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## **Postfeminist Hegemony in a Precarious World: Lessons in Neoliberal Survival from *RuPaul's Drag Race***

By Phoebe Chetwynd<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

The popularity of the reality television show *RuPaul's Drag Race* is often framed as evidence of Western societies' increasing tolerance towards queer identities. This paper instead considers the ideological cost of this mainstream success, arguing that the show does not successfully challenge dominant heteronormative values. In light of Rosalind Gill's work on postfeminism, it will be argued that the show's format calls upon contestants (and viewers) to conform to a postfeminist ideal that valorises normative femininity and reaffirms the gender binary. Through its analysis of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, I further intend to develop our understanding of the relationship between neoliberalism and postfeminism. It will be argued that neoliberalism conditions postfeminism and yet at the same time neoliberalism is in some ways dependent on postfeminism for its own survival. Thus, this paper will demonstrate the importance of caution with regard to superficially subversive cultural objects in an era which has witnessed the increasing entanglement of progressive and regressive politics.

*Keywords:* *RuPaul's Drag Race*, postfeminism, neoliberalism, drag, precarity theory, consumerism

### **Introduction**

Since the 1990s, postfeminism has become an increasingly important concept as theorists seek to make sense of the complex and often contradictory discourses about women in the media. Rosalind Gill defines postfeminism as a 'sensibility', characterised by narratives of empowerment, self-surveillance, sexualisation and consumerism (2007, p. 149). In other words, postfeminist media culture renders some feminist narratives more visible whilst at the same time allowing misogynistic narratives to persist and even intensify. Further, Gill argues that postfeminism should not be understood only through its relationship to feminism but also through its relationship to neoliberalism (2017, p. 606). Neoliberalism emerged in response to the Keynesian project of state intervention, instead prioritising the free market in all economic and political policy (Brown, 2015, p. 31). This paper will follow Wendy Brown in understanding neoliberalism to be not only a governmental policy but also 'a widely and deeply disseminated rationality' that 'transmogrifies every human domain and endeavour along with humans themselves according to a specific image of the economic' (2015, pp. 9–10). In other words, neoliberalism produces new forms of subjectivity whereby subjects understand themselves as a form of human capital that needs to be constantly improved in order to be better able to compete (Brown, 2015, p. 33). Gill underlines the striking similarity between the ideal neoliberal subject and the ideal postfeminist subject – notably in that the individual is constituted as an entrepreneurial actor (2007, p. 163). Research on

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postfeminist media culture initially focussed on cultural objects such as *Sex and the City* or *Bridge Jones's Diary* – objects that presented the postfeminist subject as white, middle class and straight. Recently, research has turned from these classic postfeminist case studies to consider how postfeminism affects minority identities. This has included research on women of colour (Butler, 2013), transnational postfeminism (Dosekun, 2015), homosexual postfeminist men (Genz and Brabon, 2009) and lesbian brides on television (McNicholas Smith and Tyler, 2017). Despite these developments, Gill suggests that the relationship between postfeminism and gender non-conforming or trans\* identities requires greater theorisation (2017, p. 615).

This paper intends to respond to this call through an ideological analysis of the reality television show *RuPaul's Drag Race (RPDR)*. Understandings of drag are varied and shifting but within the show drag is understood to be a queer art form in which people transform themselves into their drag persona (Schottmiller, 2017, p. 23). The show predominantly depicts contestants who specialise in performing femininity: drag queens. Therefore, an analysis of *RPDR* as a postfeminist cultural object will raise questions about the kinds of femininity privileged on the show. Further, because the contestants are understood to transform into their (feminine) drag persona, this analysis will also interrogate how the show both denaturalises gender and at the same time reaffirms a stable gender binary. *RPDR* follows a traditional reality television competition format: the contestants compete in challenges and one is eliminated each week until only 'America's Next Drag Superstar' remains. Decisions are made by two regular judges RuPaul – a celebrity drag queen – and his close friend Michelle Visage (since Season 3) alongside a range of guest judges.<sup>2</sup> The show has become increasingly popular with both queer and straight audiences and this has been accompanied by growing academic attention. Most notably, two collections of essays have been published: *RuPaul's Drag Race and the Shifting Visibility of Drag Culture* (2017) and *The Makeup of RuPaul's Drag Race* (2014). The essays in both books tend to focus on issues of identity politics and representation within the show – and this is characteristic of *RPDR* scholarship generally (Schottmiller, 2017, p. 127). The work of Carl Schottmiller (2017) and Lori Hall-Araujo (2016) is a key exception to this trend: both authors focus on camp, parody and consumer capitalism in the show. This paper intends to draw together these two strands of *RPDR* scholarship in order to more fully consider how neoliberal capitalism colonizes minority identities.

To this end, I will engage in a close textual analysis of Seasons 6 and 10 so that the show's ideological underpinnings can be properly assessed. These two seasons were chosen because they were made after the format of the show had stabilised and yet remain sufficiently temporally distant for developments to be identified. In the first place, this paper will consider the format of *RPDR* in light of Judith Butler's claim that 'drag may well be used in the service of both the denaturalisation and the reidealization of hyperbolic heterosexual gender norms' (2011, p. 85). It will be argued that at the same time as it denaturalises gender, the show calls upon both viewer and contestant to conform to a postfeminist feminine ideal. The following three sections will explore what this interpellation reveals about the relationship between neoliberalism and postfeminism. It will be argued that a comparative analysis of Seasons 6 and 10 highlights an increasing dependence on a psychological register of dispositions for survival in neoliberal society. Moreover, it will be suggested that these same dispositions ensure the survival of neoliberal society because they minimise dissent. Finally, I will propose a second psychological register, predicated on the gendered internalisation of unhappiness, which works in tandem with Gill's register to secure the survival of neoliberal society. It will be concluded that postfeminism and neoliberalism have a reciprocal relationship to each other: postfeminism is conditioned by the needs of neoliberal

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<sup>2</sup> This paper will follow *RPDR* in using masculine pronouns for RuPaul and feminine pronouns for the contestants.

society and the two postfeminist psychological registers contribute to the survival of neoliberal society.

### ***RuPaul's Drag Race: Establishing a postfeminist feminine ideal***

Gill identifies three 'lives' of postfeminism: the cultural, the affective and the psychic. The cultural life refers to the way in which postfeminism has saturated contemporary media culture, becoming more and more hegemonic since the 1990s (Gill, 2017, p. 606). The judges in *RPDR* establish rules of 'realness' – standards by which the feminine illusion of drag is deemed to be authentic. In some ways, these rules draw attention to the social constitution of femininity, thereby denaturalising gender norms. And yet, Butler notes that this denaturalisation may be 'in the service of a perpetual re-idealization' of a feminine ideal (2011, p. 89). An analysis of the rules of realness established within *RPDR* reveals a privileging of a normatively attractive femininity. This can be seen in the judge's attitudes to slim queens, for example when Courtney Act is told by RuPaul: 'Body: 10, Couture: 6' (S06E02).<sup>3</sup> Later in the series, RuPaul warns the contestant 'it's a cliché but you're resting on pretty, don't be a cliché, my dear' (S06E06). Ami Pomerantz argues that 'don't rest on pretty' is 'not a problematic remark in itself but since Michelle saves this critique for skinny queens, she reveals what "pretty" really means to her' (Pomerantz, 2017, p. 110). Indeed, significant emphasis is placed on an hourglass figure throughout the show. Although the judges approve of her look, The Vixen is criticised for not wearing a waist cincher: 'Imagine that thing just sucked all the way in' (S10E05). This focus on a slim and normatively attractive femininity demonstrates Gill's claim that in postfeminist media culture the body is 'a defining feature of womanhood' (2017, p. 616).

The importance of the body to the postfeminist feminine ideal brings us to consider the potential essentialism of this emphasis – particularly in a show that claims to represent the queer community. The show largely understands drag to be transformative – often, a transformation from a male-presenting contestant to a feminine drag persona. Indeed, RuPaul continues to use the catchphrase 'Gentlemen start your engines, and may the best woman win!' despite the fact that there have been several openly trans\*<sup>4</sup> or gender non-conforming contestants. Indeed, those contestants that choose to blur the boundaries between genders may face criticism: Laganja Estranja is critiqued because 'I need more fish from you on stage, I felt like it was boy' whereas Kelly Mantle is praised because her outfit is 'very feminine and I like that' (S06E01). Remarks such as these suggest that *RPDR* represents a 'flexibilization of sexual politics' whereby 'certain guises of homosexuality have been included into what is considered "normal,"' leaving other sexual identities – in this case gender non-conforming identities – to remain marginalised' (Ludwig, 2016, p. 419). Thus, the extended postfeminist hegemony may be explained in terms of the normalisation of gender identities that do not challenge the gender binary – whilst those identities that threaten these norms are marginalised. Therefore, while the rules of realness in *RPDR* may denaturalise femininity in some ways, the judging seems to idealise a postfeminist femininity that is normatively attractive and remains within the gender binary.

In addition to her theorisation of the cultural life of postfeminism, Gill's more recent work introduces the notion of a postfeminist psychological register – made up of a psychic life and an

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<sup>3</sup> Due to the repetition of episode names across seasons, this paper will refer to episodes through season number and episode number to avoid confusion. A list of episodes used, and their full titles can be found in the references at the end.

<sup>4</sup> Trans\* is an umbrella term that refers to all gender identities that are not cis-gender.

affective life. Firstly, the psychic life refers to the way in which women are exhorted to participate in a constant process of self-transformation, such as becoming confident or becoming happy (Gill, 2017, p. 618). Affirmations of self-love are part of the rhythm of *RPDR*, exemplified by the fact that every episode ends with RuPaul saying ‘if you can’t love yourself, how in the hell you gonna love somebody else?’ That this is a Foucauldian technique of the self can be seen through RuPaul’s emphasis on self-love as an ongoing labour: ‘Loving yourself, it really takes a daily practice’ (S06E12). The guest judges reinforce this message: for example, when Khloe Kardashian declares ‘I want to be a better version of me, that takes constant work’ (S06E02). In this way, both the contestants and the viewers are called upon to ask themselves questions such as ‘how high is your happiness quotient? Are you comfortable in your own skin?’ (Gill, 2017, p. 618). Secondly, the affective life of postfeminism ‘works by attempting to shape what and how women are enabled to *feel* and how their emotional states should be presented’ (Gill, 2017, p. 618). Notably, contestants are encouraged to minimise negative mental attitudes such as rage, insecurity or vulnerability. For example, when Eureka performs poorly, she says, ‘I won’t disappoint you again, I’m sorry’ and RuPaul replies ‘don’t be sorry, be fierce’ (S10E02). The eye-level shot of RuPaul’s face when he says these words means that he appears to be addressing the viewer, so that both the contestants and the audience are called upon to display a positive mental attitude and exclude negative emotions that may undermine the ‘effort’ to become happy.

Furthermore, through a comparison of Seasons 6 and 10, it seems that this exhortation to display a positive mental attitude has intensified. In Season 6, Trinity K. Bonnet suffers from insecurity throughout her time on the show but is encouraged by RuPaul to develop her self-confidence: ‘I know what you’re capable of [...] Don’t let the moment pass you by’ (S06E08). By contrast, in Season 10, Eureka is threatened that ‘if you don’t get out of your head, your head’s gonna send you home’ (S10E02). Although Eureka overcomes her insecurity and succeeds on the show, her fellow contestant The Vixen is unable to overcome her rage and insecurity. Her eventual elimination is foreshadowed in the episode by multiple shots of her face displaying negative emotions, which leads the viewer to identify negative mental attitude with failure (S10E08). This comparison suggests that a display of positive mental attitude is now required for success on the show, thereby calling upon both viewer and contestant to associate negative mental attitude with failure. In this way, the femininity valorised by the judges is not only normatively attractive but also entrepreneurial and resilient.

### **Survival in neoliberal society**

Gill argues that postfeminism ‘is becoming increasingly dependent upon a psychological register build around cultivating the “right” kinds of dispositions for surviving in neoliberal society’ (2017, p. 606). In other words, neoliberal society is so profoundly unequal that some subjects lead more precarious lives than others because political and social institutions fail to support them (Butler, 2004, p. 20). This psychological register therefore gives precarious subjects the means of survival: the ‘resilient subject is one who can absorb the impact of austerity measures and continue to be productive’ (Bracke, 2016, p. 61). Through its editing, *RPDR* calls upon precarious subjects to be resilient and to recover from the effects of their marginality. Notably, the show juxtaposes the dressing room scenes, during which contestants share their experiences of marginality, with the scenes of the runway when the contestants are displaying the resilient and confident postfeminist feminine ideal. This means that ‘queens who seconds before appeared vulnerable and sensitive in the dressing room lights emerge as bold visions of dragged-out glamour

and charisma on the main stage, strutting confidently towards the judges' (Yudelman, 2017, pp. 20–21). For example, Monique Hart expresses how scared she is of engaging in political drag in a former slave state: 'I didn't want to come back and just get shot' (S10E07). Yet this expression of marginality is foreclosed by the immediate juxtaposition with the runway so that symbolically both viewer and contestant are called upon to absorb and recover from the effects of inequality.

Gill argues that this is gendered: there is no 'parallel outlawing of male vulnerability – or indeed even of claims to victimhood' (2017, p. 619). In some ways this claim is borne out through *RPDR*: the scenes of vulnerability in the dressing room are always when the contestants appear most masculine whereas on the runway the contestants appear at their most feminine. For example, Bianca Del Rio opens up about her learning experience on the show and how proud she is of Trinity K Bonnet for overcoming her anxiety (S06E07). In this scene, shots of Bianca and Trinity beginning their makeup are interspersed with their reflections on the situation completely out of drag so that their vulnerability occurs when they appear most masculine. This is immediately juxtaposed with the runway scene when RuPaul and the contestants are presenting as feminine. Similarly, in Season 10, The Vixen and Asia O'Hara discuss The Vixen's anger and how their emotions come from their experiences of growing up as queer people of colour. Asia attempts to understand The Vixen, saying 'she is still that kid struggling to prove that she's worthy of being heard and being loved' and then the two contestants hug, a rare expression of emotional vulnerability for The Vixen (S10E08). Again, this moment of vulnerability is juxtaposed with the runway and a depiction of confident resilient femininity. This suggests that the neoliberal valorisation of individualism and resilience have provoked a profound shift in how society envisions femininity: where once the idealised femininity was framed as fragile and vulnerable, the ideal postfeminist femininity appears to be resilient and confident (Bracke, 2016, p. 67).

However, the myriad minorities represented on *RPDR* allow for Gill's claim to be nuanced: perhaps it is not just women that are exhorted to display positive mental attitude but many kinds of precarious subjects. For instance, The Vixen identifies her rage as stemming from her experience as a queer person of colour in the south side of Chicago. This rage leads her into conflict with Eureka, a white and middle-class contestant and the tension eventually spills onto the main stage in front of the judges. While the judges criticise The Vixen, saying that there is 'a clear reason' for why her fellow contestants do not like her, they ignore the part that Eureka had to play in this conflict (S10E07). This suggests a racialisation of resilience so that many precarious subjects may face pressure to display positive mental attitude. Furthermore, although *RPDR* establishes and encourages a feminine ideal, the contestants themselves do not necessarily identify as women. Therefore, we can also understand members of the queer community as facing pressure to display resilience. For example, Adore Delano opens up to RuPaul about the abuse she faced from her father for displaying feminine characteristics as a child. RuPaul responds with an exhortation to absorb this pain and recover: 'A bone in the place it was broken, after it heals that becomes the strongest place on the bone' (S06E12). This suggests that all precarious subjects may be called upon to display a greater level of resilience or confidence simply because they may face greater inequality and injustice in neoliberal society.

Finally, it will be suggested that a reaffirmation of the gender binary can itself be understood as a tool for survival because 'neoliberal governing structures in the post-9/11 era relegate [...] gender-nonconforming bodies to the margins of society, with their gender ambiguity creating uncertainty for authorities and thus opening up these bodies to increased surveillance and governing' (Quinan, 2017, p. 155). This is perhaps most striking with the example of Milk, a genderqueer contestant who often performs in androgynous drag. In her first runway appearance,

the contestant is told by Santino Rice that she ‘could have left off the beard because really the whole ensemble looks like a million dollars’ (S06E02). Although this appears to be praise, Milk is wearing a conventionally feminine dress, thereby suggesting to the competitors – and to the viewer – that it is better to remain within the gender binary. Milk faces increased surveillance within the show due to her failure to conform to *RPDR*’s expectations of drag: ‘Part of me is extremely offended that you would come out here in a suit, part of me thinks it’s genius’ (S06E05). The hesitation Visage shows with this comment highlights to Milk, her fellow contestants and the viewer that you will face extra challenges if you step outside of the gender binary. The following episode, Milk is enthusiastically praised for her elements of her attempt to appear more feminine: ‘It’s great to see you with pretty makeup on’ (S06E06). In this way, the postfeminist reassertion of the gender binary can be understood as a disposition for survival that teaches postfeminist subjects to conform to social norms. It seems, then, that postfeminism constitutes precarious subjects to be able to survive inequality and to conform to pre-existing social norms. This draws out one aspect of the relationship between postfeminism and neoliberalism: the postfeminist feminine ideal seems to be partly conditioned by the dispositions required for survival in a deeply unequal neoliberal world.

### **Survival of neoliberal society**

*RPDR* highlights a further dimension to the relationship between postfeminism and neoliberalism: the postfeminist attitudes that allow the individual to survive in neoliberal society also allow for the survival of neoliberal society. This section will discuss the show’s valorisation of empowerment, individualism and resilience in terms of a retreat from notions of structural dissent. In the first place, *RPDR* can be understood to demonstrate an ‘entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideas’ (Gill, 2007, p. 161) because even as the rules of realness call for a postfeminist, resilient and confident femininity, the show continues to use misogynistic slang and jokes. Notably, the show calls upon its contestants to display ‘Charisma, Uniqueness, Nerve and Talent’, which spells out a pejorative term for the vagina. The heteronormativity of this catchphrase is demonstrated when RuPaul says: ‘It’s that time of the competition when your Charisma Uniqueness Nerve and Talent could really use some fresh meat’ (S06E09). Here, we see a reaffirmation of heterosexuality as the norm, and of sexist slang, which contrasts with the exhortation to confidence found in the catchphrase itself. Similarly, the show consistently uses the word ‘fishy’ to describe contestants whose drag aims to be realistic, whilst referring pejoratively to the odour of the female genitalia (Brennan and Gudelunas, 2017, p. 4). Thus, despite its progressive and subversive trappings, *RPDR* ‘makes drag safe and confines gender transgression within heteronormative discourses as well as binary codes’ (Kohlsdorf, 2014, p. 71).

Further, the emphasis on *self*-transformation is profoundly damaging to the potential for socio-political change: ‘Internally focussed and individualised strategies of psychic labour go hand in hand with a turning away from any account of structural inequalities’ (Gill and Orgad, 2015, p. 333). This can be seen when guest judge Kardashian critiques Darienne Lake, saying: ‘I have a very big camel toe, my puss is large and in charge, I embrace it though, but I cannot have ruching in front of my body because it’s just going to accentuate my puss’ (S06E02). Kardashian claims to embrace her difference even as she encourages the contestant to conceal her deviance from the “normal” vulva [that] is “small, neat, and tidy,” with “invisible” labia minora’ (Braun, 2017, p. 71). We see that the contestant is encouraged to be confident without challenging the social norms that lead to insecurity. Moreover, Kardashian frames her critique in terms of her own cis-gender

female body, which calls upon viewers identifying as women to follow this advice. In Season 10, the contestants are asked to portray the good version of themselves and the evil, negative version. The praise that Eureka O'Hara receives for her 'good twin' portrayal further highlights the importance of confidence culture in *RPDR*: notably Lena Dunham says that she 'really put a fun, self-effacing, playful energy [into the character] that just made sense to me as another woman who maybe doesn't necessarily feel that my body fits in in the industry that I've chosen' (S10E11). Although this appears to confront the socio-political structures that make the media industry unaccepting of divergence from the norm, once more this praise encourages the individual to transform themselves rather than to resist.

In a similar fashion, confidence and resilience discourses perform a 'silencing of critique of structural inequality' (Gill and Orgad, 2018, p. 484; 2015, p. 325). As we saw in the previous section, the scenes during which the contestants share their experiences of precarity are often foreclosed upon through the show's editing. Such a silencing becomes striking in the 'Reunited' episode of Season 10. The Vixen and RuPaul come into conflict over her behaviour on the show and The Vixen eventually walks out and withdraws from filming. RuPaul responds thus:

'I come from the same goddamn place she comes from and here I am, you see me walking out? No, I'm not walking out, I learnt how to act round people and how to deal with shit [...] I have been discriminated against by white people for being black, by black people for being gay, by gay people for being too femme. Did I let that stop me from getting to this chair? No, I had to separate what I feel or what my impression of the situation is to put my focus on the goal' (S10E13).

This quote highlights firstly RuPaul's own interpellation within neoliberal and postfeminist narratives: he is proud that he learned 'how to deal with shit', in other words he is proud that he learned how to display a positive mental attitude and silence his own experience of injustice. We can therefore evidence Gill and Orgad's claim that resilience is 'increasingly taken up in ways that are "freely" actively and sometimes enthusiastically embraced' (2018, p. 491). Moreover, through the rhetorical question 'Did I let that stop me getting to this chair?' we see that the onus for transformation is on the individual, who must 'bear full responsibility for their life biography, no matter how severe the constraints upon their action' (Gill, 2007, p. 163). RuPaul blames The Vixen for not being able to succeed in the same way that he himself was able to. In this way, narratives of resilience and confidence undermine notions of collective dissent because instead of focusing on structural change, the individual is expected to succeed or be blamed for failure. Indeed, RuPaul appears to believe that he had no choice other than to adapt or fail: 'I *had* to separate what I feel [...] to put my focus on the goal' (emphasis added). This bears out Bracke's claim that resilience 'thwarts skills of imagining otherwise' because it 'implies a colonization of the imagination, given its profound investment in the motto at the heart of neoliberalism: "There is no alternative"' (2016, p. 63).

The importance of resilience to the survival of neoliberal society can be seen through the brief moments when the contestants resist the show's format and express vulnerability. In these moments, we can see the power of vulnerability to create community and critique socio-political oppression. For example, Bianca and Trinity had come into repeated conflict, yet their relationship recovers when Trinity discloses her HIV+ status and Bianca responds by sharing her own experience with a close friend who died from HIV/AIDS (S06E06). The two openly discuss the stigma that is still attached to the diagnosis, which educates the audience on an aspect of structural



oppression for the queer community. Similarly, Monique and Dusty Ray Bottoms open up about facing rejection from religious families, with Dusty having endured an involuntary exorcism before being forced to leave home (S10E03). In response, Monique declares ‘it is so great to see such vulnerability,’ highlighting a (temporary) rejection of postfeminist narratives. In this way, expressions of vulnerability are able to critique power structures and to bring contestants together. Yet – as discussed above – these scenes are immediately juxtaposed with shots of the runway, so that the show’s format forecloses these contestatory moments.

It is true that at moments the judges do encourage the contestants to display vulnerability and to display kindness to their “sisters”. However, I believe this kind of sisterhood is only acceptable when it improves the contestants’ brand. Notably, the eventual winner of Season 6, Bianca, gives a speech selling herself as the best choice for America’s Next Drag Superstar (S06E12). Rice questions whether Bianca’s caustic humour is ‘the best choice for the brand’ because it could be off-putting to audiences. RuPaul responds to this remark by saying that ‘it was interesting to see her vulnerability’ in the speech. In this way, it appears that vulnerability is understood by the show as a quality that can improve the optics of a contestant’s drag persona. This notion is reinforced through the award for “Miss Congeniality”: the queen that fans believe was the most helpful towards their fellow contestants. The very fact that this is a fan-voted award demonstrates the commodification of certain qualities – the contestants are encouraged to present a drag persona that they can successfully sell to the *RPDR* audience. This notion of the drag artist as human capital was strikingly affirmed by Jasmine Masters (a competitor on Season 7) in an interview Schottmiller: ‘You are a brand from that point [when you enter the competition], you know, so you have to treat yourself as a market, as a business’ (2017, p. 283). Appearing too resilient and individualistic could be off-putting to the fan-consumer but the valorisation of vulnerability in response to this is not actually intended to undermine neoliberal narratives. In this way, it appears that the judges’ calls to sisterhood and kindness are more a technique to build a brand than a real call to community.

Indeed, the contestants’ attempts to build genuine community are undermined by one of the show’s key catchphrases: ‘This is not RuPaul’s best friends’ race’. This adds further weight to the notion that sisterhood is an appealing characteristic in a persona to be consumed rather than a characteristic that is valorised for its community-building promise. The catchphrase can further be understood to call upon the viewer to understand themselves as an individual within a competitive society, rather than as an individual within a potential community. In continuing to undermine notions of genuine community, the show also undermines the notion of collective dissent. In this way, through the occasional glimpses of the contestants’ attempts to create community, we see the power of vulnerability in resistance; and equally how the show’s format serves so strongly to undermine this and reassert narratives of resilience. It therefore appears that postfeminism is not only conditioned by neoliberalism but also contributes to the survival of neoliberalism through a psychological register that discourages resistance.

### **A second psychological register**

In addition to Gill’s psychological register, an analysis of *RPDR* brings to light a second psychological register: the internalisation of unhappiness. William Davies has suggested that ‘capitalism would seem to require an optimal balance of happiness and unhappiness amongst its participants, if it is to be sustainable,’ and that neoliberalism in particular has ‘depended on an insatiable, debt-fuelled “unhappy consumer”’ (2011, pp. 70–71). This unhappiness ‘is reduced to

a psychological tendency to be fed back into processes of production and consumption' (ibid, p. 73). In the first place, *RPDR* calls upon the viewer to want new, luxurious commodities such as luggage or jewellery through its product placement. Often this product placement is framed as satirising contemporary advertising, as when Adore and Laganja promote RuPaul's makeup product 'Glamazon'. The contestants use the wordplay of 'beating face,' which means putting on makeup in the drag community to play popular girls who are too busy putting on Glamazon to bully other students. The over-exaggerated acting and makeup highlight the techniques through which advertising targets teenage girls so that their performance is judged 'shockingly irreverent' (S06E07). Yet this is undermined because the subversion of advertising is itself used as advertising, as judge Leah Remini says, 'I want to buy your product and that's the most important thing'. This privileging of novelty is key because it maintains the viewer-consumer in a constant state of un-satisfaction, thereby encouraging spending to achieve a happiness that is, in fact, unattainable because true happiness 'would mean no longer seeking ever more and ever newer sources of satisfaction' (Davies, 2011, p. 72).

In the second place, *RPDR* calls upon the contestants to conform to an idealist postfeminist femininity that is actually unattainable. Hall-Araujo believes that the consumerism on *RPDR* differs from conventional consumerism in that RuPaul's 'products are designed to reinforce a sense of perfect imperfection and self-acceptance among anyone who feels marginalized' (2016, p. 239). However, this statement is to some extent belied in that the show's beauty standards have become increasingly narrow, as the contestants have become 'younger, thinner and more fashionable' over the course of the show (Yudelman, 2017, p. 27). Yet, being young, thin and fashionable is no guarantee that your body will not face criticism. As we saw above, Courtney Act was often accused of 'resting on pretty' during her time on the show. Yet, in the 'Glitter Ball' episode, she is criticised for not wearing enough padding: 'If you're gonna shimmy your cakes, you have to have cakes [...] You need to pad more, go rob a couch' (S06E11). This demonstrates that no matter how apparently perfect it might be, the body is understood to be 'unruly and requiring constant monitoring, surveillance, discipline and remodelling (and consumer spending) in order to conform to ever narrower judgements of "female attractiveness"' (Gill, 2017, p. 616). Moreover, constant unhappiness with one's body is not just encouraged in the contestant but also in the viewer. For example, guest judge Tisha Campbell Martin declares 'well, I don't know whose legs I want more, Aquaria's or that goddamn Logan over there' (S10E04). While Aquaria is a contestant, Logan Browning is another guest judge. In referring to both within the same comment, Martin implicitly demonstrates that normative beauty standards are not just part of the rules of realness by which the contestants are judged but an ideal for all viewers to aspire to.

Furthermore, the format of *RPDR* understands drag to be men that transform themselves into women: when the contestants are presenting as male in the dressing room scenes, they are often dressed in casual clothes whereas when they are in drag, they are wearing high-fashion outfits, quality wigs and well-done makeup. Therefore, one can suggest that the viewer is led to idealise a postfeminist femininity understood in a narrow sense and tightly related to purchase power. The importance of this can be seen in a debate which took place off-screen, when RuPaul said that he would not allow a trans woman who had transitioned to compete because: 'You can identify as a woman and say you're transitioning, but it changes once you start changing your body. It takes on a different thing; it changes the whole concept of what we're doing' (Aitkenhead, 2018). This is striking because it undermines the identity of trans women who have not paid to transition. And yet, contestants who have undergone plastic surgery to appear more feminine are allowed to compete. This highlights a double tendency to associate femininity with consumer

spending: firstly, within the show as contestants can pay to transform their body and secondly, off-screen in terms of what RuPaul deems to be a 'real' woman. This second psychological register highlights the complex relationship between neoliberalism and postfeminism: neoliberalism seems to condition postfeminism according to its need for continued consumer spending whilst at the same time postfeminism appears to enable the survival of neoliberalism.

The two psychological registers work in tandem so that even as women are exhorted to be confident, they are also internalising a narrative of unhappiness. In Season 10, Monet X Change is repeatedly criticised for wearing a wig that gives her a short, bob cut and eventually she wears a longer hairstyle. Visage comments: 'I do want to take this moment to tell you Monet how stunningly beautiful you look tonight, why would you ever go back to your pussycat wig?' (S10E10). We see here how Monet is praised for conforming to the postfeminist feminine ideal promoted by the show, and yet implicit in this critique is a reminder of her flaws when she had short hair. Thus, we see how the attainment of the ideal femininity is always in the future, because it is, in fact unattainable. Similarly, in Season 6, Adore is repeatedly criticised over the course of several episodes so that she is essentially forced to cinch her waist and wear short skirts to attain a normative feminine beauty standard. When she does, she is told: 'I love the way you look Adore, your waist is cinched, you have legs, you're not cutting them off, let's savour this moment' (S06E07). Through Visage's gaze as a cis-gender woman this calls upon not only the contestants but also the female viewer to conform to social conventions of femininity such as wearing long hair or having a normatively attractive body. Moreover, as with Monet, there is an implicit temporality in 'let's savour this moment', suggesting that Adore has only temporarily done enough to achieve the feminine ideal and it will inevitably fade. This bears out Gill's claim that 'women's bodies are evaluated, scrutinised and dissected by women as well as men and are always at risk of failing' (2007, p. 149). The contradictory praise and criticism illustrate the two psychological registers: exhorted to confidence and yet encouraged to internalise unhappiness. Through these two psychological registers, happiness is eternally relegated to futurity in postfeminist culture, so that the need for self-transformation is perpetual and the survival of postfeminist-neoliberal society is ensured.

## Conclusion

Examining cultural objects produced by minority communities allows us to truly grasp the extent of postfeminist cultural hegemony and to further interrogate and nuance its theoretical underpinnings. This paper contributed to the theorisation of the relationship between postfeminism and queer communities. It was argued that *RPDR* accepts only those identities that can be incorporated within contemporary heteronormative standards and therefore continues to marginalise gender non-conforming identities. This suggests that postfeminism is reliant on a binary understanding of gender, notably due to its definition of womanhood through the body. Furthermore, this paper used an analysis of *RPDR* to further explore the relationship between postfeminism and neoliberalism. It was firstly argued that postfeminism has become increasingly dependent on a psychological register of dispositions such as positive mental attitude and self-transformation that help precarious subjects to survive. Secondly, it was shown that these dispositions ensure the survival of neoliberal society because they evacuate notions of collective dissent or structural change. Finally, it was argued that there is a second psychological register, predicated on the internalisation of unhappiness which works in tandem with Gill's original psychological register to ensure the survival of postfeminism and neoliberalism. In this way, it

becomes possible to identify a reciprocal relationship between neoliberalism and postfeminism. On the one hand, neoliberalism conditions postfeminism: Gill's psychological register is made up of dispositions for survival as a precarious subject and the second psychological register is predicated on consumption. Yet on the other hand, neoliberalism appears dependent on postfeminism: it is these two psychological registers that minimise dissent and ensure the futurity of happiness. I believe that nuancing and interrogating our understanding of this reciprocal relationship is essential if we are to work towards an intersectional feminism capable of resisting contemporary neoliberal hegemony.

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