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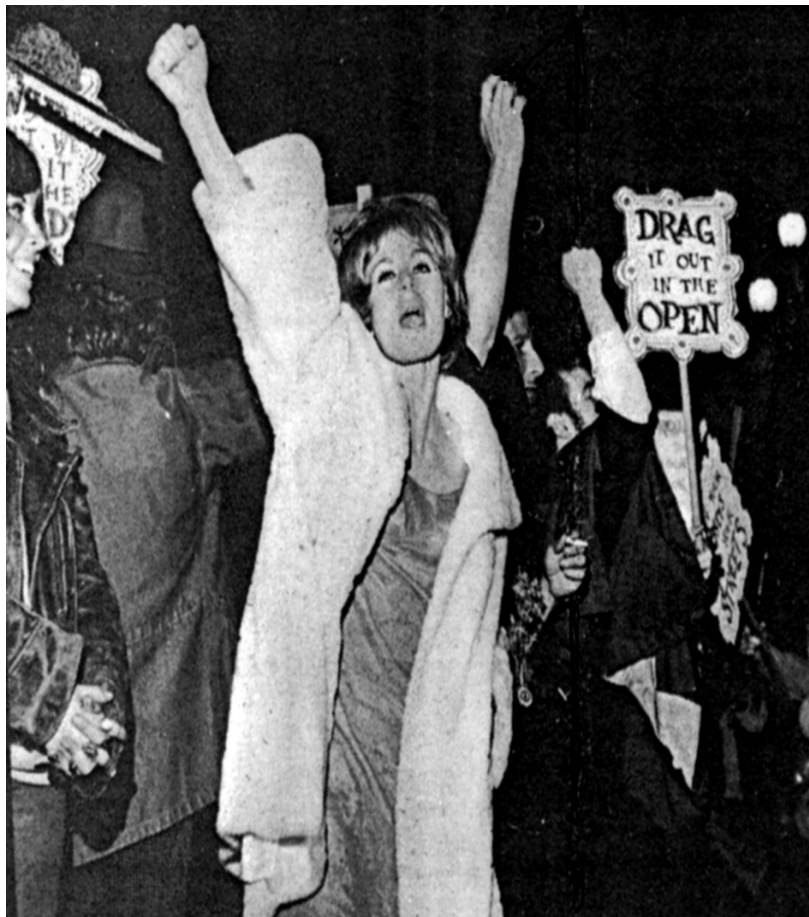
University
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School of Social and Political Sciences

**The subversive power of voguing: examining the political
potential of drag.**

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of
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Table of Contents

<u>Introduction - “Hell Hath No Fury Like A Drag Queen Scorned.” – <i>Sylvia Rivera</i></u>	<u>1</u>
<u>Literature Review</u>	<u>4</u>
<u>Methods</u>	<u>12</u>
<u>Ethical Considerations</u>	<u>13</u>
<u>Sample</u>	<u>14</u>
<u>Findings</u>	<u>15</u>
<u>Discussion</u>	<u>24</u>
<u>Limitations, Contributions, And Recommendations</u>	<u>32</u>
<u>Conclusion – “We Are All Born Naked And The Rest Is Drag.” - <i>Rupaul</i></u>	<u>34</u>
<u>Bibliography</u>	<u>36</u>
<u>Filmography</u>	<u>39</u>

List of Illustrations

1.1	“Elfie’s Magical Adventure”	18
1.2	Milk as Workroom RuPaul	30

Abstract

This paper seeks to assess the extent to which drag can disrupt gender hierarchies. It explores the key debates among feminist and gender theorists that provide the context for this research. The research involves five drag artists that perform in Glasgow, Athens, or Cologne. It employs an ethnographic approach, conducting semi-structured interviews with the participants. It analyses its findings using a qualitative postmodern approach and presents them in terms of definitions of gender and drag, performers' motivations, audiences and performative spaces. It concludes that the participants' performances aim to empower femininity and deconstruct gender hierarchies but their outcome is limited when faced with audiences unwilling to identify the performance's political aspects, or in a performative space that does not encourage political statements.

Introduction - “Hell hath no fury like a drag queen scorned.” – *Sylvia Rivera*

While you are growing up gay in a small city populated by a rigidly gendered, heteronormative and patriarchal society, it is especially difficult to avoid internalising such norms to your belief system. I was no exception; intuitively, I disagreed with such norms but when it came to practice, I conformed. My self-taught LGBT+ history class started relatively late and was intensely clouded by toxic elements of the current gay culture such as “masc4masc (masculine gay men looking for the same attributes in a partner) and “no femmes”. So, I thought, “men should be men; being gay does not make you a woman, why would you want to dress or act like one?”. Lucky for me, Western LGBT+ History 101 starts with the Stonewall riots of 1969 against the police harassment of LGBT+ communities, a key event for the gay liberation movement. The riots were sparked by a group of drag queens, namely Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera, resident performers of the Stonewall Inn, against police harassment and unlawful arrestment of LGBT+ people. I had not encountered a drag queen before; since I was only taught a binary, I was unsure whether they were men or women. Digging deeper into this realm, I started becoming fascinated with drag and its possibilities. The drag queens of the 1960’s and 1970’s in the United States were in the frontline of LGBT+ rights marches. They combined entertainment with politics to protest LGBT, gender, as well as social justice issues through a performance on stage (Hillman, 2011). I had never conceived that a person in makeup and a dress could have such incredible influence on an audience to the extent that they could prioritise issues within the LGBT+ community and its allies.

Drag performances are still alive and a prominent form of entertainment in LGBT+ venues. So are the issues that they were originally intending to tackle: homophobia, transphobia, misogyny, queer homelessness, HIV/AIDS stigmatisation, to name a few. The LGBT+ movement is becoming gradually more fragmented; most gay men, in the West at least, prioritise gay marriage in their agenda whereas trans people still struggle against

discrimination, violence and/or homelessness (Spade, 2008; CDC, n.d.; Warriner, Nagoshi & Nagoshi, 2013; Meyer, 2015). Is drag still relevant or politically charged to address any of those issues or has its political power been exchanged for mere entertainment?

Drag is a complex phenomenon and has been both embraced and criticised by audiences and academics (Hillman, 2011; Schacht, 2002; Wright, 2006; Taylor & Rupp, 2004). On the one hand, drag's supporters argue that it has the potential to undermine social conceptions of gender and its expressions, and thus contribute to disrupting hierarchies of gender and sexuality (Taylor & Rupp 2004; Shapiro, 2007; Taylor, Rupp & Shapiro, 2010). On the other, its critics claim that drag systematically reinforces such norms and can be extremely hurtful towards transgender individuals by discrediting the latter's experiences of gender through drag performances (Schacht, 2002). Sheila Jeffreys (2009), for example, argues that drag tends to conform to unrealistic expectations of beauty which incites misogyny and the presentation of women as just visual/sexual objects.

This research aims to fulfil a two-fold wider personal goal: firstly, to appease my interest in finding out more about a phenomenon that I am personally invested in and, secondly, to reintroduce the importance of academically studying drag performances as vehicles to deconstructing gender hierarchies by contributing to the literature with my own collection, synthesis and analysis of empirical and theoretical data.

This paper aims to examine to what extent drag and drag performances can undermine hierarchies of gender. I use data I have gathered personally, and arguments put forth by other academics. The examination revolved around few axes: the artist's off/on stage gender and gender expression, their motivations for doing drag; their cultural environment; their interactions with the audience; and the impact of the performative space.

To do so, the paper commences with a theoretical exploration of gender and drag. I will then describe the methodology used, the ethical considerations involved, and the sample of

participants. I provide the findings of this research in the following section, followed by a discussion of the findings in light of the examined literature using gender, drag, motivations, audience and performative spaces as the main axes. I explain the limitations of this research and make recommendations to future researchers. Lastly, I conclude with the evaluation of the extent to which drag can subvert gender hierarchies.

Literature Review

Theorising Gender

Drag has been examined in a plethora of academic disciplines including theatre studies, sociology, and politics. A complex phenomenon such as drag entails a complex analysis thus this research aims to bring various scholars from various disciplines in conversation and examine what their arguments can illuminate in terms of its findings.

In examining the impact of drag on gender hierarchies, it is fundamental to choose an analytical lens that suits the purpose of this study. The debate on gender and its ontological status is far from fully resolved. The two oppositional camps of the spectrums argue on a fundamentally different basis. Biological determinists argue that gender is inherent to anatomical bodies and is the result of evolutionary mechanisms; there are essential gender differences and women are inferior due to a weaker physical anatomy and maternal instincts (Jabbara, 2008). Such arguments have been gradually contested by numerous gender theorists throughout history. One of the most recent, and arguably one of the most influential, gender theorist is the postmodern thinker, Judith Butler.

Mainly influenced by the works of Michel Foucault, Simon De Beauvoir and Jacques Derrida (Namaste, 1994), Butler attacks essentialist versions of gender which present a set definition of 'womanhood' and 'manhood'. Instead, she argues that the illusion of a gender core is achieved by the repetition of gendered acts (Butler, 1990 cited in Harper, 1994). This relentless reiteration of various gender acts/styles make gender seem 'real, eternal, a deep truth of our lives' (Butler, 1990: 119, 122). Even though she personally identifies as a lesbian woman in certain instances, Butler disavows identity as the basis of politics. She claims that resistance towards power cannot be achieved without resisting identity politics, since the latter unavoidably creates hierarchies. Butler's version of feminism is particularly novel. As she argues herself, "the identity categories often presumed to be foundational in feminist politics

[...] simultaneously work to limit and constrain in advance the very cultural possibilities that feminism is supposed to open up (Butler, 1993: 126).

Butler (1993) claims that gender and body are products of cultural interpretation defined by particular sociohistorical forms of power (in Beasley, 2008). Similarly, she claims that the body is a result of gender since the former assumes different roles in the context of the latter (ibid.). Therefore, Butler views great potential in acts that can blur the social construction of gender and deconstruct social identities (ibid.).

The debate on the nature of gender is long and complex, and the scope of this research does not allow me to engage with its different camps in depth. I do, however, personally align with Butler's analytical approach. I believe that gender varies historically and contextually, and it would be naïve to think otherwise. My engagement with gender studies and drag incline me to believe that gender is indeed a performative process defined by the continuous repetition of acts. Therefore, this research will employ the analytical tools offered by Butler, mainly analysing gender as a performance.

Theorising drag through post-modern lenses

Acquiring the analytical tools is only the first step to engage in this research. How can Butler's view of gender as a performance help us in analysing the effect of drag performances on gender hierarchies?

Firstly, it allows us to examine drag under the perspective of social construction. Egner and Maloney (2015) argue that drag performers employ a less essential and more fluid conception of gender. Drag constructions of gender, they argue, help us to better understand traditional constructions of gender, too (ibid.). Similarly, Butler argues that drag acts as a parody of the conception of an original gender identity rather than gender identity itself (Butler, 1993). She claims that drag draws attention to the lack of essentialist qualities of gender and can

denaturalise homosexual gender norms (Egner and Maloney, 2015). Shapiro (2007) also argues that gender is a conscious and constant decision of performing masculinity or femininity and views drag as exemplifying this process.

Drag is itself a performance, either on stage or off. Drag involves more than cross dressing, i.e. wearing clothes of what is traditionally thought as the opposite gender. It may take various forms, depending on the artist's intentions, and incorporate different performances beyond one's appearance. For many, drag is defined simply as an explicit performance of gender (Shapiro, 2007). For others, drag arts are just a form of entertainment. However, as Sue-Ellen Case (1985) claims: "Art is not distinct from politics".

The political aspects of drag which are examined in this paper, namely the performance of gender, are evaluated differently by scholars engaged in studying drag. Many have found potential in drag to redefine gender norms and deconstruct gender hierarchies whereas others argue that it reinforces gender stereotypes, appraises masculinity and offers a damaging view of femininity (Egner and Maloney 2015). Taylor and Rupp (2005) suggest that drag performances act against the expectations societies have of gender and can therefore destabilise gender categories. They view drag as 'ultimately transgressive' since it forces individuals to question how they think about gender categories (ibid.). Other researchers including Schacht (2002) and Wright (2006) claim that drag often reinforces hegemonic gender norms. Wright (2006) argues that drag queening questions the structure that favours hegemonic over homosexual masculinity instead of questioning the forces that undervalue femininity.

Contextual Factors

It is obvious from this discussion that there is no consensus as to the *inherent* capacity of drag to deconstruct gender hierarchies. How should we then evaluate a drag performance in terms of its political power?

Performers, genders, and gender expression

Surkan (2003, cited in Egner & Maloney, 2015) uses the performer's on and off stage gender to make this analysis. He argues that:

“If the performer’s identity is one of masculinity while the performance is one of femininity, the performer is then gender fluid but not subversive. If the staged gender is an extension of the performers’ off-stage gender representation, the drag performer is subversive but not gender fluid” (ibid.: 183)

Others, such as Ayouf & Podmore (2003) claim that drag kings are inherently more subversive than queens since their feminine bodies come from a place of heteropatriarchal oppression which is critical of women claiming and performing masculinity. An obvious flaw in this argument, however, is that it does not account for drag kings whose off-stage gender identity is masculine.

It is crucial to note here that drag queening has been relentlessly fought against in not only heterosexual, but also homosexual contexts such as the gay liberation movements of the United States. Hillman (2011) argues that drag queens were excluded from numerous such movements because they were perceived as a threat by confusing gender identity with sexuality and were damaging to the movements' efforts to appeal to heterosexual societies. The prevailing logic was that you are a homosexual but you are still a man and should act like one (ibid.). Therefore, I believe it is rather unfair to underestimate and override the difficulty of performing femininity within LGBT+ communities since femme-phobia makes its appearance in such movements, too (Meyer, 2015).

Race and Culture

Jennie Livingston's *Paris is Burning*, the ground-breaking documentary that examined the drag ballroom culture in New York, brings into attention other contextual factors that have an input

in this conversation. The documentary revolves around LGBT black and Latinx working class people that organised balls that incorporated visual and dancing contests while allowing freedom of gender expression. Factors such as class, race, audience, and space were all crucial in the development of the balls. Those factors, I argue, are still relevant and crucial in examining the political potential of drag performances.

In terms of race, it is important to understand how gender is constructed and understood in different contexts. In Shapiro's (2007) research, an Asian/Pacific Islander drag queen was told by other drag queens not to move his hips so much; however, he argues that he grew up around men who always knew how to move their hips and it was a fundamental element of his identity. Thus, it is crucial not to universalise the researcher's conception of gender expression and eradicate cultural differences. A mannerism that we might perceive as subversive in the West may be in fact a gender norm elsewhere, as illustrated above. This extends to other aspects of drag beyond mannerisms, such as attire, hair, makeup, etc. For example, Greaf (2015) problematizes the concept of hyper-femininity since it assumes that non-hyperised feminine characteristics are somehow the normal ones. Think of an afro-textured wig. Beyond cultural appropriation, this could be considered an exaggeration on a white performer. However, this would be the norm among performers and audiences of colour. We ought to bring elements as such in our analysis. However, my sample did not include any other races than white, therefore I shall not engage with this debate in greater detail.

Audience

The audience and space are arguably as crucial elements in a performance as the performer themselves. 'Doing gender involves a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional and micro political activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine

'natures' (West & Zimmerman, 1987: 126). Such perceptions and interactions play a major part in the subversiveness of drag. Egner and Maloney (2015) dedicated their research to analysing such interactions by interviewing ten performers in Pennsylvania. They found numerous occasions in which the performer's audience were confused by the performance and were motivated to put their conceptions of gender in question (ibid.). Their interviewees described their performances as highly emotional, in the sense that they may incite emotions to members of the audience individually. The performers held that heterocisgender audiences were more likely to act in an insulting fashion while, however, simultaneously questioning gender and the performer's identity (ibid.). They found that in many ways, the audience influenced the performance by reacting positively or negatively to the performer's actions which are perceived as cues by the performers to act more aggressively or retreat to a more conventional act. (ibid.) Most of the interviewees claimed that they cater to different audiences and are more likely to push boundaries when across an LGBT audiences (ibid.). Finally, their jokes and acts depend on whether the performer believes they will be received as intended (ibid.). Other scholars claim that drag can only be subversive to conservative audiences that are not used to gender bending acts (Piontek, 2003 cited in Egner & Maloney, 2015). However, even though intuitive, it is not necessarily true that those exposed to more diverse identities (especially LGBT+ people) do not hold conservative views in terms of gender. This illustrates the importance of accounting for the audience of a performance and the former's impact on the subversive potential of the latter.

Performative Space

Drag shows predominantly take place in LGBT+ venues or during Pride marches. Many drag artists argue that this is where they are most comfortable and likely to push boundaries since they are less likely to be judged rather than in other venues (Taylor and Kupp, 2004; Egner and

Maloney, 2015). However, since drag arts are a form of entertainment and often incorporate acts such as comedy, they are likely to invade mainstream audiences and venues. The prime example would be RuPaul's Drag Race, a reality television show broadcasted on Logo TV, hosted by the famous drag queen RuPaul in which drag queens compete against each other in a number of challenges. Even though it is broadcasted on an LGBT+ channel, the show has attracted many heterocisgender audiences, predominantly young women (Cracker, 2017). The show has been scrutinised by many scholars. It is a reality show hosted by one of the most prominent drag queens – with a large merchandise brand – and participants are only female impersonators which makes it controversial. Jim Daems has offered an excellent collection of international essays in his book “The Makeup of RuPaul's Drag Race”. When examining the participants subversive potential, the authors are perplexed by instances of transphobia, fatphobia and misogyny that manifested in numerous occasions throughout the series (Marcel, Kohlsdorf, Morrison, Chernoff in Daems, 2014). Its platform, television, and its millions of viewers arguably commercialise the show and strip many of its political aspects off. The contestants mostly aim to be visually appealing, the interaction with the audience is eradicated, and performers who deviate from the show's conception of drag tend to be eliminated rather early (ibid.). Nevertheless, the show has mainstreamed drag performances to LGBT+ and heterocisgender audiences which is in itself an achievement and possibly an indication of people's more fluid conceptions of gender. However, one is unavoidably tempted to question whether such platforms have fundamental differences to other performative spaces and whether these affect the potential of drag to disrupt gender hierarchies.

Motivation

Finally, it is important to discuss the performers' motivation. The subjects in the examined literature (Taylor & Kupp, 2004; Taylor & Kupp, 2005; Egner & Maloney, 2015; Shapiro,

2007) are motivated to deconstruct social hierarchies of gender and sexuality, and engage their audiences with the nature of gender. One can infer that performers who charge their performances politically, in this sense at least, are more likely to push boundaries and gender blend throughout their acts. However, that does not incite that performers who do drag only for entertainment or self-expression cannot motivate their audiences to engage with such discussions. It is important not to discredit such performances but keep into consideration how a performer's motivation may impact their performance.

This analysis of previous literature has been fundamental in the design of this research and the analysis of the findings. Most importantly, the debate itself has shown that we cannot make any *a priori* judgements on the subversive potential of drag performances but should be extremely aware of the context they take place in. The aforementioned parameters were key in the discussions with the participants and I aimed to examine their perspective on the impact of those throughout our conversation. These factors are also evident in the analysis of the findings since I believe they are crucial in evaluating to what extent drag performances can disrupt gender hierarchies.

Methods

Since the early stages of designing the research, I was set on employing constructivist qualitative methods that could account for queer participants. This research stands on sociological and feminist foundations; it does not seek to impose a definite answer, but explore the realities of gender as experienced by a particular social group. This research does not aim to reinforce the gender binary and does not presume that gender is independent of interpretation. Therefore, it would be counterintuitive to conduct a realist research which ignores the context and external influences that mould gender notions.

Bryman defines constructivism as “the ontological position that asserts that social phenomena and their meanings are continually being accomplished by social actors and are [...] in a constant state of revision” (2012, p.33). Likewise, this research holds that agents of gender are an inalienable component of the definition and interpretation of the term, and should not be studied separately without mutually complementing each other.

As the aim of the research is to contribute to the debates on the potential of drag to disrupt gender hierarchies and not answering a specific set of questions, an inductive approach will be adopted. Ultimately, the research is concerned with the individual and social experiences of gender, therefore, a qualitative approach is fundamental in seeing through the subjects’ eyes (Bryman, 2012, p.400).

Since the interview subjects may be of traditional or non-traditional genders, I believe that it is important to address feminist and queer concerns (Browne & Nash, 2010). The qualitative approach calls for a closer relationship between the researcher and their subjects which often creates power relationships that may affect the process and results (Bryman, 2012, p.408). Since I identify as male, it is crucial to factor the present power dynamics when interviewing female or non-traditional gendered people. Feminist research practice shall be adopted to ensure that the subjects are not exploited for the sake of conducting the research; this includes stating a clear, broader objective beyond personal gain (i.e. the completion of the dissertation)

and not treating the interviewees as the ‘other’ interviewed by a cisgender homosexual male who potentially enjoys certain privileges (Bryman, 2012, p.411). Ultimately, I attempted not to be seen as an authoritative figure withholding academic supremacy; the interviews should be conducted as normal conversations in a safe space within which the interviewees feel comfortable to express their personal views, interpretations and behaviours. Even though I am unable to remove myself completely from the process, I attempted to give the interviewees the platform to create their own knowledge, and identify the instances when my positioning affects the analysis.

For these reasons, I decided to follow an ethnographic approach and conduct semi-structured interviews with the participants. The interviews lasted approximately fifty minutes each. I did not form a set of questions that should be answered by each of them. Even though I have already touched upon various contextual factors that may have an impact in the analysis, I decided to give the participants as much freedom as possible to direct the conversation. The direction they choose is itself informative and can illustrate what the participants prioritise and what not. Additionally, I occasionally refer to audio-visual or visual content that may facilitate the analysis.

Ethical Considerations

As it is often the case with social science research, there are ethical implications that need to be addressed. The participants come from an LGBTQ+ background and have possibly experienced discrimination such as homophobia or transphobia in their lives. The questions and objectives of the interview, however, are not aimed at discussing personal trauma and events of discrimination in order to pose a low risk of distress to the participants and myself. The participants and their drag characters have also been anonymised to prevent any potential identification. The research has been approved by the University of Glasgow Ethics

Committee, and the relevant documentation has been prepared to ensure the interviewees feel safe to participate.

Sample

Since I have acquaintances in various drag scenes, I started approaching potential participants during the summer hoping that I would achieve to recruit at least ten. Initially, I expected to have a diverse set of participants with a balance of kings and queens and who identified as male, female, or trans off-stage. As the snowball technique holds, I began approaching my personal acquaintances which then referred me to other potential participants. Even though I was expecting a larger sample, I managed to recruit five participants, four of whom perform as queens and one as king.

I was fortunate enough to recruit the founding members of the contemporary drag scene in Glasgow and Athens who have given a fruitful insight into the challenges of bringing the community together to participate in such events.

Maria, 28, performs as drag king Diamond in Glasgow. She identifies as white cisgender homosexual woman and is from a working-class background, educated at university level.

Ben, 24, performs as drag queen Sapphire in Glasgow. He identifies as white cisgender homosexual man from a working-class background, educated at university level.

Andreas, 26, performs as drag queen Ruby in Athens. He identifies as white cisgender homosexual man from a working-class background, educated at university level.

Helen, 22, performs as drag queen Emerald in Athens. She identifies as white cisgender homosexual woman from a working-class background, educated at university level.

Finally, George, 25, performs as drag queen Sparkle in Cologne. He identifies as white cisgender homosexual man from a working-class background, educated at university level.

Findings

Mapping gender

The conversation with all participants started directly or indirectly with gender. Even though I knew most of them, I believed the right starting point was to ask for their preferred pronoun so I could avoid misgendering anyone. Ben in a way pre-empted my question while signing the consent form:

“Do you want my boy or girl name?”

I prompted them to sign in the way they made them more comfortable to which they replied with:

“Ugh, it doesn’t matter, we’re the same person anyway!”

To make sure, I asked them whether they are comfortable with me referring to them as ‘he’, ‘she’, or ‘they’.

Ben: “You know, I never know what to answer to this question. I am a cisgender male and definitely not identify as a trans person, but I am genuinely not bothered with pronouns. Call me a he, I’ll reply; call me a she, I’ll reply to that, too. [...] I think all of us who do drag are in a sense gender fluid, pronouns don’t really matter to us. [...] In my family, I’m the black sheep. Too masculine for my mother and sisters and too feminine for my dad and brothers. I am male physically but not manly; I’m flamboyant. I don’t know what it means to be a man.” At that point, I assumed that for Ben trans involved sex reassignment; they did not identify as trans but were happy to call themselves gender fluid.

A similar trend became evident with the other interviewees. Maria said she was comfortable with ‘she’ or ‘they’. Helen claimed that:

“Everyone uses ‘she’ to refer to me. I am okay with that. Personally, I am not very comfortable with labels, but I understand people who are.”

The other two participants identified as cisgender male and did not elaborate. However, they both interchanged between pronouns when referring to themselves, their personas or other drag artists, indicating a more fluid conception of gender.

Dragging up – the beginning

We then started discussing what got them into drag. Helen and Ben both come from an artistic background; both have done art courses in university and were very eager to stress that drag is an art that deserves respect. Maria and George initially filled in positions in drag performances. Maria was heavily involved with gender studies during her undergraduate and postgraduate degree, and currently does a gender-centred PhD. George had a background in philosophy with a special interest in gender philosophy and a self-proclaimed love for Judith Butler. More or less, these participants have engaged with drag and gender on an academic basis. Andreas, however, was initially a major fan of RuPaul's Drag Race and started doing drag as a hobby:

“I gathered a few friends and we started doing our own balls in our houses, with categories and guest judges, just like RuPaul. We then started performing in a gay friendly restaurant on weekly drag nights which ended up being a regular thing.”

Andreas also stressed how class had an impact on his engagement with drag:

“You know the situation in Greece: if you are a young gay educated male, you have no chances of getting hired anywhere. I was looking for a job for months, and then I thought, why not turn drag into a paying job? Obviously, when people pay you to perform, they have expectations from your performance. I just end up doing lip-syncs to Beyoncé and Gaga songs which is not really me, but I need the money.”

The other participants took up drag as a hobby and a vehicle for experimentation and self-expression. They get paid for some of their performances but claimed that money was not their main motive. For Ben, drag also turned into a paying job about a year ago, and he also claimed that this has some sort of unavoidable impact on the performance.

Bringing the persona to life

I then prompted the participants to describe their drag and their personas. They all described their personas initially in a few words and referred to their personas as an existing entity. Ben described Sapphire as “Art, Fashion, Stupidity”; Maria described Diamond as “Flamboyant, Camp, Sexual”; Andreas described Ruby as “Funny, Fierce, Political”; Helen described Emerald as “Artistic, Feminine, Multi-dimensional”; and George described Sparkle as “Weirdly sexual, Ratchet-ass gender bender”. Unsurprisingly, the drag characters had very different personalities, yet all agreed that they are likely to evolve. For example, Helen said that:

“I’m not 100% sure about Emerald’s gender. All I know is that she has feminine characteristics but is currently agender. I don’t know, this might change.”.

She was also particularly against the terms faux-queen and bio-queen. She claimed that the latter is highly transphobic since it restricts drag to people whose gender portrayal matches their sex. In terms of the former:

“Why faux? Why do people find it so difficult to understand that a woman can be a drag queen?”.

All but George thought of their characters as an extension of themselves, whereas he thought of Sparkle as a completely different entity. While discussing their drag personas, it became evident how carefully their construction came about. However, they all agreed that drag is anything and anyone can do it. Andreas put it simply as:

“Drag is a journey. It allows you to be whatever you want to be. Drag is everything. You can be a seven-foot bearded guy voguing the house down. The only common thing that drag has is transformation: take a body, a character, anything and transform it to something else. That process allows you to express yourself.”.

Sexual orientation, sexuality, and drag

Some participants did not explicitly state their sexual orientation but allowed inferences to be made through references such as “us gay people”. However, for Maria, her persona’s sexual orientation played a decisive role in the performance:

“Drag kings usually parody cisgender straight masculine men. [...] Diamond is very camp, flamboyant, and confident. I am too very flamboyant, but definitely lack his confidence [laughs]. He is gay and very sexual, he’s here to seduce and amuse. He uses many sexual probes throughout his performances. It’s often that poppers, dicks, and dildos fly about when he’s on stage. He’s flamboyant and not ashamed of it, he wants to establish that gay male sex is not repulsive. As far as I’m aware, there’s no other drag kings in the scene that are openly gay.”

Similarly, George claimed that Sparke was highly sexual, like he is, and “does not miss an opportunity to hit on a straight guy in the audience, especially when he is there with his girlfriend”. However, he stated that he would not be comfortable having sex in drag; he would have to take the persona off. Andreas, on the other hand, claimed that he felt way more confident hitting on people in drag:

“As Ruby, I feel sexy and comfortable hitting on other men. I feel pretty. As a boy, I just feel guilty to be flirtatious, thinking I’ll make someone uncomfortable. As Ruby, I like to be open and inspire other women to own their sexuality”.

The subversive power of drag

At that point, the foundations had been established. It was time to find out what could be potentially subversive in their performances. I did not want to lead with an explicit question, so I started asking about what is involved in their typical and favourite performances.

Luckily, this sparked a fruitful narrative and led to conversations about audience and space.

Andreas had devised an interesting performance for Ruby. He claimed that he personally had a ‘fetish’ with the Greek culture – songs, dances, etc. What sets him from the other queens in the scene is his tendency to take those things that are usual and specific to Greek people and “fuck them up”. He was most prominently concerned with how the Christian Orthodox religion is so central to the Greek culture and how no one dares to question it. The anti-LGBT stance of the Greek Church has inspired him to protest this relationship in his performances. Ruby takes music from the Byzantium such as hymns, which are still performed in Greek churches, and combines them with voguing and other elements of gay subcultures. Andreas claimed that her most iconic performance is as an Orthodox nun.

Andreas: “Ruby tells the story of a crazy, Satan-possessed, feminist, Orthodox nun. She is possessed by a feminist spirit and wants to destroy all the guys in the church. She is initially dressed as a nun and gradually transforms into a queen. I have done many versions of this. I have a more glamorous, family-friendly version and a darker, underground version with exorcisms etc. The audiences always love it!”.

Diamond involved a similarly transformative routine. Maria says she sings and so Diamond does not have to lip-sync which gives him greater freedom during the performance. As mentioned, Diamond is “feminine, glittery, jazzy”.

Maria: “You know, there is an expectation for women to be constantly sexy; put that on a man and he’s ready for a carnival! Diamond often uses the clothes in my wardrobe. I mean, I can go from flamboyant to butch. This is relatively acceptable for me as a woman. Camp, however, is stigmatised within straight and gay communities. I think laughing at the situation can offend it. [...] I don’t mind offending people as long as it can spark a conversation. I don’t want to be perceived as mocking camp people though. I’m not parodying camp, I’m parodying how it is viewed by society. [...] Drag is about parodying a stereotype, to take the piss out of that.”.

Gender is evident in Diamond's performances. His reverse-striptease routine is a good example.

Maria: "It starts as a traditional striptease. I am happy to be naked on stage so that makes it easier. I start taking off the femininity. Shit! I've got no gender. Then I start putting on masculinities."

Gender-bending appears in Sparkle and Sapphire's performances.

Ben: "Sapphire is a fashion statement and a shallow character. She is not your typical model though, she adds a weird twist to it. [...] Queens are thought to be glamorous and feminine, but for me, the best type of drag has no limits to gender. There's beard drag for example. I don't always pad or have wigs on. I don't try to change my voice as Sapphire – I have a deep voice and that's that. [...] I came under fire for calling Sapphire a ditsy blonde fashionista. I take feminine aspects and empower them through drag. Even though she might not be the brightest, when she's on stage, she is in charge and in control."

The interesting feature about Ben's drag is that the persona performs as a character. Her weekly shows have different themes during which Sapphire impersonates male characters such as Leprechauns and Oswald the Rabbit and performs in male drag.

Ben: "It's like the character plays other characters, you know?"

George imagined Sparkle as the drag version of Friedrich Nietzsche. When asked to describe his performances as Sparkle, he said:

"Sparkle is flamboyant and over-the-top. She is in full makeup: feminine eyes and cheeks and underneath that a massive moustache! Sparkle doesn't wear wigs and doesn't pad. She is proud of her body and body hair and is not afraid to show them off. In one of my performances, I went on stage in a jockstrap and a 1920's ladies coat. When the coat came off, I just shook my ass to the audience. Sparkle takes to the extreme things you could do, but wouldn't do normally. She tries to play dumb even though she can't convince anyone, smiles

to people, dances and throws shades all the time. I try to make her a likeable paradox. She doesn't necessarily look like a drag queen, but is perceived as one. She has a male body but a feminine attitude. That's normal drag for me."

Helen thought of Emerald's performances as inherently political and able to criticise gender norms.

"Queer entertainment itself is political. We are unapologetic about it. We exist, we'll have fun, and we'll fight. [...] I think the most important aspect of my performances is the transformation. I don't look anything like my persona. This just shows how easy it is to play with gender. However, I have faced misogynistic and negative comments. Some people are like "she's a woman, I don't want to fuck a woman so she's not valuable" and others don't believe I do 'true drag' because I am not a man."

Andreas also noted instances of misogyny in the LGBT community in Athens:

"People struggle with female drag queens. It's so hard to get rid of patriarchy; you need to check on yourself all the time. Some people choose not to fight against stereotypes because it's simply too hard. Some performances are misogynistic too, especially when performers want to play the dumb whore to pleasure straight men. I don't want to do that. I want to be extreme, trashy, and political."

Ben also made a comment on the misogynistic aspects of certain performances:

"I don't think drag is inherently misogynistic. Some performances can be though. I don't really like old drag, I think they are unwilling to adapt. Here, for example [points at 'The Mammy' in Elfie's Magical Adventures]. This, this is the type of drag I don't like. I'm sorry, but I really hate it. It's pantomime. Straight drag mocks rather than celebrate gender."

He also discussed his personal experience with coming under fire from feminist and trans groups:

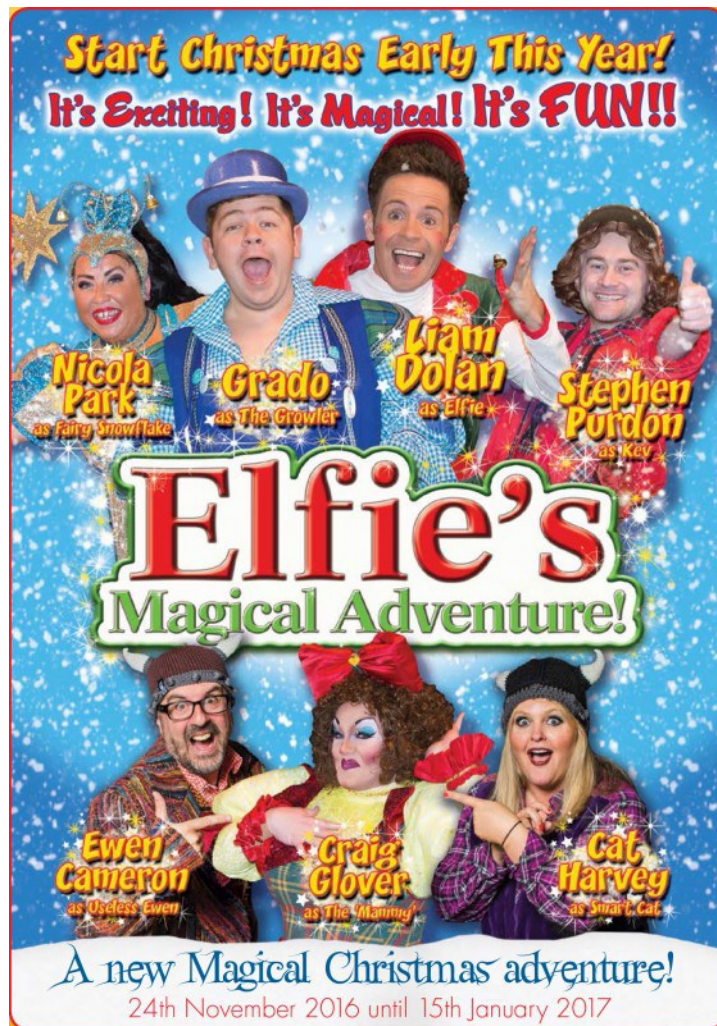


Illustration 1.1: Elfie’s Magical Adventure; Credit to: Panorama; Available at: <https://www.paviliontheatre.co.uk/shows/elfies-magical-adventure/>

“I think there is a point where being too left wing is similar to being too right wing. I call them left-wing fascists. In their attempt to not offend, they manage to exclude. Drag queens are the warriors of LGBT movements, you can’t deny that. Drag represents all sides of being a woman. Why is it so bad to be stupid?”.

Evidently, the performers were highly aware of how their performances have a wider impact, and how it can be perceived differently by different groups. Ben performs in LGBT and straight venues.

Audience and Performative Space

Ben: “I host a local bingo night in a straight venue. Straight audiences just see clown. They expect a show and a lip-sync to straight songs. They don’t put much thought into it. [...]

Whenever I perform in a club, I am faced with drunk students. All they want is a lip-sync to Ariana Grande. [...] Clubs also have high ceilings and I can’t wear big hair! [laughs]. During my weekly show, however, audiences are there to pay attention to the show. There I can be more creative and present something more complex. I know people won’t ignore me.”.

Maria had a similar worry. She predominantly performs in alternative queer bars, but was concerned that her performances would be different and potentially not allow her to push boundaries within mainstream gay venues in Glasgow. Andreas, Helen, and George argued that the audience plays a role in their performance. They attempt to always engage their audiences which makes their performances dependant on the attendees’ expectations, however, they could not come up with precise examples of how they do that. They claimed that they tested the waters; if an audience was willing to take more, they would give more. For example, George as Sparkle flirts with straight men in the venue:

“Most of them usually love it! It makes them question “how the hell am I attracted to someone who’s obviously a guy?”. Their girlfriends usually have a laugh, too, especially when I make comments like “Why are you with her? I can suck dick better than her for sure.”. They just end up buying me a drink or giving me a tip and that’s it.”.

The conversations with the drag artists offer an abundance of information. The next section is devoted to bringing this data in conversation, scrutinizing them through the established literature and research, and analysing how they can help us understand drag’s contributions to subverting gender hierarchies.

Discussion

Drag, bodies, and gender

Common thought made me expect the participants to describe drag as an exaggerated performance of gender (Egner and Maloney, 2015). I was surprised that none described drag as exaggeration or their performances as exaggerated. Rather, the common trend was ‘transformation’, a term mentioned directly by three participants and incited by the other two. I found this definition to clash with the ones provided in the examined literature, possibly due to their sample since they interviewed mostly queens that construct an exaggerated female persona (Egner & Maloney, 2015; Taylor & Rupp, 2004). However, the participants confirmed the trend of drag performers to describe drag as an art form and a vehicle of self-expression (ibid.). Ben explained how he thought RuPaul’s Drag Race is affecting the makeup industry and fashion trends of women such as heavy contouring. Since the participants come from a rather specific age group, one could potentially infer that definitions and expressions of drag are changing. Could what Ben has described as ‘old drag’ be dying out and a modern conception of drag be on the rise that defines the trends of the female fashion industry?

Even though most participants admitted incorporating comedy in their performances, as Ben commented, ‘it’s not clown drag’. Ben claimed that ‘old drag’ was eager to point out that the performer is actually a man in a dress, heavy makeup and a wig, and the comedic aspects of the show were derived from that illusion. The participants did not claim to perform comedy based on that. Rather, they treat their personas as standalone entities with their own genders and bodies, and not as characters to be made fun of. This is crucial when we start theorising how drag can impact gender hierarchies and performances of masculinities and femininities since the performers aim to empower their characters and not portray them as caricatures of gender performance. This is in line with the 801 girls that Egner and Maloney (2015) interviewed, as well as the drag kings in Shapiro’s (2007) research.

Let us assume that there is a new kind of drag performance on the rise, particularly the ones presented by the participants. How can we examine their potential in disrupting gender hierarchies and representations?

Firstly, one can observe that the participants held definitions of gender prone to interpretation. Four of the participants were either indifferent or preferred to be referred to in neutral pronouns and ways. Unsurprisingly, none of their participants mentioned their biological sex while discussing gender, inciting that the former was not a determinant of the latter for them. This confirms the postmodern, social constructivist approach the research adopted. The trend is also evident in other literature where drag queens often change their pronouns and communicate in a gender-neutral or gender-bending language (Taylor & Rupp, 2004; Egner & Maloney, 2015).

Furthermore, the participants rarely referred to attire, appearances, or mannerism as *male* or *female*, but rather using descriptive words such as *feminine*, *masculine*, *butch* or *femme*, showing that they do not associate those appearances with gender but rather view them as compatible with any. In fact, Helen even claimed that we refer to things as *masculine* or *feminine* due to custom and because it facilitates conversation, but would not reduce them to *male* or *female* respectively. Again, this points out the neutrality the participants hold against commonly held gendered practices.

Surprisingly, none of the queens employed ways of hiding their off-stage and stressing their on-stage genders. Besides Helen who self-identifies as a cisgender female, the other participants claimed that they rarely pad, tuck, singe or wear wigs. Padding entails the insertion of foam materials in one's clothing, usually at the thigh area, to make a body appear curvy; tucking entails hiding male genitalia to achieve a flat pelvic area that emulates a vagina; singeing entails putting on a corset to achieve a feminine figure (small waist and larger hips). This results in gender-bending, blurring the ways in which one attempts to infer

another's gender from their appearance. Therefore, the queens offer alternative realisations of womanhood that deviate from normal expectations. Undoubtedly, this is culturally-dependent, but generally the male gaze demands curvy bodies with large breasts and commercial-like hair. Rather, the queens often come out as women with penises, flat breasts, short hair, or all of the above.

Gender-bending is central to George's character. Her appearance in full makeup, feminine attire, feminine mannerisms and yet has rich body hair and a moustache that often perplex her audiences as to her gender.

The examined literature did not focus much on the appearance of their subjects but some descriptions included heavy make-up and extravagant hair (Egner & Maloney, 2015).

Sparkle's and other appearances are politically charged in the sense that they defy social expectations of gender expression which tend to be based on satisfying the heterosexual male. They show a way in which one can celebrate their own body regardless of gender and the infinite possibilities to express that beyond norms and binaries. The queens legitimise alternative appearances that deviate from the mainstream while empowering the potential of female people to express their gender in a unique way.

Performing masculinities or femininities

In terms of performing masculinity, only one of the participants claimed that they involved masculine aspects in their routine. Maria's persona, however, was there to mock toxic masculinities and celebrate other forms of, including gay, masculinities. Diamond is openly and explicitly gay. He is dressed in an unconventional fashion for a man: attire in bright colours and glitter. He has a quirky character that becomes evident in his humour and mannerisms. Shapiro's (2007) research included a few drag kings who were openly gay.

They were also keen to play with masculinities and present different versions of it, similar to Diamond.

Connell (1992) argues that the heterosexual white male has become the model of masculinity. This interpretation of masculinity is strongly linked to patriarchy and the view of men as rational, powerful, objective agents not prone to emotional distress (ibid.) Evidently, this definition excludes masculinities exhibited by homosexual or men of colour (ibid.; Ward, 2000). Even within gay communities, straight masculinities are favoured over gay masculinities, often referred to as 'camp', and people who display the latter are less likely to be given similar credibility or even be sexually desirable (Ward, 2000).

Maria's persona exhibits and performs various of gay masculinities. Besides, he is a self-proclaimed camp gay. This is subversive in two main ways. Firstly, by critiquing the misogyny and femme-phobia that is manifested within the LGBT+ community (Ward, 2000).

The centrality of Diamond's sexual orientation in his performances is crucial to that subversiveness. Diamond represents a homosexual male who is nevertheless comfortable with his effeminate ways and uses them as a tool to seduce potential lovers. Additionally, he empowers *camp* gay men by being in charge in his performance and define the way it will escalate (Torr & Bottoms, 2010). This can be viewed as an analogy to gay movements who often suppress and discriminate against their effeminate members (Connell, 1992). Diamond rejects this hierarchy (ibid.; Ward, 2000) and presents an effeminate male with the power to define.

Secondly, Diamond shows that not only is it okay to be gay, it is also okay to deviate from traditional notions of 'manhood'. He shows a more sensitive side to masculinities and is comfortable with embracing his romanticism, jazzy mannerisms and flawless appearance. He sings along to Doris Day songs and pulls men on stage to flirt with. All these aid in the

deconstruction of the *alpha male* and contribute to embracing and celebrating the feminine aspects of genders.

As suggested, femininity is viewed as inferior to masculinity since it is associated with softness, weakness and emotional reactions (Butler, 1995). Andreas' performance as an Orthodox nun is not only re-appropriating the aforementioned and femininity in general, it also protests highly gendered institutions such as the Greek Orthodox church (Liveris, 2005). Firstly, the persona is self-identified as a feminist. In her performance, she portrays a nun as typically thought of, reserved and avoiding eye contact. While the performance advances, the nun takes the veil off and shows herself in makeup, a revealing dress and dancing provocatively, not shying away from touching her breasts and sexual organs. This performance deconstructs the image of the 'pure' and 'virgin' woman that is prominent in the Orthodox Church (ibid.). It portrays a woman in full control of herself, body and the decisions that affect her. She is dancing in a sexually explicit way and she is searching for sexual partners counters the notion of sex for pleasure as a sin that is held by the Church (ibid.). In fact, she embraces and celebrates feminine sexuality and legitimises the sexual desires of women. Lastly, she is addressing a predominantly queer audience from which one can infer that she is not performing for the male gaze but rather for fulfilling her own sexual pursuits. It not only demonstrates the fluidity of gender, but also the fluidity of sexual orientation since she is attempting to attract homosexual men to engage in sexual intercourse with someone who appears to be a woman.

These examples not only illustrate gender hierarchies but also how hierarchies of sexuality unavoidably come in the conversation. The performances, from the point of view of the performers at least, succeed in undermining the structures that expect them to perform a gendered heterosexuality.

Class

Since the participants claimed a working class background, it is important to mention how their engagement with drag deconstruct classist views of gender performance. Barrett (2000) argues that working class gay men are thought of as tougher, distant, and holding conversations only about football, alcohol and, counterintuitively, sexualising women. My sample has exhibited the opposite. They engaged in highly gendered activities such as drag, embodying feminine personas and empowering their femininity and homosexual desires throughout their performances. Even off-stage, they described themselves as flamboyant or camp in contrast with popular misconceptions to associate working class men with intense masculinity. This also addresses the diversity within gay men and illustrates the desire of some to tackle misogyny.

Motivation and Intentions

One of the most important findings, the performers' motivations and intentions, counters Schacht's (2002) argument that drag queens employ masculinity to parody women while reserving benefits from both genders. He claims that their performances mirror stereotypical conceptions of femininity and have no desire to challenge hegemonic norms (Schacht, 2002). The queens in this research were actively looking to challenge gender hierarchies. Andreas' character was explicitly a feminist aiming to empower femininity and female sexuality, and has done so without aiming to please a heterosexual male audience. The other queens also argued that one of their goals was to empower femininity and show the diversity among feminine characters. Ultimately, they all described gender hierarchies as 'nonsense' and were attempting to undermine the social conceptions of femininity as powerless and undesirable.

Similarly, Maria's king was explicitly there to 'take the piss out of masculinity' by portraying an effeminate gay character in a way that not only does it not parody femininity, but aims to empower and celebrate it.

The fact that all participants were critical of the lack of diversity in RuPaul's Drag Race also confirms their desire to challenge hegemonic gender structures. All the participants claimed that the show often presents problematic aspects of drag and femininity, inciting misogyny, fat-phobia, or trans-phobia. For example, Ben was critical of the judges' constant insistence on the padding and feminisation of the contestants' personas. George eagerly explained that subversive queens such as Milk in season six were eliminated quickly because she did not fit in the show's brand (especially when she appeared in male drag as workroom RuPaul). This confirms the participants' preference towards gender-bending and subversive drag, which goes against Schacht's (2002) argument.



Illustration 1.2: Milk as workroom RuPaul; Credit to: N. Fallon, 2014; Available at: <http://www.businessnewsdaily.com/6185-rupauls-drag-race-career-lessons.html>

Audience and Performative Space

The participants described an interactional relationship with their audience and their desire to include the attendants in the performance. However, their intention to subvert was often inhibited by the audience and the space they were performing in. Maria's performances took place in independent queer venues and attracted a predominantly queer audience which she claims enjoy and participate in the performances. Nevertheless, she mentioned that some performances alienated members of the audience which left at sexually explicit parts. She assumed that those attendants were heterosexual and cisgender, which is against Surkan's (2003, cited in Egner & Maloney, 2015) view that more conservative audiences are more likely to find the performances subversive. Similarly, Ben found audiences as such restrictive and was reserved to performances that cater for heterosexual entertainment. Ben also claimed that club venues where the audience are most likely drunk and the performance takes place in the background do not offer much potential for political statements. Maria also raised similar concerns that Diamond's performances would not be appreciated in a mainstream gay venue. Lastly, the negative comments made to Helen by homosexual male members of the audience raise a concern whether such members are likely to be triggered by the performance to rethink and re-evaluate gender hierarchies.

I am cautious about generalising such findings since the research did not involve interviews with the audiences in order to make sound evaluations. However, as Egner and Maloney (2015) argue, there is very limited research on the interaction between drag artists and their audience, and even more limited of the impact of their performative spaces. However, a drag performance is only a performance if it involves an audience (ibid.) and therefore that interaction ought to be examined further.

Limitations, contributions, and recommendations

Firstly, let me acknowledge the scope of this paper. This paper is presented as an undergraduate dissertation. It has a limited word limit of 10,000 words and timescale to be completed. Thus, it was not possible to engage in all possible dimensions of the research question. I focused on examining a small fraction of the greater debate, and the subversive potential of drag should not be studied solely in terms of gender. As other researchers have done hitherto, it is crucial to examine in detail the context and other factors that may have an impact such as class and race.

Furthermore, I would be careful in generalising the findings of my study due to the very limited sample and methods available to me at the time. I regret that I did not have the opportunity to interview members of the audience of the drag artists I interviewed, and was unable to invest time in observing their shows. A bigger and more diverse sample would have also offer different experiences and contributed to the findings. For example, it would potentially be insightful to interview heterosexual drag performers and examine the impact of their sexual orientation on the performance. However, as argued, a thesis of this scope does not allow for investment in greater depth.

A minor hurdle I faced was language while interviewing Helen. She preferred to conduct the interview in Greek, which is also my native language, but I was not familiar with the terminology around drag and gender studies. The conversation was a bit frustrating at times when either of us had to explain or take a few moments to find the relevant word which may have taken away some of the possible contributions Helen could have made to another interviewer.

Lastly, I observed my status as homosexual male to have an impact on my conversations with Helen and Maria. Maria repeated a few times that she did not mean any offence to gay guys, especially camp ones, and it was evident she was very aware of her terms by taking brief pauses or quickly changing to more politically correct language when referring to gay guys. Helen, on

the other hand, has evidently faced a few instances of misogyny while performing by gay men. This makes me curious as to whether either of them would potentially disclose more, or even different information to a female or non-binary interviewer.

Despite the limitations, I believe the participants provided unique perspectives which can help us debate the potential of drag to subvert gender hierarchies. Among the remarkable contributions, Andreas' nun routine is particularly novel and exclusive to the Greek context which allows us to see the impact of specific cultural norms in understanding and performing gender. Helen has illuminated the challenges of performing as a female drag queen and how drag can empower aspects of femininity. Maria brought sexual orientation to the forefront and has demonstrated the various ways in which it interacts with gender and gender expression. Ben's notions of femininity and how to embrace them are also particularly insightful. Lastly, George's gender-bending persona illustrates how gender appearances and expressions have the potential to subvert rigid social expectations.

This research makes a few valuable contributions discussed in detail in the previous section. It has also examined two locations, Glasgow and Athens, whose drag scene has not been yet researched by academics, as far as I am concerned. I believe Athens hosts a drag scene that could be of great academic interest. The city's drag scene was recently founded and rapidly bloomed, as Andreas mentioned, taking over many LGBT+ venues and marches. Amidst the economic crisis and the strong presence of the Orthodox Church, it arguably has a lot to offer in examining the subversive potential of drag, in terms of gender and beyond.

Conclusion – “We are all born naked and the rest is drag.” - *RuPaul*

This research has employed a postmodern qualitative approach to evaluate to what extent drag performances can disrupt gender hierarchies. It has used data collected from ethnographic semi-structured interviews with five drag artists performing in Glasgow, Athens, or Cologne. It has provided a brief discussion of the relevant theoretical frameworks before deciding on Butler’s postmodern analysis of gender as performance.

The results of this research in many ways conform with relevant researches and contest them in other. The performances described by the participants were highly critical of gender hierarchies. Firstly, they were motivated to critique toxic masculinity and celebrate femininity, despite that each performer decided to do this in a different way. They were critical of rigid gender categorisations and often gender-blended in their performances (Shaw, 2005). Highly aware of these issues, they design their performances in a fashion that portrays femininity as desirable and equal to masculinities. In many respects, their performances undermine social conceptions of gender and in turn deconstruct gender hierarchies which favour masculinity over femininity.

However, their intentions were sometimes faced by an unwilling audience to question gender hierarchies. The participants claimed that they performed more moderate versions of their persona when across straight audiences and aimed to create an entertainment show rather than to make a political statement. Finally, some found mainstream gay venues to be restrictive of politically charged performances.

This paper concludes that drag, from the perspective of the performer, can undoubtedly be considered subversive if they intent it to be so. Nevertheless, since the performances are directed to an audience, it is important to evaluate the audience’s reception of the performance and willingness to engage in a political conversation. Even though performing gender fluidity, masculinity or femininity may in itself be a political protest against

hierarchies of gender (Taylor, Rupp and Gamson, 2004), it is important to be aware of the contextual factors that encourage or restrict the performance's potential subversiveness. Further research should aim to explore the relationship between the performer and the audience, and attempt to determine which factors contribute or inhibit the potential of the performance to encourage its audience to re-evaluate gender hierarchies.

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