

Exploring the influence of drag in the Central Valley LGBTQ community

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Abstract

Drag is the art of female and male impersonation. According to Berkowitz and Belgrave (2010), its culture within the LGBTQ+ community has helped loosen the restrictions of gender across the board, not only in the context of drag performance. Transgender individuals have been able to use drag as a means of survival within the context of performance. Moreover, this preliminary research suggests that heteronormative society restricts gender performance by enforcing the societal gender construction of men and women. Furthermore, the research doesn't focus on why drag performers are the most visible part of the LGBTQ+ culture, i.e. Logo's television show "RuPaul's Drag Race" (Goldmark, 2015). For this exploratory study, I expand on the limited research done on drag communities in rural areas such as the Central Valley of California. Through observational and in-depth interview data I hope to understand how participants experience, cope with and challenge their social marginality within the larger heteronormative community through drag performance.

Keywords: drag, LGBTQ+, California Central Valley, transgender

Introduction

When looking at the LGBTQ community some of the most public faces are those of drag performers. But what is their connection and role in the community? Drag is where individuals dress up as a different gender, primarily for short periods of time, which differentiates the practice from people who are trans and change their gender socially and/or legally. Drag is nothing new to the LGBTQ community, although acceptance of it outside the community has not always been obvious or direct. Men have always been looked at as strong and women have been seen as the "weaker sex." The topic of drag is taboo because wanting to take on a role in the stronger group is okay, but wanting to be part of the weaker group is not. The purpose of this project is to not only contribute to the existing research, but also to introduce a topic that is seen by general society as taboo. This project helps destigmatize different types of gender performance through the help of drag.

Literature review

When looking at the impact of drag within the LGBTQ community, researchers often have to look at the perceptions, origins, and ways in which communities like these thrive. Recently, drag queens have seen a broad rise in popularity through *RuPaul's Drag Race*, a competition

reality show where drag queens compete for the crown and "title of America's next Drag Superstar" (Moore, 2013). RuPaul Charles is easily one of the most famous drag queens with record charting music and popular television shows in the 1990s. This has continued through to his most recent award-winning show, *RuPaul's Drag Race*, since its inception in 2009 (Moore, 2013). Drag is an important way to investigate gender within a community. It is directly represented by the RuPaul phrase, "You're born naked and the rest is drag," an expression that Moore (2013) argues reflects the show's "de-naturalized gender performances" allowing drag to be represented as "fully realized threads of identity which are woven into a perceived whole." That is to say, drag is an important way to see that gender is not inherently natural, but socially constructed through interaction and performance, allowing for an easier route that people can travel to come to understand how their own gendered expressions are malleable.

These gender constructions reaffirm the importance of drag because it is through these moments that we can see how important it is to realize that gender is something changing rather than static (Schacht, 2003). They function to aid audiences in seeing the ways gender comes to exist, as well as how easy it is to cross the boundaries of gendered expectations of behavior. While drag is not the only way to do this, this does not negate that it still has influence. Drag, as Schacht (2003) notes, is what helps centralize that

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playing with gender is an important component of the LGBTQ community through its history. This makes both intuitive and empirical sense in that individuals in the LGBTQ community are regularly derided as doing gender “wrong” by not participating in normative heterosexuality, so intracommunity approaches are especially important.

But what is the culture of drag and its impact in our LGBTQ community both nationally and locally? The current popularity of *RuPaul’s Drag Race* is a logical continuation of the earlier influences of drag in society. In 1969, the Stonewall Riots were initiated, invigorated, led, and supported by drag queens. This fact, though, is regularly overlooked. As an example, an article in *The Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review* (1994) discusses how the history of the Stonewall Riots, a key moment in the LGBTQ history, is one where the central role of drag queens and trans people is often obscured, primarily to cater to a more normative market.

Because of this, there is rampant obscuring of how drag queens led and maintained the community’s protest over multiple days and used that energy to build coalitions for future activism.

This example is emblematic of the ways in which drag queens are public faces but their roles and importance have been pushed down and hidden, thus creating an important issue to investigate because of the ways drag queens are continuing participants in their communities while supporting broader social movements. These ties to community help give a solid grounding not only for social events, but also fundraisers and philanthropy. A prime example of this is the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, a national group of drag queens in various cities who raise money for various causes, non-profits, and events that aid their communities and the individuals within them. Studies also emphasize the importance of drag performers in clubs (Rupp and Taylor, 2003). As Rupp and Taylor (2003) note, drag queens operate within their communities as key members, while also being an important avenue for the exploration of gender and presentation, not only for the local LGBTQ community members, but also for cisgender heterosexual audience members.

Building from these vantage points (historical and contemporary, LGBTQ and heterosexual community), the current project aims to look at the local context of drag queens in California’s Central Valley. More specifically, it aims to understand, through the experiences of drag performers in this region, how they see themselves within their community while building up an understanding of how they took on that role and what it means to do drag. By focusing on these factors, the project addresses the above

points in multiple ways. It looks at the historical context and the broader implications of why drag queens do what they do, all while addressing if they think drag queens are centrally important in the community, and if so, why? The goal of the project is to understand the roles drag plays within the larger LGBTQ community through the specific experiences of drag queens of the Central Valley.

Methods

The data collection method used in this project will be purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is a form of convenience sampling wherein respondents have been identified because they have specific knowledge of the topic or phenomena on hand. This project is focused on the role of drag in the LGBTQ community. This means I will look at the publically named drag queens at events and at clubs in the Central Valley (with a focus on the range from Stockton to Fresno) to construct my sample. Contacting publically noted queens offers two key strengths to this project. Firstly, these drag queens have a larger knowledge of their roles in the community. Secondly, publically named queens are known and recognized members of society, thus ensuring sure that the individuals I contact are people who are known and identified as drag performers, thereby reducing concern regarding the fact that not everyone within the LGBTQ community is out.

Approximately 12-14 drag queens will be contacted through their publicly listed contact information with the goal for the final sample to be interviews with approximately 10 drag queens. Because they are publicly known with publically available contact information, this means that all contact is direct, increasing confidentiality. Participants’ age range will be 18-40 and they will be both male and female. Respondents will be supplied with a study information sheet and will be asked to sign an informed consent sheet. Semi-structured interviews will be conducted along the points mentioned earlier.

Interviews will primarily be conducted at their main performance venue, although participants will be able to choose the location of the interview depending on their schedule and preference. Because survey questions are personal and reference potentially sensitive topics to gender identity and sexuality, participants may feel uncomfortable or embarrassed answering them. Contact information for the student researcher and the faculty advisor will be provided to performers if they wish to receive further information or discontinue participation.

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