masculine theme. In P. Gagné and R. Tewksbury (Eds.), *"Gendered sexualities" in the series on Advances in gender research*. Boston: Elsevier Science. pp157-180.
- Schacht, S.P. Underwood, L. 2004. The Absolutely Fabulous but Flawlessly Customary World of Female Impersonators. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 46:3-4. Routledge.
- Simmons, N. 2013. Speaking Like a Queen in RuPaul's Drag Race: Towards a Speech Code of American Drag Queens. *Sexuality & Culture*, 18:630-648.
- Strauss, A. 1988. *Qualitative Analysis for Social Scientists*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Taylor, V. Rupp, L.J. 2005. When the Girls Are Men: Negotiating Gender and Sexual Dynamics in a Study of Drag Queens. *Signs*, Vol. 30, No. 4. The University of Chicago Press.

The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert. 1994. Stephan Elliott. Dir. Australia: PolyGram Filmed Entertainment. Specific Films.

The Birdcage. 1996. Mike Nichols. Dir. United States: Nichols Film Company.

The Trixie & Katya Show. VICELAND. 2017. 15 November, 22.00.

Tonkiss, F. 1998. Analysing Discourse. In C.Seale (Ed.) *Researching Society and Culture*. London: Sage. pp245-60.

West, M. 1928. *Pleasure Man*. Mae West. Dir. Biltmore Theatre, New York. First performance: 1 October 1928.

Whyte, W.F. 1984. *Learning from the Field: A Guide from Experience*. With the collaboration of Kathleen King Whyte. London: Sage.

WOWPresents. 2016. *UNHhhh ep 1 Trixie Mattel & Katya Zamolodchikova*. [Online]. [Accessed 11 March 2018]. Available from:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uSwY31GMqY0&index=3&list=PLVmMNOHpsWfkF7E-ZYg_mufJfF6_xJBim

Consent to take part in Student Research Project “I’m so into voguing right now” - An exploration into drag culture’s shift from fringes to mainstream

	Add your initials next to the statement if you agree
I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet explaining the above research project and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project.	
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to decline. I know that I can contact the student’s lecturer if I have any questions.	
I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my anonymised responses. I understand that my name will not be linked with the research materials, and I will not be identified or identifiable in the report or reports that result from the research. I understand that my responses will be kept strictly confidential.	
I agree to take part in the above research project and will inform the researcher should my contact details change.	

Name of participant	
Participant’s signature	
Date	
Name of person taking consent	
Signature	
Date*	

*To be signed and dated in the presence of the participant.

Once this has been signed by all parties the participant should receive a copy of the signed and dated participant consent form, the letter/ pre-written script/ information sheet and any other written information provided to the participants. A copy of the signed and dated consent form should be kept with the project’s main documents which must be kept in a secure location.

INFORMATION SHEET

Dear participant,

I'm a final year media and communications student at the University of Leeds currently writing a research project exploring drag culture's shift from fringes to mainstream.

The aim of the research is to understand how the increased popularity of drag due to the rise of social media and the phenomenon of *RuPaul's Drag Race* has affected the British drag scene, and whether drag still functions as a political art form that challenges prejudice faced by the LGBTQ+ community.

Would you be willing to take part in a 25-30 minute interview?

Questions will be relaxed and open-ended, focusing on what performing in drag means to you, what inspires your drag, and your feelings towards the culture of drag becoming more commercialised.

This would involve an audio recording of the interview. All the information that I collect about you during the research will be kept strictly confidential. You will not be able to be identified in any reports or publications. No other use will be made of the original recording without your written permission, and no one outside the project will be allowed access to the original recording.

Please ask me if there is anything not clear or would like more information via my email

Best wishes

William Sidi