

Culture is a Drag

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Abstract

With Drag culture becoming more relevant there is more content to analyze for specific cultural messages. This is the basis of my thesis, to analyze the effects of drag queen culture on our current society and what notable characteristics this group of people holds. I will do this by analyzing several different television series, web shows, and online presences within the drag queen community, pointing out the specific cultural elements that this subculture displays. For example, there is now a television show that centers around the competitive nature of Drag queens, i.e. *RuPaul's Drag Race*. To understand the potential effects of this television series, I will rhetorically analyze for cultural messages. After this, *RuPaul's Drag Race* will be analyzed by looking for messages that pertain to the cultural subcategories. I believe that I will find that drag queens are part of a subculture that has truly unique elements; furthermore, with drag queens being present in mainstream media now, there is potential for other cultures to be influenced by their messages. Also, it will answer the question of why drag is currently resonating with pop culture like never before.

Culture is a Drag

The phenomena of wanting to be something or someone other than yourself is not new. For centuries people have crafted ways of transforming themselves into another persona -- whether it be through mask, dress, or even just mentality. There is even a whole culture dedicated to this idea that is present throughout history, known as *drag*. drag is defined as when one gender chooses to dress in clothes that are usually worn by opposing genders, while also adopting the mannerisms and characteristics from the other gender (Buckner, 2016). This concept stems from Ancient Greece where women were not allowed on stage, meaning that their male counterparts had to dress and act as women. Japanese Kabuki theater also did not allow women, which also meant that men were playing both the masculine and feminine roles; however, there is a specific drag culture that calls New York City its home: the House and Ball scene. The ball scene is comprised of individuals dressing as their opposite gender within specific categories--they 'walk,' i.e., compete, for different prizes. This cultural subset is integral to the drag scene that is present today throughout the United States. The House and Ball culture has contributed its geography, history, language, practices, and traditions to create a new form of drag that resonates with popular culture and helps create a new outlook on identity that many people, even outside of LGBTQ+ culture, relate to.

Geography and History

New York City serves as a melting pot for many different cultures, including drag. Harlem, a neighborhood within the city, served as a home for the House and Ball scene. Geographically, Harlem was a neighborhood that minorities, especially African Americans,

moved to. In 1869 the first drag ball took place in Harlem as a safe community for gay men to express themselves; however, it was not called a ball at this time. These first events or gatherings were known as ‘Masquerades’ or ‘Civic balls’ and were essentially beauty pageants held for male and female impersonators. It did not take long for the drag scene in the community of Harlem to take off, becoming popular quickly. In the 1920’s, balls were dubbed as a ‘Faggots’ Ball’, alluding to the religious resentment held against the drag culture (Stabbe, 2016). Between 1916 and 1970, the mass geographic exodus of African Americans from the south to larger cities up north meant that more young African Americans were becoming acquainted with drag, also attributing to its popularity. Morals of the United States at this time conflicted with drag, minorities, and LGBT+ peoples, so balls eventually became illegal; however, people of color who participated in drag were further ostracized in comparison to their white counterparts. This is what led to drag becoming an *underground* culture. Underground meaning that the practice of being a drag queen was kept secret, including their balls. A few queens came together to create a new scene where LGBT+ minorities actually felt safe, the underground nightclubs in Harlem (Buckner, 2016).

The first balls were fairly simple, with queens impersonating femme Las Vegas showgirls. In the 1960’s, however, the Stonewall Riots ignited a change within LGBT+ people of color. The riots encouraged drag queens to accept themselves fully and unapologetically, leading to more participation in the already established balls (Buckner, 2016). With more participation came more inclusivity as well. The femme Las Vegas showgirl was no longer the only category that balls catered to. All youths of color were welcome to showcase their desired talents, even if that meant staying true to their masculinity (Livingston, 1991). In 1990 the documentary film

Paris is Burning further shed light on ball culture, while also attributing to its geographic spread. Today, underground balls have become prominent not only across the United States, such as in Chicago and Atlanta, but also all over the world.

Practices and Traditions:

Houses & Balls

When balls and drag went underground due to the manifestation of racism within the community, ‘Houses’ became an integral part to the culture. Drag queens looked to established fashion houses in Paris and became inspired by the concept, integrating this into their own culture. The houses themselves are actually structured just like a ‘typical’ family; in fact, “the leaders of the houses are called mothers and fathers; however, neither role is gender-specific nor is defined by level of masculinity (Phillips et al, 2011, pg. 517).” Those who were established members in the drag community at the time of house introduction were able to start their own houses, beginning a family history. Presently, many of the older houses are having to appoint new mothers and fathers as they grow older. Just as in typical American families, the mother is expected to be nurturing, caring, and thoughtful towards the children of the house; on the other hand, the father is expected to be defensive, strong, and protective. Houses compete with one another at balls for prizes, such as cash, and often get violent with one another upon losing (Monforte, 2010, pg. 30). The goal of many mothers and fathers in the houses was to become ‘legendary,’ well known by other houses and winning in specific categories. Houses not only provide as a structural system to balls, but also as a substitute family for many young, minority, LGBT+ youths. Due to their identities, many of their biological families reject them -- leading them to turn to balls and the house culture. After they find themselves situated in a house, they

also take that name, for example: the house of LaBeija. The parents of those houses then educate their children on pertinent issues within minority and LGBT+ culture, such as coming out and AIDS (Phillips et al, 2011, pg. 517).

Balls are pinnacle to the underground drag scene, giving many homosexual or LGBT+ people of color a place to express themselves while also creating a unique social structure and vocabulary (Phillips et al, 2011, pg. 517). They are held multiple times a month and hosted by different houses each time, creating their own themes, which are prepared months in advance. Mothers, fathers, and children from houses come together to compete at the balls where they help one another get ready for the different categories (Marlon, 2011, pg. 368). People who want to become part of a house, also known as free agents, also compete at balls to appeal to the various houses. There are also

judges, emcee/emcees, and a disc jockey (DJ). Judges are either celebrities or walkers who have some renown as a mother/father or as a legend in the ball community. The judges need to have first-hand experience with balls in order to convince walkers that their scores are valid (Phillips et al, 2011, pg 518).

One of the greatest phenomena that emerged from the balls was the practice and dance style “voguing.” This type of dance began during the 1980’s and is a combination of martial arts, yoga, and modeling techniques. It is also characterized by “[...] stylized arm movements, sharp poses, and fast, low to the ground foot movements (Buckner, 2016).” Madonna took voguing and made it her own in 1990 with her hit song Vogue. The whitewashed version of the ball dance resonated with America, earning her seven awards and grossed well over millions of dollars (Monforte, 2010, pg. 30). This led to another explosion of popularity of the culture, with

more houses developing. The house and ball community even influenced popular artists such as Beyonce Knowles, with the creation of her alter ego 'Sasha Fierce'-- 'fierce' being a word popularized by walkers.

Cultural Values and Dimensions

With a prominent history, practices, and traditions, House and Ball culture has strong cultural values and dimensions. Even though cultural dimensions are typically associated with a specific country, they can be found in smaller subcultures as well. Members of the House and Ball community have developed their own language, sense of pride, and various other dispositions and orientations due to the history of the culture.

Language and Pride

A lot of the common phrases used in pop-culture today stem from drag, but the House and Ball culture specifically. 'Serving realness' is a popular saying in reference to balls themselves. When you 'serve realness' that means you are blending in with the norm of whatever category you are performing in (Livingston, 1991). "If you can pass the untrained eye or even the trained eye and not give away the fact that you're gay, that's when it's real," says Pepper LaBeija in the documentary *Paris is Burning* (Livingston, 1991). Reading and shade are another integral part of the House and Ball language. Reading is when you directly insult another person, but in a joking manner; however, shade is an indirect insult thrown at someone with more truth behind it. These two language concepts are a method of defense used by many drag queens experiencing homophobia. As mentioned above, 'fierce' is another term used by drag queens to help describe how good someone looks, 'work' and 'fabulousness' are also used in this case (Monforte, 2010, pg. 30).

Originally, the LGBT+ community was void of pride due to the oppression and hate towards their sexuality. Through history and triumphs in legislation, House and Ball culture slowly developed pride -- especially through the Stonewall riots. Balls are an environment where pride and acceptance are visible through the use of language in support of members of the culture. Expression of identity is also encouraged through the specific categories that balls include, which creates a sense of pride not only on a collective, but individual basis as well (Buckner, 2016).

Masculinity/Femininity

In the House and Ball culture, there is a lot of emphasis placed on the leading mother and father roles of each house; however, the culture itself is inherently masculine. Houses compete head to head for prizes in money and trophies. For many that are members of House and Ball culture, they live at an already disadvantaged place, meaning that winning material items is very crucial to their own survival. Most important, ball walkers want to bring honor to their house name. That is what it takes to become known in the drag industry (Marlon, 2011, pg. 368).

High/Low Context, Hierarchy, and Power Distance

With a small amount of written and formal information on the underground scene, House and Ball culture is very high context. All of the people within the community have similar backgrounds due to also being members of the LGBT+ culture. In Balls there are certain movements to convey certain feelings, making the communication indirect in comparison to some other cultures (Livingston, 1991). Status in the House and Ball scene is also very important, which happens to be a component of high context culture. There are 5 specific rankings of walkers: (1) star, a person who is new to the scene, (2) statement, the range between

1 to 10 years of experience, (3) legendary, 10 to 15 years of experience, (3) icon, 15 to 20 years of experience, and (4) hall of fame, 20 plus years of experience (Livingston, 1991). This hierarchical system is how up and coming drag artists earn respect in the community; yet, they do have a low power distance. In the House and Ball culture, equality is important because participants are already ostracized in the real world. The close knit houses encourage an even playing field and large support system (Phillips et al, 2011, pg 518).

Collectivism/Individualism

With large ‘families’ leading balls and guiding new children, the House and Ball scene is very much collectivistic. Drag mothers can be seen helping their children prepare for the categories ahead while siblings share clothing, makeup, and even techniques (Livingston, 1991). Even though there is a prominent competitive aspect in the culture, the willingness to help one another dominates that. The relationships established through houses are crucial to the education that members of the culture receive; furthermore, they can be lifesaving to those who have been turned away from ‘real’ families (Monforte, 2010, pg 29).

What Does This Mean

Today drag is not as taboo as it once was, now even being immersed into our own pop-culture. Prior to the development of the House and Ball culture, many minority, LGBT+ identifying people were forced into hiding. It was the development of this new subculture that allowed for them to flourish, learn, and become part of a family. Slang that emerged from this scene also has left a profound impact on our society, such as ‘serving realness’ at school. Even with competition as a key part of the House and Ball culture, the community still remains collectivistic. Media around the world has taken note of the intricacies of this subculture and

further popularized it through television, internet, and social media. While the House and Ball world has definitely changed, the message of self love and acceptance has not. These messages resonate with people for specific reasons, which is why it calls for a more specific analysis.

The Future is Now

While the historical implications of this culture are crucial to the understanding of existing cultural elements within it, drag has progressed from its underground days in New York City. Media has allowed for drag and mainstream culture to interact more than ever before. This interaction allows for a look into what it means to be a queen from a cultural standpoint, revealing nuances that have impacted other realms of society as well. There are specific queens that can be cited with the integration of drag and mainstream culture, but the most important to note is none other than RuPaul Charles, supermodel of the world; furthermore, with his television show *RuPaul's drag Race*, this subculture has never been more popular or relevant.

Who is RuPaul

Born in 1960 in San Diego, California, RuPaul always had an affinity for performance. At fifteen he attended a performing arts school, while also performing in drag at underground nightclubs in Atlanta. This launched his career in the drag world, leading to his move to New York City in 1987. In NYC, RuPaul became a mainstay in the subculture. From releasing albums to starring in films, Charles was an unstoppable force in the drag queen world. It was these accolades that helped immerse queens into mainstream media outlets, with RuPaul even hosting his own VH1 talk show. But the series that changed it all, for both Charles and drag culture alike, did not start until 2009. A reality competition series, *RuPaul's drag Race* focuses on queens trying to obtain the title of “Drag Superstar of the World”; however, with this increased

popularity of both drag culture and *Drag Race*, it is necessary to study the messages and elements that appear in the show to understand how it might impact society as a whole and why the culture resonates so well with others. (Green, 2018).

A Study on RuPaul's drag Race

In order to analyze the cultural messages in *RuPaul's drag Race*, a rhetorical analysis of the television shows content was conducted. A rhetorical analysis (i.e. qualitative research) is suited for studying specific cultural communities by focusing on the media texts that feature these communities (i.e. *RuPaul's drag Race*); furthermore, it is also best for exploratory work and when there is not much existing research on the community. This is why a rhetorical analysis was best suited for studying the implications behind drag culture. In order to conduct the study, a sample of one season (eight episodes) of *RuPaul's drag Race: All Stars* was used and rhetorically analyzed for cultural messages or significance; this procedure for the rhetorical analysis was simple. First, the broad category "cultural messages" was divided into subcategories of vernacular, nonverbal, rituals/practices, and image/identity. After this, the episodes of *RuPaul's drag Race: All Stars* season two were analyzed by looking for messages that pertained to the cultural subcategories. This was done via watching the episode on one screen and having a document open to categorize each message into the correlating subcategory. Post analysis there were notable findings in each of the categories, proving that *RuPaul's drag Race* communicates multiple meanings that resonate society.

Vernacular

While watching *RuPaul's drag Race*, it is easy to notice the difference in vernacular; specifically how the queens express themselves through a unique language. While some of the

terminology utilized during the times of house and ball culture still remain, the vernacular of drag queens is constantly evolving, reflecting the current times as well. 'Fierce' is a term that remains important to the culture, as a way of expressing acceptance of another queens look or 'gig'-- which refers to who they are as a drag queen. With *drag Race* in the spotlight, fierce has become not only a term inherent to drag culture, but LGBT culture as a whole, proving to be an ideograph with resonance within this community. drag queens are not only communicating acceptance of others' image, but also their femininity. This is shown through appropriation of terms such as 'bitch', 'girls', 'mama', and 'sister'; inherently feminine terms, drag queens are trying to display that they are not only a man in a wig, but are taking on another identity completely. This important nuance in language resonates with people who may also feel as though they do not fully connect with their gender and wish to express themselves freely. Apart from resonating with marginalized groups (i.e. gender based), the language utilized by drag queens also frequently finds itself turning into internet fads or memes. One that has currently been infiltrating media is that of 'spilling tea' or 'tea'-- which refers to a process of telling the truth or revealing secrets. The vernacular of drag queens is not only important to themselves, but it also resonates with society as a whole.

Nonverbal

What is communicated without words is equally important to the subculture of drag queens; furthermore, the nonverbal behaviors of queens influence audiences as well. Perhaps the most popular nonverbal vocalization is provided by Alyssa Edwards, who popularized the tongue pop movement. The tongue pop is a simple vocalization created by resting your tongue on the roof of your mouth and quickly pulling it back down. This simple sound became wildly popular,

first with other drag queens utilizing it, moving onto fans of *drag Race*; then to popular media figures such as the Kardashians. While the Kardashians may not be aware of the origins of this nonverbal, it still proves how this subculture resonates. Affect displays are also important within the culture, revealing how a drag queen may be feeling at any time. The rhetorical implications of this vulnerability are that audience members are more likely to connect with queens, giving them the ability to identify themselves with this culture.

Rituals & Practices

While what the queens portray through verbal and nonverbal communication in *Drag Race* reveals important implications on society, their rituals and practices do as well. One practice important to drag, as mentioned before, is reading; furthermore, it has remained important to this culture since house and ball times. This idea of directly insulting someone, but in a joking way, also known as reading, provides humor to female impersonation, an otherwise complex topic that some people may not understand; however, the humor draws in an audience beyond LGBT+ members. This reach targets an important group, such as those who may be against the livelihood that is drag and female impersonation. Another ritual that drag queens uphold in *RuPaul's drag Race* is the lip sync, i.e. moving lips to the words of a song/track. This is the primary form of entertainment and revenue in the drag industry, which is why it is a component of the series. Queens prove themselves through the lip sync, winning the ability to send another queen home. Audience members resonate with this practice, especially through its performative aspects, either relating to the song or emotions on stage; furthermore, this practice has now infiltrated other realms of popular media and culture, such as the television show

Lip-Sync Battle. It is also important to note that individual drag queens have unique lip-sync styles, culminating an identity that sets them apart from others.

Image & Identity

The image and identity behind a drag queen is perhaps the most important communicative aspect of *RuPaul's drag Race*. Each queen has a unique aesthetic or look, as they are all individuals with different personalities. Their individual personalities are amplified when doing female impersonation. This factor is what creates an appeal within audiences that anyone from all walks of life can pursue drag if they wish. Some queens find themselves inspired by fictional universes, such as Phi Phi who cosplays based off of comics; while others may find themselves inspired by their professions, such as the Russian linguist Katya. Comedic, goth, camp, and pageantry are other common images or 'types' of drag that are exemplified through *drag Race*; however, identity is a complex notion, especially in the realm of drag. Most drag queens are gay, identify as male, but express their femininity through female impersonation. Some go as far as creating or taking on another persona or ego that helps fulfill their desire to achieve womanhood. There are also drag queens that identify as trans, meaning that they perform as women and identify this way as well. The adoption of another ego implicates the rhetoric of escape, which is something that many LGBT+ community members, and people of other communities, encounter.

Why This is Important

It is easy to question the importance of a study in female impersonation, as it stereotypically only serves as a form of entertainment; however, there is not a lot of existing research on this subculture, meaning that the potential impacts and messages have went

unexamined since its start in Harlem. By looking at these cultural messages, insight can be provided on a community that has been a part of America since the late 1800's; furthermore, more people can understand the implications behind this culture. This process of educating others on the topic can bring together the topics of diversity and communication, which can aid in the process of removing stigma from the artistry that is female impersonation and LGBT+ culture in general. Perhaps most important is the identity empowerment piece, where *drag Race* becomes a platform for queens to not only empower themselves but also others who may be having issues with expressing their gender or identity freely; furthermore, every person has a part of themselves they wish to express to the fullest, just as drag queens do. At the core of this is an explanation as to why or what influences many drag queens become female impersonators in the first place.

Who are Drag Queens

Besides the obvious fact that drag queens are individuals that have unique personalities that affect their identity as female impersonators, there are also the reasons behind why they choose this form of expression. Winner of *RuPaul's drag Race: All Stars 3*, Trixie Mattel has unique a backstory that provides reasons as to why she became a drag queen, for example. Brian Firkus (i.e. Trixie Mattel) found himself drawn to more feminine toys, such as Barbie, which would later inspire his drag persona. It was this attraction to feminine toys and other behaviors that also influenced his stepfather's verbal abuse towards him -- in fact, Firkus' father most commonly referred to him as a 'trixie'. This internalized abuse played a role in creating the persona of Trixie Mattel, 'Trixie' from her step-fathers insults, and 'Mattel' from her love for Barbies (Parks-Ramage, 2017). Instead of straying away from femininity, Mattel took it to the

extreme and performed it. A queen close to Trixie and *All Stars 2* alumni, Katya Zamolodchikova, also has a past that influences her identity choices as a drag professional. While growing up, Katya did not experience the same abuse as Trixie, but did struggle with drug and alcohol addiction. Methamphetamine relapse caused her to take a hiatus from drag, she revealed in an episode of her podcast, *Whimsically Volatile*. Katya utilized her platform as a popular drag queen to discuss the implications of drug abuse and how the sisterhood of drag queens helped her heal in a time of need. She created a narrative on how you can regain success from a dark place in life, something that many other marginalized groups can relate to. Essentially, both of these queens took negative components of their lives and coped by altering part of their persona, i.e. their drag persona, in performance. This is a concept that many people can relate to, as we all have parts of ourselves that we either wish we could perform to the fullest, or alter in a way that becomes acceptable to everyone.

Post-drag Race

The results from this study focus primarily on the implications behind the series, *RuPaul's drag Race*, but it is also important to discuss the platform that is created for queens from this series alone. This includes taking into consideration what drag queens do outside of the series and who they are as individuals; however, RuPaul is still cited with the jumpstart for many queens' careers, especially the aforementioned Trixie Mattel and Katya. Post *drag Race*, the two queens formed a strong bond, leading to them creating their own Youtube series: *UNHhhh*. This solidified them as personalities existing outside the realm of *Drag Race*, which ushered in a new fan base, one that differed from the typical *Drag Race* audience. Young people and folks outside of the LGBT+ community began to consume more drag queen content, specifically *UNHhhh*.

The Youtube series is comedic, with Trixie and Katya discussing different topics each week; while the topics are not serious (i.e. aging, or school), the discussions they are having makes drag relatable to a wider demographic. People were able to see that they have similar experiences, but decided to take their experiences and channel them into the most extreme performance of femininity. The series allows for people outside of the LGBTQ+ to understand that all individuals have parts of themselves that they want to represent to the fullest, but there may be societal implications holding them back. Trixie and Katya are not solely gender performers, but also individuals with lives that exist apart from the drag scene. Katya is a gymnast, yoga instructor, and linguist, while Trixie is involved in music and video game circles. Female impersonation is not who they are totally, but it makes up a large portion of their lives. This freedom of expression can resonate with anyone who has a part of themselves that they may fear to put on display without reservation.

Drag on Campuses

Drag queens definitely push the boundaries on what is and is not acceptable based on gender performance. After being told for most of their lives that they are too feminine, they resort to this femininity to express themselves in a way that goes completely against preconceived notions of identity. Instead of forcing themselves to be completely masculine, they embrace who they are as individuals and create a new form of artistic performance. This unique performance of identity provides as a source of entertainment, but also as a way to bring about discussions on identity in the general population.. Through television introduction, i.e. *RuPaul's Drag Race*, drag has become more well received over the years; this is why we are seeing drag

pop up in more public spheres than ever before, i.e. cable television, social media, and live venues.

Appalachian State University is no exception, with drag shows becoming a routine component of live performances. Just this past year, *Drag Race* alumni Shangela Laquifa Wadley performed at Appalachian, communicating the importance of diversity and inclusion within spaces such as college campuses; furthermore, the current political environment and hostility towards gender based discussions necessitates these displays for people who identify within this community and others as well. Having a popular queen such as Shangela come proves that these performances are pinnacle to these communities, as the Straight and Gay Alliance club on campus sponsored the event. More importantly, drag provides a form of escape for people who experience negativity or strife based off of how they identify, i.e. drag queens taking their prior abuse and channeling it into their new persona. These displays encourage and show others how identity is a fluid notion, also that multiple messages can be communicated at once; as drag queens are unique in this transformation of identity. While some individuals identify as men, they still perform femininity as drag queens. Other drag artists fully adopt femininity as trans women, but still perform as drag queens. Their drag persona as trans women is still crucial to them, as it allows for continued expression of femininity whereas it may be denied in other parts of their life. Identity is a flexible notion, giving individuals power to express themselves fully, providing a breadth of messages. In this way, drag is a radical rhetorical performance of identity, changing how people view traditional notions of expression; furthermore, people also realize that parts of your identity can be chosen, which is a message that resonates with different audiences.

Conclusion

For a phenomenon that has existed longer since the age of the ancient Greeks and Egyptians, drag has went for the most part under-researched or analyzed for its potential impacts. With RuPaul bringing drag into the spotlight as part of the House and Ball culture, he provided more publicized content to analyze; furthermore, he provided them with access to platforms to spread their messages as drag queens. This is why it is necessary to analyze the television series and what individual queens are exemplifying, as it reveals important cultural nuances and rhetorical messages. By understanding these, it is easy to see the importance of these gender performances, as they resonate with multiple populations. Drag is everywhere around us, as there is a part inside each person that they wish they could fully express.

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