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Drag Incorporated: The Homonormative Brand Culture of *RuPaul's Drag Race*

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DRAG INCORPORATED: THE HOMONORMATIVE BRAND CULTURE OF *RUPAUL'S*
DRAG RACE

by

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B.A. December 2017, Old Dominion University

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ABSTRACT

DRAG INCORPORATED: THE HOMONORMATIVE BRAND CULTURE OF *RUPAUL'S DRAG RACE*

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Old Dominion University, 2020
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This thesis argues *RuPaul's Drag Race (RPDR, 2009–)* positions itself as a homonormative pathway to LGBTQ+ social inclusion through privileging neoliberal self-branding and commodity activist practices that reify privileged raced, classed, and sexuality identity markers. Utilizing interdisciplinary and intersectional cultural studies methods to conduct a textual analysis, I examine how *RPDR* produces homonormative LGBTQ+ identities through the commodification and standardization of drag cultures. In conversation with existing *RPDR* scholars, I critically survey *RPDR's* gender biases and prosocial messaging as an example of brand culture's reification of hegemony and homonormativity within LGBTQ+ communities. This research considers the utility of media representation in identity, community, and political composition while also engaging with how consumption can communicate personal and relational meaning. *RPDR* proves the homonormative commodification of niche drag cultures perpetuates existing power imbalances, simultaneously benefitting and hindering aspects of the LGBTQ+ rights movement. In effect, *RPDR* rejects a radical queer politic and commodifies its cultural and iconographic elements, while the brand's homonormative privileging exacerbates inequalities within LGBTQ+ communities.

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This thesis is dedicated to my mother, grandmother, and to all those making sacrifices right now
to protect your communities, neighbors, and loved ones.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

At the 2020 Emmy Awards, RuPaul accepted *RuPaul's Drag Race's* (RPDR 2009–) third Emmy in a row for Outstanding Competition program. In the short minute and a half acceptance speech, RuPaul summarized the brand's identity. First, he stated individual non-normative gender expression is always a political statement. Second, he framed the radical potential of queer ideology through “love” for LGBTQ+ communities, Black and Brown queens, and love for the U.S.A. Third, he specifically detailed the “lovemark” of the brand, or “[the story or] experience associated with a company or a product,” by stating the U.S.A. made it possible for “a little gay boy [...] [to] build an international platform that celebrates sweet sensitive souls, everywhere” (Banet-Weiser, 2017, p. 26; RPDR, 2020e). And fourth, RuPaul leaves with a prosocial message urging viewers to vote in the 2020 election (RPDR, 2020e).

This Emmy's speech exists in contrast to his 2019 acceptance speech, after which press critiqued the lack of diversity—mainly referencing a lack of other Black executives—in *RPDR's* production staff (Young, 2019). RuPaul responded by citing his own gender and racial identities as host while defending against the implication *World of Wonder* (*RPDR's* production company) is not inclusive (Young, 2019). The 2020 speech still champions neoliberal individualism and cultivates commodity activism but responds to criticisms that the brand appears inauthentic, homonormative, and ambivalent to issues like systemic racism (Henry, 2019). Consumers expecting anti-racism practiced within all aspects of their production exist in contrast with the brand's representational and business practices. *RPDR's* brand identity champions individual discipline over systemic inequality: if RuPaul succeeded, systemic action is unnecessary, and if

someone is struggling they are just not working hard enough. Contemporary tensions regarding the brand and its audience have underlined discrepancies between *RPDR*'s homonormative brand identity and popular conceptions of drag's queer and subversive potential.

To these issues, I argue *RuPaul's Drag Race* positions itself as a homonormative pathway to LGBTQ+ social inclusion through privileging neoliberal self-branding and commodity activists' practices that reify privileged raced, classed, and sexuality identity markers. After the introductory chapter provides a background explaining my methods, theories, and consulted literature, I utilize interdisciplinary and intersectional cultural studies methods to conduct a textual analysis of *RPDR*'s homonormative identity politics in the following case studies. Claiming *RPDR* produces homonormative LGBTQ+ identities through the commodification and standardization of drag cultures (in conversation with existing *RPDR* scholars), I conclude *RPDR* ultimately rejects a radical queer politic while commodifying its cultural and iconographic elements. I then explore the utility of media representation in identity, community, and political formation while also engaging with how one's consumption habits can communicate important personal and social meaning.

***RPDR* & the Social, Political, & Economic Justifications of Mainstream Drag Media**

Importantly, this thesis views *RPDR* as a media space representing diverse LGBTQ+ groups in a reality-competition setting that judges LGBTQ+ individuals' quantifiable and qualifiable economic values within homonormative neoliberal frameworks. In so doing, the franchise's lackluster inclusion of transgender performers speaks to how marginalized and gender non-conforming individuals are valued within contemporary society, entertainment industries, and within LGBTQ+ communities themselves. I ultimately conclude *RPDR*

contradictorily champions inclusion while in actuality cultivating and investing in homonormative gay male contestants' normative economic and celebrity potential.

This research is critical because it engages with intersectional scholarship invested in historical and contemporary gender, media, and LGBTQ+ political representation with an eye to how such groups and practices will continue to utilize new media systems and produce new forms of identity, culture, and community within such shifting technologies. Investing in the analysis of *RPDR* through a sports media lens acknowledges how participants and fans are reacting to the brand's representational and media practices, ultimately leading to a nuanced discussion of homonormativity and gay men's investments in masculinity within LGBTQ+ communities. Additionally, following this homonormativity thread to *RPDR*'s corporate activism provides a case study in modern brand culture and the commodification of LGBTQ+ communities within neoliberalism. Hopefully, scholars and fans alike will read *RPDR* more critically because of this examination and engage with more histories and cultural phenomena produced by media, economics, and social constructions, ultimately following what Banet-Weiser & Mukherjee (2012) posit as "critical consumer studies," or "a field that takes consumer culture and consumption habits seriously as sites of scholarly inquiry [...] in order to discern both the promise and limits of political action" (p. 14). *RPDR* provides a case study in how popular culture and communities can be commodified with new technologies, media systems, and political/economic conditions which helps reveal circulations of power and its productive force within identity and social construction.

Background & Context

RuPaul Andre Charles (1960–) is a drag queen, singer, actor, and television host whose international fame spans four-plus decades. Both building on and furthering the celebrity and brand of one of the most famous U.S. drag queens ever, the *RPDR* reality-competition show originally began as a satire of the genre, influenced by *America's Next Top Model*, *Project Runway*, and *American Idol* (Brennan, 2017). However, the brand today has grown into its own reality-television franchise and has significantly furthered RuPaul's celebrity beyond his (1993) *Supermodel of the World* album success. In 2020, RuPaul's brand (in partnership with World of Wonder), is a talent management company, licensing powerhouse, and lifestyle brand representing various LGBTQ+ performers, narratives, and experiences.¹

RuPaul's Drag Race (2009—) is a reality-competition program featuring drag queens in a weekly elimination-style beauty pageant.² *RPDR* has become a serious institution and “star factory” beyond any original parody first used to market the series (Montero, 2020). For example, the brand has aired twelve U.S. seasons (all with *Untucked* half-hour post-shows), one U.K. season (2019) (notably the only international season RuPaul hosts), a Christmas special (2018), a recent *Celebrity* version (2020), and the *RPDR Las Vegas Live RuVue* (2020) spinoff, which is reality-documentary series about the *RPDR* live show in Las Vegas. Originally on *Logo*, (Viacom's LGBTQ+ premium cable channel), the brand moved to the more accessible VH1 during S9 (2017). This cultivated the brand's mainstream popularity and more prominently

¹ The program is franchised out into different markets, however, the focus of these licensing and production efforts are still American market-based. Contestants participate with drag-queen live entertainment and touring companies to perform in other countries and vice-versa, international contestants then perform in the American market.

² Its *Untucked* series has also been nominated for Outstanding Unstructured Reality Program and Picture Editing for an Unstructured Reality Program (2017–2020). The series has also won a host of Creative Arts Emmy categories, including Directing for a Reality Program, Costumes for Variety, Nonfiction or Reality Programming, Hairstyling for a Multi-Camera Series or Special, Picture Editing for a Structured or Competition Reality Program, and Host for a Reality or Reality-Competition Program.

centered Black LGBTQ+ narrative and casting intersections since VH1 largely features Black reality programming. Now on VH1, *RPDR* is “regularly the number one cable program in its time slot” and importantly for success within the post-network era, the show has been listed as “the No.1 social series of the night in all of TV” (Lawson, 2019/2020; Nolfi, 2018). In addition to their U.S. growth, the *Drag Race* name has been licensed out to other markets, so far including *Thailand*, *Canada*, and *Holland*. This media empire is important to note because World of Wonder’s premium subscription service, WOW Presents Plus, streams these versions internationally beyond their local markets.³ WOW Presents Plus boasts 1.58 million subscribers to their YouTube channel, where much of their digital content is also made available (WOWPresents, 2020).

The brand also produces live experiences like sponsored international tours, the fan access event DragCon (with conventions in L.A., NYC, and the U.K.), and the aforementioned Las Vegas residency. In 2018, DragCon L.A. and N.Y.C. “hosted 100,000 people and sold \$8 million [dollars] of merchandise” (Montero, 2020). Also, *RPDR* is a huge platform for product placement, “advertainment,” and direct marketing to LGBTQ+ consumers. Main challenges directly put contestants free labor to work producing music, merchandise, and other content marketed concurrently within the production and broadcast of the series. For example, *RPDR*’s (2018) “Holi-slay Spectacular” was nothing more than an hour-long commercial for RuPaul’s Christmas album in the trappings of a regular episode. Similarly, the *Las Vegas RuVue* series follows a similar advertainment pattern as the album/Christmas special, though with more

³ Importantly, Viacom does not allow for past seasons of *RPDR* to be available on WOW Presents Plus in the U.S. market. The U.S. market has a diverse assortment of licensing agreements. Most recently, *RPDR* was made available in its entirety on CBS All Access, Viacom’s premiere subscription service. Certain seasons have also been made available on Hulu and Amazon Prime. Viacom also airs old *RPDR* episodes on Pluto TV’s *Logo* channel, their free (with commercials) streaming service.

sophistication and documentary influences. These examples point to the brand's synergy in advertising and content production. In effect, *RPDR* has made RuPaul a multi-millionaire while contestants remain low paid contractual workers growing such wealth for the media brand.⁴ Noting in detail the growth of *RPDR*'s brand and media presence is an important development in *RPDR* scholarship. With considerations to current and earlier investigations into *RPDR*'s cultural impact, this thesis probes *RPDR*'s mainstream success, corporatization, and media representation as a substantial LGBTQ+ property within the post-network television era.

Methods, Materials & Limitations

In order to explore how the *RPDR* brand privileges homonormativity and commodifies activism, I conduct a qualitative textual analysis of the TV series and its paratextual extensions' representational practices when it comes to the intersection of gender, race, and sexuality, as well as a discourse analysis of how the brand selectively embraces queer political sensibilities and reorients them toward a neoliberal liberation framework (Fürsich, 2009, 2018; Tyson, 2015; Hall, 1997).

I primarily employ an interdisciplinary cultural studies approach with heavy emphasis in gender studies, reality-television production studies, and queer production studies, while conducting a textual analysis of key televisual and paratextual moments (Martin Jr., 2018; Caldwell, 2009; Mayer, 2014; Grindstaff, 2014; Gray, 2010; Crenshaw, 1995; Carbado, 2013). Taken together, these lenses allow for multiple interpretive readings of *RPDR*, though they specifically center how power systems and ideologies struggle for dominance within the

⁴ Contestants of course are caste based on their perceived value for the brand and accept the rigors of production for the opportunity to generate future capital from one's increased exposure and affiliation with the brand. However, this thesis examines inequalities and social contexts which problematize this economic relationship as unequally implemented and reifying of contemporary social privileges.

production and circulation of knowledge, histories, and cultural artifacts (Foucault, 1980, pp. 141-142; Gramsci, 1971, as cited in Storey, 2012, p. 10). Thus, this analysis interprets identity as co-influenced by social, cultural, and various production practices. Additionally, I employ “writing as a method of inquiry” to explore qualitative methods in conversation with other *RPDR* readings within a host of other contexts, methods, and points of view (Richardson and St. Pierre, 2005, p. 960). Such perspectives allow for both corroborating and conflicting interpretations that allow the reader to consider this research in concert with other works. Much *RPDR* scholarship comes from either feminist/queer studies or media studies without considering the two fields in tandem. Therefore, I address these fields together within this analysis.

Furthermore, the study of popular culture is herein implemented to center Gramsci’s concept of hegemony, or the struggle between dominate and subordinate classes (as cited in Storey, 2005, p. 10). Popular culture, and *RPDR*’s expression of it, represents a fruitful environment to examine the power relations of multiple identities in contention. A brief historical and cultural background is provided to interpret the proceeding case studies in context, which contend “dominant, emergent, and residual” directions of power play out within *RPDR*’s mainstream rise (Williams, as quoted in Storey, 2012, p. 11). Also, media and popular culture theorist John Fiske reminds us “popular culture is what people make from the products of the cultural industries” (Storey, 2005, pp. 11-12). As such, this analysis acknowledges the productive impact of modern capitalism upon cultural and identity construction. Acknowledging commodification’s influence, the queer manipulations of culture hereby examined cannot have occurred without capitalism’s economic conditioning. Therefore, this analysis investigates the ideological positions, power struggles, and identity formations such phenomenon create while gesturing to future adaptations within new media and cultural conditions.

In addition to such methods and fields, the paratextual evidence gathered necessitates clarification. Per Jonathan Gray's examinations, metatexts (like interviews, digital content, and bonus materials) inform readings of the main text (Gray, 2010). For example, social media spaces, merchandise, and spin-off shows represent rich artifacts that inform readings of the main text and brand.⁵ Chiefly, *RPDR*'s promotional and official YouTube and WOW Presents Plus digital content is surveyed for its resemblance to sports-media (like their official fantasy league platform) within the following case studies. Fan produced content, like reviews, memes, and protest signs were also consulted to elucidate ongoing discourse and audience receptions to the brand's identity.⁶ And finally, official *RPDR* social media comment threads were consulted to gauge audience receptions to the brand's activism during June 2020's Black Lives Matter protests. These are cited when informative of the textual analysis, but a primarily general survey was conducted to discern topics of analysis for the proceeding textual analysis.

In addition to such media spaces, Gray's employment of the television author as a paratext informs the following case studies (2010, pp. 107-113). This lens allows for RuPaul's own celebrity and interviews to inform readings of *RPDR*, in addition to World of Wonder's executive producers. Gray insinuates "authors [...] are texts that audiences utilize to make meaning and to situate themselves in relation to other texts" (2010, p. 108). Therefore, RuPaul's

⁵ In addition to World of Wonder's ongoing digital content and programs, including the noteworthy *Fashion Photo RuView* (2014-) and *UNHhhh* (2016-), they have also partnered with other television providers to produce contestant spin-off shows. These include Netflix's *Dancing Queen* (2018-), Viceland's *Trixie & Katya Show* (2017-2018), and VH1's *RuPaul's Drag Race: Las Vegas RuVue* (2020).

⁶ Fandom receptions were collected within comment threads and digital fandom spaces reviewing episodes and series as they aired. Many former contestants have official and unofficial digital programs on YouTube reviewing the brand like World of Wonder's *Fashion Photo RuView* with Raja and Raven, *Whatcha Packin'* with Michelle Visage, and *Extra Lap* with John Polly, as well as Yuhua Hamaskai's *Bootleg Opinions*, Miz Cracker's *Review with a Jew*, and Nina Bo'nina Brown's *Rawviews*. Additionally, Podcasts reviewing episodes with former contestants include *The Chop* with Manila Luzon and Latrice Royale, *Race Chaser* with Alaska and Willam, and *Sibling Rivalry* with Bob the Drag Queen and Monét X Change. Fan spaces reviewing episodes include *MovieBitches*, *In My Homosexual Opinion*, and comment sections on contestants' Instagram pages after episodes air. See also Grindr's (formerly intomore's) *RPDR* fan analysis series, "The Kiki" (2018) on YouTube.

interviews and fan interpretations of such positions are part of *RPDR*'s paratextual network and necessary for the proceeding analysis. Paratextual spaces like RuPaul's own podcast, commercial ventures, and career as intertext were also consulted for this thesis.

This analysis is limited to *RPDR*'s United States productions because it is the central text influencing other versions and because most *RPDR* scholarship was written before the brand's international franchise growth. Thus, to stay in conversation with the existing literature, this thesis examines *RPDR*'s U.S. brand identity. Also, of note are difficulties in dealing with digital content. During the creation of this thesis, some information pertinent to this research has been deleted or repurposed.⁷ This analysis also lacks direct interviews. However, this research mainly examined artifacts and the text for present ideological and cultural tensions within the brand, especially regarding understandings of LGBTQ+ identity. Thus, more direct investigations are not within the scope of this project.

In addition, I list my own positionality—as a cisgender gay white man within the academy writing about Queer of Color and other marginalized communities—as a limitation. Knowledge and history are inherently privileged by the capitalist conditions in which they are created. This research also recognizes the biological essentialism gender and drag performances rely upon to subsequently subvert. Historically, this necessitated the codification of the underlying performer's gender identity for the audience to grasp the layered performance of the employed gender systems. I recognize my place in such economic and gender systems and simply aim to amplify marginalized voices with the platforms I have. This research utilizes transgender and Queer of Color voices in abundance to help advocate for communities

⁷ Mainly, the *RPDR* fantasy league official website deleted by VH1 after the season aired. Also, RuPaul deleted all social media posts from Twitter and Instagram in July 2020. The former links are provided but likely bereft of content. Screenshots are provided when applicable or relatable from other online sources.

systemically underserved, harmed, and exploited. When discussing gender and sexuality, care was employed to honor the identities, communities, and histories of the individuals herein featured. While I support a liberatory politic, I also honor how each individual or community chooses to self-identify and claim hard-fought victories within oppressive systems of power. Detailing my positionality also acknowledges the feminist, queer, and fandom traditions inspiring this research (Jenkins, 2011; Serano, 2016a, p. 282).

Taken into account, these considerations guide the project towards theoretical applications of new historical and cultural studies approaches utilizing textual analysis of *RPDR* episodes and applicable paratextual materials. Next, I detail the literature and context employed for the upcoming case studies.

RuPaul As Progressive? Debatable

Throughout RuPaul's career, scholars and the media have considered his success groundbreaking for Black LGBTQ+ expression, as exemplified by his presence in Google's 2020 Black History Month commercial as "#themostsearched drag queen" (Google, 2020). Naturally, the type of success RuPaul enjoyed in the early 1990s is the framework for *RPDR* contestants today: can you do what RuPaul did? Can you be a pop-culture sensation and a household name in fashion, film, music, and television as a drag performer? RuPaul's celebrity is also popularly associated with marginalized representation in television and media in general. In an interview about RuPaul, *Broad City* (2014-2019) co-star Ilana Glazer cited RuPaul's early '90s presence on television as a "relief" from "the model-looking teenagers" on *Saved by the Bell* (1989-1993), saying "that [RuPaul's] representation [on TV] trickled all the way down to these two little weird Jewish girls" (Wortham, 2018). In the same interview, famed gender and queer studies scholar

Jack Halberstam is quoted saying “[n]otice [...] there’s no ‘RuPaul’s Drag Kings’,” though Halberstam also acknowledges the importance of drag’s current mainstream visibility (Wortham, 2018). Discursively, RuPaul today is seen as a generational figurehead for a standard of LGBTQ+ identity becoming mainstream while also representing the homonormative limits of this current representation. RuPaul is thus progressive and simultaneously not progressive enough.

In addition, RuPaul’s zenith reflects the mainstream arc of the LGBTQ+ movement in America, including their overlap reflecting his often-touted presence at the 1993 LGBT March on Washington.⁸ The contemporary expression of the LGBTQ+ rights movement is often credited with its homonormative turn—reacting against previous LGBTQ+ labor, intersectional, and community activist expressions—in the late 1980s (Duggan, 2003; Wilson, 2018b). Homonormativity as an LGBTQ+ activist tactic expresses integration within heteronormal social institutions and values. As Lisa Duggan asserts, “those that confirmed to dominate culture ideals of the nuclear family, bodily modesty [...] and [self-] enterprise in the market” gained cultural and political capital during this time, eventually winning legal battles in gay military inclusion, marriage, and—as recently as 2020—national employment protections (2003).

Such integrationist political and cultural change stands in stark contrast to what earlier LGBTQ+/queer rights movements fought for. For example, much political action before this turn was in coalition with others, like disability and labor rights groups protesting for universal health care in the wake of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Also, activism advocating for separation from heterosexual culture, society, and institutions was a feature of this era’s activism. Reflecting these more radical positions, non-normative gender expression and drag within contemporary

⁸ Hinting at possible economic interests to RuPaul’s activism, his (1993) hit album *Supermodel of the World* came out in June and the March on Washington occurred in April.

LGBTQ+ consciousness is often associated with such queer activism. Emblematic of this identification is lore attributing the start of the 1969 Stonewall Riots to Marsha P. Johnson, a gender-fluid Black queer activist.⁹ Such connections to queer activist iconography are employed throughout *RPDR* itself. For instance, S6's "Drag Herstory 101" segment exemplified both the "mainstream & underground" histories of drag in popular culture. They also utilized Johnson's image for the "revolution[ary]" possibilities of drag and a picture of RuPaul at the 1993 March On Washington as the "political" expression of drag.¹⁰ Notably, *RPDR* exudes this core tension among the media and its audience: exactly what is the politic of RuPaul and *RPDR*? Using their own example, *RPDR* clearly expresses a difference—though not necessarily a mutually exclusive one—between LGBTQ+ and queer activism.

***RPDR* as Progressive**

RPDR scholarship has touted the show's ability to instill political and cultural change, especially after the 2016 Trump presidency (Middlemost, 2020; Greenhalgh, 2018). Such takes envision *RPDR* as a platform exemplifying "the role of contemporary drag queen[s] as a force of revitalized queer resistance" (Greenhalgh, 2018, p. 299). In addition, Middlemost cites how *RPDR* produces micro-celebrity "drag activists" out of former contestants who then utilize their notoriety from *RPDR* for LGBTQ+ activism (2020, p. 48-49). To their points, *RPDR*'s mainstream success has been a focal point for LGBTQ+ political discourse (Judkis, 2019). In addition to RuPaul's advocacy that viewers vote at the end of every episode, *RPDR* notably

⁹ I use gender fluid and not transgender (as is presently attributed to Johnson in much modern Stonewall historical discourse) because we cannot be sure exactly how Johnson would identify with present gender and sexuality labels. However, I acknowledge the utility of referring to Johnson as transgender to further the transgender rights movement contemporarily.

¹⁰ *RuPaul's Drag Race* S6 E14. "Reunited!" Logo/Viacom. May 19, 2014. 22:55.

includes politicians as guests and judges, such as House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's appearances on the program.¹¹ *RPDR* literature tends to lean one of two ways: either they champion the show's subversiveness, commitment to diverse LGBTQ+ representation, and liberatory political potential (in the vein of the above examples), or critique the program for presenting as an inclusive property that contradictorily reifies systemic oppressions.¹²

***RPDR* as Homonormative**

As mentioned above, plenty of works criticize *RPDR* for perpetuating discriminatory practices within LGBTQ+ communities, often focusing on the brand's biases, reification of stereotypes, and commodification of drag cultures. Notable works in this group include Jenkins' (2017) intersectional textual analysis of its first four seasons for familiar racist, sexist, and classist stereotypes. Also, Schottmiller's (2017) analysis critiques how *RPDR* borrows from queer of color historical and media references but often erases their origins when employed through the program's white gay male cultural lens. And finally, Vesey's (2017) investigation of *RPDR* contestant's music careers (after their series airs) found a prioritization for signing white gay male contestants into genres of music traditionally seen as culturally white. Taken together, this thesis acknowledges both positive and negative cultural impacts but agrees more so with scholars critical of the brand's homonormative and corporatizing methods.¹³

¹¹ *RuPaul's Drag Race* AS3 E7. "My Best Squirrelfriend's Dragsmaid Wedding Trip," VH1/Viacom. Mar 8, 2018; *RuPaul's Drag Race* S12 E7. "Madonna: The Unauthorized Rusal," VH1/Viacom. Apr 10, 2020.

¹² For more, see Daggett, 2017; Gamson, 2013; Gudelunas, 2017; Miltner, 2018; & Collins, 2017; 128-134.

¹³ For more, see DeAnda, 2019; Brennan, 2017; Ferrante, 2017; Norris, 2014; Morrison, & 2014.

Former Contestant Criticisms



Figure 1: The Vixen, *RPDR* S10 contestant, criticizing RuPaul's ideological position (@TheVixensworld, (2019, April 2). Twitter.

In addition to scholarship critical of RuPaul and *RPDR*, contestants also express discrimination engendered by the brand's homonormativity. Often, these criticisms urge the brand to more vociferously represent underserved individuals and intersectional queer political issues. Reacting to such criticism, *RPDR* repositions itself as a platform—or catalyst—facilitating the discussion of these tensions and alternative values, without changing their homonormative priorities. For example, former S3 contestant Carmen Carrera is very critical of *RPDR*'s transgender representation (or lack-there-of) (Kim, 2020). Such criticism came to a head after a 2018 interview in which RuPaul claimed drag performers who medically transitioned (alluding to transgender performers who had breast augmentation surgery) would not be as

subversive to patriarchy as cisgender (or persons who identify within the gender of their birth sex) male drag performers because they are women and therefore not actively expressing femininity in rejection of their male privilege (Aitkenhead, 2018). In addition, Figure 1 shows S10's *The Vixen* is similarly critical of RuPaul's Black political expression (*The Vixen*, 2019).

These critiques represent a gap between RuPaul's practice of homonormativity—made possible due to his cultural, social, and economic capitals—and the systemic marginalization of everyday queer populations. *RPDR* is really a reality-competition makeover program promising class mobility to regional drag performers and importantly marginalized LGBTQ+ individuals. To realize success like RuPaul, one must adapt to certain homonormative instruction, industry standards, and be evaluated by a slew of LGBTQ+ judges who similarly realized homonormative success within existing neoliberal entertainment systems. Contestants seeking to change *RPDR*'s political priorities through increased inclusion ironically recenter *RPDR*'s main position: the homonormative disciplining of marginalized LGBTQ+ individuals for neoliberal economic interests. Framing such intra-LGBTQ+ community concerns around representation and inclusion fail to decenter *RPDR*'s homonormative position. Rather than imagining a queering or restructuring of *RPDR*'s practices, such positions actually maintain the brand's homonormative economic practices as the center of LGBTQ+ political formation.

***RPDR*'s Masculine & Homonormative Reproduction**

My research agrees with scholarship critical of *RPDR*'s representational and homonormative identity politics. I argue because *RPDR* privileges homonormativity, the brand obscures the histories and possibilities of a radical queer future partly because it commodifies iconic queer elements to produce its self-enterprising and neoliberal brand of drag and LGBTQ+

culture. Furthering this claim, I must detail how homonormativity intersects with masculinity studies.

Masculinity studies is an interdisciplinary field (influenced by feminist and gender studies methods) that critically examines masculinity's social construction. Though not exclusive to gay male masculine studies, homonormativity intersects with masculinity studies because of its investments in the heteronormative status quo, of which patriarchy and masculinity still dominate social power relations. Foundational masculinities studies scholar R.W. Connell calls this "hegemonic masculinity" or "the gender practice which currently embodies the problem of patriarchal legitimacy—or the dominant position of men and the subordination of women [...]" (2016, pp. 136–144). Hegemony, coined by Antonio Gramsci, is influential to cultural studies because it describes "a theory of power that argues capitalist dominance is maintained not through direct economic exploitation, [b]ut rather through ongoing cultural processes of winning the consent of the governed" (Wilson 2018a, 2018c). Hegemony explains how ideologies, systems of thoughts, and societal values become entrenched, but importantly always contestable and ever-shifting in the process to maintain a dominant societal position (Wilson, 2018a, p. 21). Hegemonic masculinity is traditionally the most privileged form of male identity, combining intersections of heterosexuality, whiteness, "manliness," and middle-class values into a hierarchal system of values (Connell, 2016, pp. 136–139). Per this analysis, the concept helps explain how homonormativity, or the LGBTQ+ expression of heteronormal values and societal privileges, is expressed within *RPDR* and cultivates value within marginalized groups (Duggan, 2003, p. 50).

Thus, *RPDR*'s homonormative privilege is an aspect of how cisgender gay men—who are professional drag queens—navigate their masculinity (intersectionally) in relation to

competing gender practices challenging the supremacy of masculine expression. Gay men's investment in masculinity perpetuates male economic, political, and cultural privileges. In addition, media scholar Amanda D. Lotz's examination of multiple masculinities on cable television situates my readings of gay male masculinity on *RPDR* within larger systems of masculine contention occurring within gender and media systems (2014, pp. 30-31).

Furthermore, gay media and cultural studies scholar Richard Dyer's work describes many aspects of gay male culture that reify hegemonic masculinity. His analysis of white male musculature in film and sport, his analysis of Judy Garland and gay men in which "Urban white gay men [...] largely defined [...] gay male culture" in their own image, and his analysis of "gay misogyny," all pinpoint specific lenses creating the white gay male hegemony in visible challenge on *RPDR* (Dyer, 2017, 2004, p. 138, 2002). Dyer's lenses into gay male media representation help guide close readings of *RPDR* for biases and privilege. Dyer's work also provides necessary histories of past gay masculine media representation and possible avenues for its reification within *RPDR*.

And finally, I employ Devon Carbado's "color-blind intersectionality" furthering Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality "to engage men, masculinity, whiteness, and sexual orientation," within the frames of Crenshaw's theory, originally and popularly employed for analyzing the specific gendered and racialized violence Black women experience (2013, 817-818; Crenshaw, 1995). Specifically, Carbado insists "we should avoid framing the intersection of race and gender as an intersection of nonwhiteness and gender," implying this allows whiteness to remain unmarked and to operate as a normative other identities are related towards (2013, p. 823). This utility of intersectional theory allows for the critical reading of whiteness, masculinity,

and specifically gay male whiteness in relation to other identities, namely queer of color representations, feminine Black identities, and Black gay male masculinities.

Extending these masculinity studies frames into *RPDR*'s homonormative investments, this thesis examines production practices and representational biases finding those with hegemonic privilege maintain their positions despite such challenges, integrations, and championing of alternative gender and Queer ways of being. This research contends masculinity is valued within *RPDR* for similar reasons masculinity dominates sports cultures when all genders can perform the same cultural practices (as explored in chapter two). Culturally, masculine expression (within cisgender males) is still economically privileged to the detriment of feminine performances. Thus, *RPDR* reifies a contradiction in economically valuing cisgender gay male performances of femininity more so than the same embodied performances by women, transgender, or gender non-conforming people. Gay men's investment in masculinity is a symptom of homonormativity and relates to tensions between *RPDR*'s queer influences and their systemic investments in neoliberalism, in which male privilege is a vehicle to cultivating social advantages their reimagining upends.

Homonormativity & Queerness

Homonormativity also informs debates in queer theory. Much *RPDR* scholarship either focuses on its media usage or conducts an intersectional analysis of the franchise. Often, the literature lacks understandings of queer theory. Scholars are versed in LGBTQ+ history, media, or drag cultures, but rarely queer the text. LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer or Questioning) is a term recognizing the diversity and shared political investments of individuals who are variously gendered and/or non-heterosexual. This thesis intends to queer the

LGBTQ+ media texts herein examined, which informs my homonormative readings of the franchise.

Queer, in comparison to LGBTQ+, is generally referenced with a different political and activist meaning. As mentioned earlier, Lisa Duggan more thoroughly details how homonormativity grew out of LGBTQ+ politics within neoliberalist societies (2003, p. 50). Conversely, Cathy Cohen envisions Queer as “a politics where one’s relation to power, and not some homogenized identity, is privileged in determining one’s political comrades. [...] [A] politics where the *nonnormative* and *marginal* position[s] [...]” are the basis for progressive transformative coalition work” (1997, p. 438, author’s emphasis). Further distinguishing queer from LGBTQ+, Halberstam, citing Foucault, implies Queer is not fixated on sexuality but employs “friendship as a way of life” “in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction” (2005, p. 1). In essence, Queer champions the abdication of gender and sexuality labels—including challenges to heteronormative and homonormative ways of living—while LGBTQ+ represents non-heterosexual integration into established social constructions.

RPDR exemplifies tensions between Queer and more homonormative LGBTQ+ political representation throughout the franchise. *RPDR*’s mainstream recognition necessitates maintaining and growing partnerships with corporations, sponsors, and broader heteronormal culture to maximize profits and other social and cultural capitals. Thus, through commodifying queer and drag culture for mainstream economic systems, *RPDR* reifies differences within LGBTQ+ and queer communities, but also exemplifies how individuals navigate such inclusion and/or exclusion.

For example, *RPDR* progressively explores gender identity and sexuality often through a season’s usual makeover challenge, in which contestants put a guest into drag resembling their

own drag character. Scholar Joshua Gamson notes this aspect of the competition holds queer potential (2013), reading an instance from S3 in which one of the participating “jocks” confesses his attraction to the queen making him over (p. 54). The makeover challenge is one of a few reoccurring challenges throughout the franchise, foundational to its brand identity of exposing mainstream audiences to an alternative gender and sexuality order. Gamson argues *RPDR*, at its best, queers all manner of identities and cultivates cross-cultural understanding.

However, scholars also explore how *RPDR* reifies hegemonic identity categories and homonormativity. DeAnda’s analysis explores how the franchise frequently reifies heteronormal sexual scripts (referring to “top” and “bottom” sexual practices) within homosexual expressions of sexuality (2019). Laurie Norris (2014), examining cisgender gay male and trans drag queen relations early in the show’s tenure discusses how “a hierarchy exists [...] within the show that privileges certain types of drag queens over others,” which I will investigate further in this thesis (p.33). And John Morrison compares how *RPDR*’s *Drag U* (2010-2012) spinoff saw cisgender gay male drag queens makeover “real” women in accordance with their gay male expressions of womanhood (2014). Morrison corroborates this thesis’ view of the franchise, saying “the mass commodification of drag in RuPaul’s TV empire promotes the history of the homophile movements and their call to assimilate rather than agitate” (2014, p. 141). Read with a queer lens, the “real” women’s gender expression agitated patriarchal and hegemonic gender norms of womanhood more so than the femininity expressed by *Drag U*’s drag queens.¹⁴

In addition, the makeover challenge also includes a cultivated homonormative racist and sexist “tactical” advantage. One contestant usually wins the opportunity to pair up the other queens with their makeover partner. Often, the most conventionally attractive guest is first

¹⁴ See also Ferrante, 2017.

chosen and on down the line. Sometimes, however, contestants choose differently raced partners for other contestants because they believe a white queen for example would not know how to apply makeup to people with darker skin tones.¹⁵ It is presumed they're making the makeover more difficult by assigning a white contestant a person of color. While certainly racist, it is a tactic built into the show and a facet of structural racism in makeup industries that companies historically did not manufacture as many options for melanated skin as they did for lighter skin tones. Therefore, *RPDR* does not necessarily cultivate racism within this practice, but employs systemic racist caveats as a “strategic” option. This reifies such systemic discriminations but also provides an opportunity to overcome these existing inequalities by showcasing one’s knowledge and skill in working with diverse skin tones.

Homonormativity & Neoliberalism

In opposition to a queer politic, I employ Duggan again to frame homonormativity as “a politics that does not contest dominate heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (2003, p. 50). Julie Wilson connects Duggan’s framework to neoliberalism as an economic and political social system, arguing the LGBTQ+ movement turned away from the “downward redistribution of resources and power” for “inclusion in the burgeoning enterprise culture” (2018b, pp. 200-201). Within neoliberalist thought, social inequalities (such as racism, sexism, class position) can be overcome individually—rather than collectively—through self-enterprise or commodifying the self in accordance with capitalist market systems. Neoliberalism reifies inequality because

¹⁵ For example, Eureka did this on S10 to Aquaria. *RuPaul’s Drag Race* S10 E10, “Social Media Kings into Queens,” Vh1/Viacom. May 24, 2018.

though one gains individually, such success necessitates unequal heteronormative racist, sexist, and classist social and economic conditions to leverage capital to the few while the many go without. Also, neoliberalism is represented through many cultural and media institutions, especially reality-television and the “gamedoc” genre, which “construct[s] community relations in terms of individual competition and self-enterprise” (Ouellette, 2009, p. 224, 2013).

Importantly, neoliberalism’s focus on the self is at odds with collective ideas of citizenship. This is counter to the very histories of Black and Queer activism *RPDR* claims lineage with, like the Harlem Black and Latinx ballroom culture represented in Livingston’s (1990) *Paris is Burning*. Thus, *RPDR*’s invocations of queer history and LGBTQ+ activism, while instructing audiences to practice individuated homonormative values, rings hypocritical and inauthentic to critics. Banet-Weiser explores how cultures and communities have been branded within neoliberalism, writing “transforming identity into a product and a market has enormous consequences. Commodifying identity reifies it. Commodities like gender or race become hegemonically constructed things rather than relations [or] intersectional qualities that are constantly subject to reinvention” (2012b, p. 36). Banet-Weiser and Ouellette both theorize consumer citizenship occurs when communities are co-produced by the affiliated political and economic relations to the brands they consume (Ouellette, 2017; Banet-Weiser, 2007). Importantly, this strategy is not entirely negative and is in fact part of demonstrating the marginalized group’s value within capitalist societies, however, it does not reimagine the systems of inequality producing social, cultural, or economic hierarchies.¹⁶

Combined with arguments investigating neoliberalism and reality television that additional *RPDR* scholars like Brennan (2017) and Daggett (2017) also investigate, *RPDR*

¹⁶ For more on how consumption coproduces group identity, see Sarah Banet-Weiser, 2012d.

proves to be a crucible of homonormative identity formation and commodity citizenship. Banet-Weiser, citing Beretta Smith-Shumade's work discussing the success of the TV channel BET, reminds us how viewers are literally commodified, reinforcing that "television not only serves programming to audiences but also serves audiences to advertisers" (2012b, p. 36). Thus, these prisms center how homonormative identity is politically and economically advantageous for *RPDR* to cultivate within its brand community.

Homonormativity & Reality Television

Reality television is further employed for its pedagogical function, which helps instruct neoliberal and homonormative values as ways of being to its audience. Additionally, this thesis is informed by Vicki Mayer (2014) and Albert L. Martin Jr.'s (2018) respective methods considering the behind the scenes representation, economic, and labor conditions of reality television/queer media, I apply Skeggs and Wood's "economy of personhood" to *RPDR*'s homonormative production practices (2012). They posit "[the] intimate bodies, parts, and practices" of featured reality television performers are commodified for corporate benefit, which further reifies the unequal systems *RPDR* operates in (Skeggs & Wood, 2012, p. 12).¹⁷ *RPDR*'s brand of professionalized queer performance art must perpetuate systems of heteronormative industry that enable its success. Thus, truly radical and queer representations are not championed by the brand. This leads to the unequal treatment expressed by some contestants in addition to influencing *RPDR*'s advocacy of market-friendly and individuated actions instead of collective solutions to systemic inequalities.

¹⁷ For more reality television and audience reception, see Dominguez, 2015; & Miltner, 2018.

A further aspect of homonormativity and reality television is hereby examined through sports media scholarship. June Deery explores how reality programming is influenced by the prior forms of the genre, including “sports, news, and documentaries” (2015, p. 4). *RPDR*, (whose production company initially made documentary films) combines all of these influences, but chiefly their sports relations are unexplored as of yet within *RPDR* scholarship.¹⁸ Televised sports, like reality television, capture actual events through the drama and suspense of competitive performances of scripted rules and rituals (Deery, 2015, p. 4). Also, sport and reality competitions are both exhibitions of embodied performance and skill. In addition, Toby Miller (2009) explores the mediation of sports on television, describing the economic investments, industrial apparatuses, and demographics targeted through sports media as industry (pp. 93-108). In chapter two, I will further detail how *RPDR*’s homonormative privileging is reified through televised sports’ influence within its production practices. Sports scholar Michael Messner (2007) notably reminds us “sport was a male-created homosocial cultural space,” and arguably still is (p. 35). In short, homonormative ideological investments in masculinity drive *RPDR*’s representation of drag professionalism as male, color which performers are seen as lucrative brand investments, and reify cisgender gay men’s hegemonic position within drag and LGBTQ+ community identity. Thus, both *RPDR* and sport’s reify normative masculine capitals within player representation, audience consumption, and its organizational structures.

Self-branding & Commodity Activism

Part of neoliberalism’s influence within identity and community formation is represented in self-branding and commodity activist practices. Self-branding refers to the contemporary

¹⁸ Outside of casual mentions, see Gudelunas, 2017, p.240.

development within the U.S. political economy that imagines “the relationship between labor, products, and capitalism” in “affect, attention, and culture itself” (Banet-Weiser, 2012c, p.72). Products, corporations, and individuals “branding” their value within market language seek to create emotional connections with potential consumers, build authenticity, and increasingly reveal an appealing and profitable commodity of the self, often blurring so-called “real” lives with produced versions of themselves for consumption and visibility within new media technologies and sales practices. *RPDR* participates within this framework by literally judging contestant’s self-brands for monetary value within neoliberal economies.

Addressing self-branding, Julie Wilson—employing Alison Hearn’s work—posits “not everyone is capable of crafting a consumable, competitive image; not everyone’s body or self-presentation is readily legible as human capital” (2018d, p.134). Additionally, Banet-Weiser agrees, arguing the accessibility necessary to engender this type of consumer relationship relies on privileges marginalized individuals do not have in comparison to the self-branding practices of those with more social privileges (2012c, p.75). *RPDR*, judges—through the prism of homonormativity—which contestant’s self-brand is the most investable as a commodity, star, and micro-celebrity. This lens frequently cultivates homonormative contestants along race, class, and gendered lines. Though waxing variously in scientific rigor, discourse exists scrutinizing former *RPDR* contestant’s social media following numbers in attempts to highlight how Black queens disproportionately lag behind in follower count compared to contestants of other races (Henderson, 2018). Rather than claim any overt racial bias in online engagement, similar concerns to Banet-Weiser’s influence homonormative readings of the brand after one recognizes—beyond their racial diversity—that all *RPDR* winners have been young, fit, capable of masculine presentation (even if they identify as gender-fluid or gender non-binary), and

versed in the class and cultural distinctions of urban white gay male culture, regardless of the race of the winning contestant.

Reacting to the increased need to govern ourselves due to neoliberal inequality and deregulation, Ouellette contends brands galvanize necessary political and social action, though often it is individually practiced instead of collectively implemented (2012, pp. 64–65, 2018). Commodity activism furthers the brand’s relationship with political groups and communities. Brands will practice corporate social responsibility, or the “various ways in which a corporation’s support of social issues [...] can build the corporation’s brand and thus bring in more revenue and profit,” only if support for a cause appears lucrative (Banet-Weiser, 2012d, pp. pp. 144–149; Ouellette, 2017, pp. 37–38). However, if such activism necessitates economic sacrifice or too few consumers care enough about the brand’s activism to reap the rewards from their increased consumption, brands will remain ambivalent to change.¹⁹ In addition, consumers participate in a brand’s activist practices in part to “maintain a politically virtuous self” and maintain their relationship with the brand. (Banet-Weiser, 2012d, p. 146). Thus, political policies or identities are only produced by *RPDR* if they are brandable or profitable. Often, this means *RPDR*’s activism and representational actions prioritize how they can commodify new markets into loyal, affective, and lucrative consumers. As Banet-Weiser, the *RPDR* literature thus far explored, and the proceeding case studies show, often this mindset overrepresents for homonormativity in comparison to increased queer or marginalized inclusion efforts. This

¹⁹ Recently, Black Lives Matter protests championed by the NBA were largely initiated by individual players. Only when players boycotted play in unison did the NBA spin such collective action into corporate support for the movement. Similarly, *RPDR* championed individual protests and shared educational material on how to protest “safely and responsibly” in accordance with the protest organizer’s wishes (*RPDR*, 2020b). However, *RPDR* did not sponsor any protests outright or invite their consumers into collective action. They didn’t even cancel airings of the show in protest. They invited consumers to participate individually in accordance with the brand’s political values. Then, it is up to the individual to emulate the values of the brand to increase their relationship with them.

research criticizes how *RPDR*'s consumer community is produced, contending their activism privileges class mobility and individual action.

Representation of LGBTQ+ Communities & Drag Culture on *RPDR*

Despite *RPDR*'s privileging homonormative representation, the media platform does showcase diversity within drag cultures and LGBTQ+ communities. However, the brand also standardizes and disciplines these same community and cultural practices for palatability within mainstream audiences. Often, this erases and/or collapses LGBTQ+ of color and genderqueer cultural expressions (Schottmiller, 2017; Jenkins, 2017). In addition, the marginalized LGBTQ+ expression the show does reference—often directly referencing Livingston's (1990) *Paris is Burning* documentary about Harlem ballroom culture—has been critiqued because Livingston's positionality as a white woman within the space alters the documentation of the queer of color cultural form (Barrett, 1994). Thus, *RPDR*'s employment of the reference has already been mediated by a white lens during its conception and is resynthesized again by a brand some argue also mediates Black and Queer cultural expression through a white homonormative lens. When knowing the emerging audience for *Drag Race* is “13-year-old suburban white girls” (directly quoted from RuPaul), this filtering of queer of color expression for more normative white audiences becomes clearer to envision from an economic standpoint as well (Lawson, 2019/2020). In addition, *RPDR* is often criticized for attempting to collapse transgender or queer of color culture into “drag culture” without distinguishing differences between each community, though historically and currently there is overlap). As such, there is heightened attention to how cisgender and colorism privileges work within the brand.

Emblematic of these debates, this thesis grounds tensions between homonormative and marginalized U.S. LGBTQ+ identity within histories of gender and racialized identity. C. Riley Snorton's *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (2017) centers how the complex history of slavery informs gender and racial identity. Snorton details mid-twentieth century links between female impersonation and trans of color communities, which reflect how these communities historically overlapped (2017, pp. 158-159). Snorton's research provides a historical lens to view *RPDR*'s intra-community racial and gender tensions. In addition, this thesis also employs the 'Quare' theory of E. Patrick Johnson, which rearticulates racialized sexual knowledge within academic Queer theory (often critiqued for being too white and elitist) (2001, p. 1). Specifically steeped in African American vernacular and culture, Quare theory privileges examinations of Quare/Queerness from marginalized positions (Johnson, 2002, pp. 2 & 19). Important to this thesis, Quare theory is also a theory of performance that prioritizes the material body and its relation to others while also focusing on "the social consequences of [...] performances" within different spaces and contexts (Johnson, 2001, pp. 10 & 13). Quare theory also allows for the honoring of Queer of color experience while critiquing institutions sustaining such social and performance spaces. Quare theory also utilizes bell hooks' "homeplaces," or "site[s] that [provide] the 'equipment for living'," which *RPDR* positions itself within as a home for "sweet sensitive souls, everywhere" (Burke, 1967, p. 293, as cited in Johnson, 2001, p. 19; Charles, 2020). Such a scope allows for the critic of *RPDR*'s homonormative privileging from a marginalized position.

RPDR's historical and contemporary lineages represent complex racial, classist, and sexist discriminations that have also be read in the simultaneous context of cultivating Queer solidarity and diverse class mixing. Within New York City—often considered the national

exemplar for U.S. drag culture— alone, historian George Chauncey (1994) explores the interracial tensions in early twentieth-century drag balls (pp. 227-267). Also, Frank Simon’s (1968) *The Queen* documentary details similar tensions mid-century. And the separation of 1980s downtown white “club kids” from Harlem’s Black and Latinx uptown ballroom culture is emblematic of a century of Queer drag segregation.²⁰ That *RPDR* seeks to be a diverse drag media brand influenced by multiple drag lineages is admirable in such a context, however, the brand still succumbs to such complex racial, gendered, and classist tensions as Chauncey demonstrated when reporting that “[t]he pageantry of the balls exacerbated the racial divisions in the gay world” (1994, p. 263). Thus, economic, social, and cultural conditions contributing to current tensions regarding *RPDR*’s homonormative brand identity need to be applied to readings of the franchise in context with the historical, technological, and media works that have contributed to *RPDR*’s current cultural position.

Thesis Outline

In the proceeding chapters, chapter two argues *RPDR*’s homonormative identity politics resemble similarities to sports and sports media practices. I argue this reproduces narratives of gender essentialism and biological determinism that privilege the masculinity of cisgender gay male performers within the purported queer-friendly brand. Chapter three argues *RPDR*’s homonormative posturing is also visible within its activist messaging. After exploring contemporary consumer and brand relations, I chart the benefits and limitations of identification

²⁰ Taking into effect World of Wonder still partners with members of the whiter club kid scene today (of which RuPaul is documented with (see Nelson Sullivan’s YouTube channel “[5ninthavenueproject](#)”) this influences my readings that *RPDR*’s seeks diversity but foundationally is from a gay white male lineage. This comparison is made to strengthen transgender and Black Queer voices when critiquing *RPDR*’s production policies and values since RuPaul and the program counter diversity issues in production by leveraging RuPaul’s success and influential position as a Black gay male executive producer and host (Young, 2019).

through consumer culture. I conclude that *RPDR*'s market-based homonormative formulation of LGBTQ+ citizenship maintains exploitative and discriminatory social systems when juxtaposed with the possibility of their equitable redesign. Ultimately, I argue *RPDR* is ambivalent to systemic change, and ultimately disciplines representations deemed unprofitable following racist, sexist, and classist ideological values. After exploring the implications of this research for future study, I claim the commodification of niche drag cultures and heteronormative subversion perpetuates existing power imbalances simultaneously benefitting and hindering aspects of the LGBTQ+ rights movement.

CHAPTER II

“GAY SUPER BOWL”: THE HOMONORMATIVE INSTRUCTION AND SPORTS MEDIA
PARALLELS OF *RUPAUL’S DRAG RACE*

RuPaul introduces *RuPaul’s Drag Race (RPDR)* S12 E4’s “The Ball Ball” by saying, “did you know, drag race and sports have a lot in common? They both involve competitions, colorful outfits, and balls!”²¹ Puns made throughout the fashion extravaganza satirize sport with campy references to athletic prowess and hidden balls. However parodic, connections to sport have always been present throughout the franchise and help discern its overarching gender politics. Another example is when show judge Ross Matthews—camping sports commentary—introduced the new lip-sync-for-your-life “smackdown” structure at the S9 finale. The show parodied sport’s television graphics, commentary, and even reimagined the *RPDR* logo in the style of the sports cable giant *ESPN*.²² This analysis reads *RPDR*’s references to sports media as a tool to satirize traditional masculinity while simultaneously reproducing a homonormative masculinity hierarchy within queer communities.

Televised sport represents complex social tensions around race, sex, and gender that both challenge and reproduce various nationalistic and commercializing projects (Rose & Friedman, 1997). *RPDR* parallels similar discourses within drag media’s rise in popularity, with many scrutinizing the franchise’s ideological leanings. Seeking the continual accumulation of capital, huge sports properties like the Olympics and the NFL elude to more equitable representation and organizational practices to appeal to diverse audiences and markets, but radical power shifts are rare. Challenges to corporate structures are subdued or disciplined to protect capitalist systems

²¹ *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, S12 E4, “The Ball Ball,” VH1, March 20, 2020. 9:48–10:00.

²² *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, S9 E14 “Grand Finale,” VH1, June 23, 2017. 21:00–21:40.

enabling lavish profits and societal privileges for those such inequalities benefit. Recently, NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick's censuring due to his Black Lives Matter protest and the Women's U.S. soccer team's struggle for equal pay (in comparison to the men's team) have exemplified this (Carter, 2020).²³

RPDR's brand of drag media, like nationalized sports, is a popular cultural practice which simultaneously parodies and reifies dominant ideological projects while representing and ultimately incorporating marginalized positions. Like modern sport, *RPDR* has commercialized and globalized this practice within media systems from regional, cultural, and folk forms. Sports media scholar Rob Brookes (2002a) identifies similar homogenizing practices in the formation of modern sports as "an attempt to *discipline* and *commodify* adult play" (p. 8). He notes modern sport formations standardized "space, time, and conduct" while channeling "physical and emotional expression [...] within societal limits" (Brookes, 2002a, p. 8). Ultimately, *RPDR*'s brand of gender performance teaches how, through homonormativity, queer groups can monetize their identities and achieve success within heteronormative capitalist systems. *RPDR* presents its brand as the authority, distributor, and arbiter of, essentially, a professional league of drag artistry and gatekeeper to a lucrative drag market within contemporary entertainment systems. Any representation that cannot be assimilated into the franchise's preferred ideological structure is quickly disciplined, expelled, and variously invited back to redeem initial assimilation failures.

While discursive and institutional links to sports will be examined later in this chapter, this analysis argues cisgender gay masculinities are privileged within the franchise over women, transgender, and gender non-conforming contestants. In so doing, *RPDR* circumscribes non-

²³ Also, while writing this, the NFL issued an apology for their reaction to Kaepernick's kneeling protest in the wake of (inter)national Black Lives Matter protests. Thousands had to march against police brutality and systemic racism for the NFL (and other corporations) to admit their initial handling of his protest reified racism. <https://twitter.com/NFL/status/1269034074552721408>. See @NFL, 2020.

homonormative masculine identities from these avenues of success, whether through questioning their need for representation, homogenizing regional, cultural, and ethnic drag performance cultures, or in setting standards and regimes of practice to maintain hegemonic control over what it means to be a successful drag entertainer within contemporary media. Thus, this analysis investigates and furthers *RPDR*'s use of sport as a metaphor and foundational narrative within the brand by employing their privileging of masculinity as a guide to frame contemporary gender and sexuality issues within media and brand culture. This lens also allows the study of malleable masculinity systems. Though *RPDR* casts diverse groups, cultures, and performers, this standard articulates success and market value through homonormative ideals tied to bodily standards, gender presentation, class, and racialized taste cultures which often perpetuate normative cultural ideals and particularly cisgender gay male performances of drag.

It is interesting to consider how a franchise commercializing and globalizing gender performance so broadly within mainstream popular culture navigates its subversive queer lineage into hegemonic power systems. Ultimately, I critically read the franchise's investments in masculinity through its homonormative and sporting influences. In this chapter, I demonstrate how *RPDR* maneuvers through such complex systems by analyzing its framing as a sports-like property through its narrative practices, media discourses, and paratextual properties. I center *RPDR*'s investments in positioning itself as a homonormative drag sports league to examine how masculinity as a power construct adapts to shifting cultural challenges and alternative ways of performing masculinity. In so doing, I reveal mechanisms of masculine privilege and show how a queer media franchise challenging such systems can ultimately reify what it set out to subvert.

Neoliberalism: Multiple Masculinities, Homonormativity, Marketized Equality, & Reality Television

Essentially, *RPDR* teaches how marginalized groups can monetize queer difference and access normative power relations within, as neoliberal scholar Julie A. Wilson posits, a *marketized equality* framework (2018b, p. 201). Citing Lisa Duggan's examination of neoliberalism's influence within LGBTQ+ activism, Wilson asserts the LGBTQ+ movement moved away from advocating for the "downward redistribution of resources and power" for "inclusion in the burgeoning enterprise culture" (Wilson 2018b, p. 200). Wilson, again citing Duggan, contends the bodies that mattered within this privatized, market-based culture were *homonormative* or "those that conformed to dominant cultural ideals of the nuclear family, bodily modesty, [...] control, self-care, and enterprise in the market" (2018b, p. 200).

Again, highlighting homonormativity, Lisa Duggan asserts it is, "a politics that does not contest dominate heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption" (2003, p. 50). Basically, those closest to normative societal privileges, like whiteness, masculinity, binary gender presentation, and class advantages, have more opportunity and visibility within marketized equality frameworks. Wilson posits "marketized equality privatizes collective struggle [...] only merit[ing] [societal recognition] through self-enterprise and competition" (2018b, p. 201). Homonormative self-enterprise reifies existing privileges because one must have the necessary capitals to compete. For example, to do well on *RPDR*, this necessitates networks of drag artisans, digital media competencies, and the time and labor to devote to such regimes of visibility to make the most out of the opportunity's the franchise provides. Per these concerns regarding technology, access, and

self-enterprise, *S12*'s (2020) reunion and finale episode were impacted by COVID-19 restrictions. As such, *RPDR* required contestants to stream and produce content from their homes. The show framed this as an opportunity to showcase the resilience and resourcefulness of drag entertainers. However, such technological requirements limit accessibility and introduce further standards and practices contestants must meet for effective integration within production's plans.

Audiences learn how to access dominant societal constructs throughout media and prominently from sports and reality television. How masculinity is performed within *RPDR*, or a queer sport's influenced reality competition program, offers a window into homonormativity at work. It is again useful to center masculinity scholar R.W. Connell's discussion of masculinity and femininity as "gender projects," which are simply "a way [...] social practice is ordered" (2016, pp. 136-144). Masculinity is just one "place" within gender which produces "a series of 'effects' in bodily experience, personality, and culture" (Connell, 2016, p. 138). Hegemonic masculinity then, again, is defined as "the gender practice which currently embodies the problem of patriarchal legitimacy—or the dominant position of men and the subordination of women—is not the only type of masculinity in practice, but it does represent the most privileged of contemporary masculine performances" (Connell, 2016, pp. 138-139).

Practitioners of masculinity come to perform it from different historical trajectories that intersect—or interact—with race, class, and sexuality, among others (Connell, 2016, pp. 136-139). Importantly these multiple masculinities simultaneously challenge and reify hegemonic masculinity's current patriarchal hierarchy, which works to control "cultural ideals, institutional power, and capital production" (Connell, 2016, pp. 138-139). Noting hegemony is a system of societal control, which Wilson cites through the Gramscian definition of hegemonic power in

class relations as “maintained through [the] ongoing, ever-shifting cultural processes of winning the consent of the governed,” the marginalization of queer drag performers on *RPDR* can be understood through the repositioning of gay and homonormative masculinities within the malleable masculine hierarchy (2018a, p. 22). Gay men’s various interactions with masculinity, as simultaneously outside but within male privilege, complicate their positioning within feminist and queer liberation efforts. To maintain supremacy, hegemonic masculinity will shift and reward previously marginalized masculinities to incorporate them within its ever-adaptable structure.

Also, Amanda D. Lotz’s analysis of multiple masculinities on cable television furthers reading *RPDR*’s sports media parallels through its investments in homonormative masculinity. Lotz, argues broadcast networks embody a mass-produced feminist space due to its accessibility, while cable is a masculine space with more niche audience appeal, male narratives, and economic barriers to consumption (2014, pp. 30-31). *RPDR* is a natural extension of Lotz’s framework. Cisgender gay male stories are presented as a viable niche market like other marginal masculine groups on cable, within a series that frames transgender representation as other. Performances are devalued and feminized on the program if they are deemed common, underdeveloped, or variously too reminiscent to undifferentiated performances of femininity throughout society. This constructs queer knowledge, social, and cultural capitals under gay male performances of hyper-femininity, individuality, and masculine notions of normative professional success. *RPDR* presents this as accessibility to all within post-identity frameworks, however, these homonormative successes are still more accessible for certain classed, racialized, and gendered bodies.

Further, reality television scholars Skeggs and Wood's concept of an "economy of personhood" again helps frame *RPDR*'s homonormative masculine privileging. They define this concept as a scrutiny of "bodies, parts, and practices for corporate interest" and their commodification along existing constructions of classed, gendered, and racialized norms (2012, p.12). When assessing who in the franchise is more market-friendly, centering how *RPDR* frames queer performance art to mainstream America necessitates examining the contradictory burden *RPDR* has to validate drag economically within heteronormative industries and represent diverse corners of the cultural form. Conversely, while monetizing queer subversion within normative industries, *RPDR* must suppress or discipline challenges to its capitalist validity from said subversive queer artists who prove the inequalities of capitalism and homonormativity.

Often contestant stories of unequal societal treatment are explained away within individuated homonormative logics of perseverance and paying dues to realize success from the very same structures which perpetuated their unequal treatment. For example, RuPaul butted heads with S10's The Vixen for describing inequalities faced by Black drag queens performing in predominately white spaces and to gay white cultural referents. Also, S8 and AS3's Chi Chi DeVayne noted difficulties in being judged equally to queens who could afford more lavish costumes in comparison to her own means. Judge Michelle Visage quickly rebuked Chi Chi's perspective, noting money is not the sole arbiter of success (missing the point, it doesn't hurt to come prepared).²⁴ Relative to sport, systemic obstacles can be overcome, but success is more easily attained when one has access to the equipment, knowledge, and spaces helping to produce institutionalized metrics of success.

²⁴ *RuPaul's Drag Race* S8 E4, "New Wave Queens." Logo/VH1. Mar 28, 2016.

Though *RPDR* champions and challenges notions of queer celebrity within heteronormative culture at large, success within the franchise relies on homonormative marketized equality. *RPDR* teaches how to access normative power within neoliberal frameworks which necessitate divestments from communal identarian bonds, such as class consciousness, racial discrimination, and queer solidarity. Many transgender and contestants of color have detailed their struggles with the franchise on social media and to press outlets. (Henry, 2019). Homonormativity limits opportunity within a market-based equality framework. Bourgeois ideologies of hard work, self-care, and discipline prove the individual worthy of reward and societal merit for their contributions to capitalist markets. This exists in stark juxtaposition to drag's historic legacy within collective based rights movements, struggles for equality, and as community organizers. These policies are depicted as economically draining and in need of bodily, behavioral, and character discipline by capitalist structures. Ultimately, RuPaul's celebrity is positioned as an exemplar for marginalized groups to emulate, proving the merit and marketability of queer celebrity within neoliberalism. If RuPaul can succeed in America as a "too Black, too gay, and too feminine" person, anyone can, right?²⁵

Reading *RPDR* like a sports league allows us to view how the brand envisions drag to be commercialized and distributed, which necessitates fostering homonormative drag performances within existing capitalist structures. I perceive *RPDR* as influencing understandings of drag within popular culture to the benefit of cisgender gay male performers through its homonormative investments, as other *RPDR* scholars have also investigated.²⁶ As a franchise representing oppressed and intersecting queer identities on cable, *RPDR* offers an example of

²⁵ RuPaul quoted saying his marginality as "too Black" for whites, "too gay" for Blacks, and "too feminine" for gays. *RuPaul's Drag Race*, S10 E13, "Queens Reunited," VH1, June 21, 2018. 16:11–27:50.

²⁶ For more, see Morrison, 2014; Norris, 2014; DeAnda, 2019; Ferrante, 2017. Other *RPDR* scholars who touch on homonormative themes include Jenkins (2017), Vesey (2017), Schottmiller (2017), and Daggett (2017).

how previously marginalized masculinities come to access and reproduce normative masculinity within ever-adapting hegemonic power constructions. When once drag queens were seen as societal miscreants causing good trouble in feminist and queer liberation mindsets, drag queens within *RPDR* are successful entrepreneurs and corporate spokespersons first and foremost.²⁷ Often, utilizing sporting metaphors, cisgender gay masculine representation is reified and coded as the ideal embodiment of *RPDR*'s homonormative investments.

Masculinity Bias in *RPDR* & Sport

Overt connections to sport run throughout the series, like the physical fitness mini-challenges in S1 and S5, and throughout the main challenges, like S4's professional wrestling challenge, S9's cheerleading challenge, and S11's "draglympics" challenge.²⁸ Also, subtler nods to sports' masculine privilege exist within the series, like on S3 E2 when contestants Mimi Infurst and Venus D'Lite discuss elective cosmetic surgery. Mimi says Venus's silicone cheek implants are like "baseball players taking steroids, you're sort of cheating" at female impersonation.²⁹ Through Mimi's statement, producers are essentially critiquing Venus's femininity as unnaturally enhanced and framing the franchise around the cisgender masculine performance of femininity. Here, the cheating corollary implies paying for feminizing body

²⁷ While I believe these issues are being quickly addressed—especially in light of national Black Lives Matter protests and discussions—there is still a decades-long history of *RPDR* favoring homonormative masculine performers and keeping (and defending) their representation as mostly cisgender gay men performing drag on their platform. Discussions of race address some marginality within the franchise; however, issues of sex and gender are intersectionally diverse, and masculine privilege is deep-rooted, including in LGBTQ+ communities. This all too often still leads to the marginality of female contestants. To these ends, I'm interested in how the brand is addressing the inclusion of contestants who have transitioned since their original season runs. Most prominently, Gia Gunn embodied this position on AS4 (2018–19), originally cast on S6 (2014).

²⁸ *RuPaul's Drag Race*, S1 E5, "Drag School of Charm," Logo TV, March 2, 2009; *RuPaul's Drag Race*, S5 E10, "Super Troopers," Logo TV, April 8, 2013; *RuPaul's Drag Race*, S4 E2, "WTF! Wrestling's Trashiest Fighters," Logo TV, February 6, 2011; *RuPaul's Drag Race*, S9 E2, "She Done Already Done Brought It On," VH1, March 31, 2017; *RuPaul's Drag Race*, S11 E6, "The Draglympics," VH1, April 4, 2019.

²⁹ *RuPaul's Drag Race*, S3 E2, "The Queen Who Mopped Xmas," Logo TV, January 24, 2011. 38:34–38:39.

modifications. This is framed as providing an unfair advantage in comparison to male contestants without such procedures. These gestures to drag and sport exemplify the show's self-conception as the "gay Super Bowl," which the franchise has invoked textually at least three separate times.³⁰

In essence, a cisgender male perspective of drag colors expectations and production processes. This is similar to the control masculinity exerts regarding sex and gender within organized sports. For example, the WNBA is the marked other compared to the NBA. Also, correlations between the Olympics governing body questioning whether South African Olympic gold medalist Caster Semenya can continue to compete with women in the 800-meter race because of elevated testosterone levels in her body resemble RuPaul questioning the fairness and subversive potential of female drag performers performing in competition with cisgender gay men (Longman & Macur, 2019; Aitkenhead, 2018). In addition to sex and gender differences, normative investments in sports that reify privileged social relations have also used the dichotomy of natural vs. practiced athletic skill to frame race. Black athletic expression and performance can be lauded or chided depending on ways the discourse needs to be employed to benefit white hegemony within the sport. For example, Serena Williams's tennis career has variously hyper-fixated on her behavior on the court to undermine her prowess within the traditionally white upper-class sport (Tredway, 2020). *RPDR* is more racially diverse than other drag competition programs it has influenced, but former contestants continue to cite race as an obstacle to opportunity within the franchise (Henry, 2019).³¹

³⁰ *RuPaul's Drag Race: Untucked*, S10 E10, "Social Media Kings into Queens," VH1, May 24, 2018. 10:56-11:09; *RuPaul's Drag Race: All Stars* S4 E6, "LaLaPaRUza," VH1, January 18, 2019. 27:03; and, *RuPaul's Secret Celebrity Drag Race*, S1 E1, VH1, April 24, 2020. 21:31.

³¹ Also, other franchises like *Dragula* (OutTV, 2016–) have more gender and sex diversity, however, lack racial diversity in comparison to *RPDR*.

RPDR achieves its masculine circumscription of drag through privileging traditional conceptions of hegemonic masculinity within drag as more physically demanding, “professional,” and as expert in relation to bodies under-utilizing hyper-femininity in dress, gesture, and/or mannerism (most prominently juxtaposed every season during the make-over challenge). Discourses also depict transgender and female-identified performers as contradictorily more naturally equipped to perform feminine drag and simultaneously less skilled at the performance of femininity because of this natural divined. Cisgender gay men are praised for studying femininity and henceforth replicating it upon their person. However, this practiced femininity (which is also essentialized as more difficult to emulate starting from a male body) is a form of hyper-femininity which subscribes to various patriarchal regimes of womanhood, even in their intended subversion.³² In comparison to female drag performances, such performances by cisgender men entrench these patriarchal notions within their drag performance in contrast to the cultural understanding female bodies convey when embodying similar signs and symbols.³³ Essentially, *RPDR* frames performances by female drag performers as less deserving of compensation, recognition, and social capital in attempts to maintain their newfound economic and cultural validity.³⁴

³² Importantly, cisgender men (gay or straight) perform drag characters in hyper-feminine ways. But there is a strong difference between glamorized, youthful, and intentionally sexually connotative performances as opposed to performances of matronly, older, and/or larger female bodies. Similar hyper-feminization, but differently applied, is emblematic of the difference between RuPaul’s drag character and Tyler Perry’s *Madea*.

³³ Gender performance is a contentious issue with a long history in entertainment forms. Rather than unpack all of this, I’ll simply gesture to two very different interpretations of drag in practice: one camp reads drag as a subversive and queer counter-cultural expression of unbounded gender identity and another reads drag akin to “woman-face” (in the tradition of white performers performing blackface).

³⁴ Importantly, this speaks only to drag performances. Female entertainers (like Mae West, Elvira, and contemporary pop-music performers) practice hyper-feminine performance, often called “glamour.” However, such signs and symbols on different bodies, genders, and contexts are interpreted differently. Cisgender gay male drag queen performers accrue different privileges within this space than transgender and other female-identifying drag performers. See Newton, 1979, (p.48-51) and Thaemlitz, 2004 for more on drag performance, “glamour” aesthetics, and transgender drag performers in context with cisgender male performers.

Reading *RPDR*'s narrative framings for sports parallels probes how the franchise teaches homonormativity similarly to how sports commentators construct narrative biases within athletic bouts. Sports narratives, such as regional vs. national, amateur vs. professional, and innate ability vs. technological/artificial enhancement surprisingly permeate between the world of sport and drag cultures. Often these relational dichotomies code gender biases within them, like how amateurism is coded feminine and professionalism coded masculine. Influenced by these dichotomies, *RPDR* employs discourses of physicality, competition, and conflict which pit diverse performers together, but on unequal footing.³⁵ Homonormative masculine privilege circumscribes the spaces and optics of physical engagement.³⁶ The show's investments in individual marketized equality fails to center larger systems of oppression, such as equal opportunity, collective solutions, and the reification of masculine privilege, whiteness, and class within LGBTQ+ communities.

For example, in S4 Madam LaQueer's ankle injury was framed as amateurish and lacking in personal responsibility. LaQueer, a plus-sized contestant, was framed through contestant discussions as not "polished" enough to choose more fitted outfits and sturdier shoes in direct comparison to the larger Latrice Royale.³⁷ Royale was praised for her professionalism as a plus sized contestant, which referred to the literal containment of her body into similar proportions as thinner contestants with her drag. Body proportion is frequently employed to compare larger

³⁵ For instance, Shangela's moments of physical altercation with contestant Venus D'Lite during their S3 E2 lip-sync. However fair production wanted to be after these incidents occurred, there were no interventions to curtail this behavior in early seasons. Also, the expanding of the mainstage space from a small runway strip, which caused more contestant interaction, into an almost four-by-four square in later seasons potentially sought to address these earlier oversights.

³⁶ I'll also mention the infamous S3 E4 incident in which Mimi Imfurst picks up India Ferrah during their lip-sync. While fair to curtail this type of encroachment onto other performers, *RPDR* potentially cast Mimi Imfurst for this very incident and reframed it as objectionable after India's reaction to it. In the Gay.com *Queens of Drag* web series, at 1:19, Mimi is shown picking up an audience member in a similar fashion to how she picked up India Ferrah. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nLS6q4Rnbns>

³⁷ *RuPaul's Drag Race: Untucked*, S4 E3, "Queens Behind Bars," Logo TV, February 20, 2012. 4:55–5:35.

bodies to thinner bodies utilizing similar metrics. Below, I further examine how gender is coded throughout the franchise.

Gendering Natural vs. Practiced Drag Performance

Many season winners are positioned as “professional” drag experts. This codes their performances as a learned masculine trade as opposed to naturally embodying femininity, which is framed as less deserving of recognition. Providing a few examples, Chad Michaels’ series-defining trait is in referring to her long career in Vegas as a professional Cher impersonator. Shangela is framed as the beneficiary of expert knowledge from a former Miss Gay America drag pageant winner in Alyssa Edwards. Alaska is framed as a knowledgeable *RPDR* superfan. Violet Chachki is framed as a studied fashion queen. And Raja is framed intertextually as an expert makeup artist and fashion model stemming from her employment on *America’s Next Top Model*.

A further example of how *RPDR* challenges traditional masculinity while simultaneously situating homonormative masculinity within patriarchy is present throughout the 2020 *Secret Celebrity Drag Race* mini-series. Celebrities in (notably sex-segregated) sets of three are challenged to perform drag within the formula of a normal series episode for a donation to the charity of their choice. This series more clearly explains *RPDR*’s underlying ideologies since the celebrity series cast straight men to perform drag in competition with queer male celebrities.³⁸ In so doing, they explain their goals and gesture more to an imagined heterosexual audience than normal seasons.

³⁸ This analysis looks at *RuPaul’s Secret Celebrity Drag Race*, S1 E1 & 3, VH1, April 28 & May 5, 2020. However, S1 E2 & 4, VH1, May 2 & 9, 2020, present a case study of cisgender gay men teaching women how to perform hyper-femininity better. For more relating to this issue within *RPDR* scholarship, see Morrison’s analysis of *Drag U* in “‘Draguating’ to Normal: Camp and Homonormative Politics,” (2017).

The straight male celebrities say they agreed to do the show to challenge normative masculinity and are praised for being brave enough to play with their gender identity. However, much of the adulation can be framed by imagining traditional masculinities embracing marginalized masculinities into neoliberal patriarchal success models by admiring and complementing their skills, work ethics, and self-discipline. The franchise in-kind positions their marginalized performance of masculinity as socially, culturally, and economically valuable through relation to normative masculine celebrity.

Frequently, a dichotomy familiar to sport is constructed on the show between natural and practiced ability regarding feminine gender performance. The casting of one queer male celebrity with two heteronormative male celebrities on E1 (featuring Nico Tortorella with Jordan Connor and Jermaine Fowler) and E3 (with Alex Newell alongside Dustin Milligan and Matt Iseman) allows for this dichotomy to emerge. This reproduces narratives from sport that circumscribe the skill and athleticism of marginalized athletes to privilege hegemonically normative athletes.³⁹ Normative notions of self-discipline, study, and hard work are privileged while reframing “natural” skill—chiefly among marginalized athletes—as less valued. In this case, queer male contestants who are imagined as being closer to embodied femininity than heterosexual males are depicted as having advantages, though all say they have never performed in drag before. Often, this privilege doesn’t come to fruition. The heteronormal contestants’ performances surprise the judges more because their perceived gender transformation was greater than contestants already embodying feminized traits.

³⁹ For example, questioning the fairness of Olympic runner Caster Semenya competing with other women because of elevated testosterone levels in her body or stigmatizing the behavior of Serena Williams in tennis as racially other to the advantage of her white counterparts within the white-dominated sport. Per *RPDR*’s case, it is surprising to see a queer space privilege homonormative masculinity and effectively reify the social scrutiny of transgender, genderqueer, and other female-identifying drag performers.

This construction can also be seen in regular seasons between transgender contestants and gay male contestants. Contestants with socially stigmatized feminized bodies (under biases privileging white European beauty aesthetics) have fought notions that female illusion is somehow easier for them to pull off (and therefore imagined requiring less skill, compensation, or praise) than contestants with historically masculine bodies and attributes. On S12, Rock M. Sakura brings this up by claiming others have said it's easier for her to pull off a female illusion because of historically racist stereotypes in the U.S. that effeminize Asian men.⁴⁰ Similarly, on S6 E1, Gia Gunn was framed as a "ladyboy in or out of geish" by fellow contestant Vivacious, with production then editing a clip of Gia walking femininely out of drag.⁴¹ Gia's show narrative did not focus on her being transgender on this season; however, this dichotomy still established scrutiny of contestants' gendered attributes out of drag to judge the extent and value of their gender transformation in drag.

Size also contributes to this natural vs. practiced dichotomy. On S3 E2, Stacy Lane Matthews (a trans contestant though not out on her season) was discussed by Raja as "looking like a girl" and "somebody's mother" when commenting on contestants' looks out of drag.⁴² The correlation being due to Stacy's size and similarity to her drag character out of drag, she was feminized in comparison to other contestants who can perform masculinity out of drag and hyper-femininity in drag. This framing implies a feminine advantage within the competition while simultaneously devaluing her performance and marking Stacy's femininity as pedestrian and therefore devalued within the standards of the franchise.

⁴⁰ *RuPaul's Drag Race*, S12 E4, "The Ball Ball," VH1, March 20, 2020. 33:38-34:10.

⁴¹ *RuPaul's Drag Race*, S6 E1, "RuPaul's Big Opening," LogoTV, February 24, 2014. 14:48-14:56.

⁴² *RuPaul's Drag Race*, S3 E2, "The Queen Who Mopped Xmas," Logo TV, January 24, 2011. 17:19-17:24.

In regard to sexuality, male attraction is almost ubiquitously shown as the given sexuality for contestants. Only one contestant on *RPDR: UK S1*, Scaredy Kat, said they were bisexual (Damshenas, 2019). To that end, masculine privilege is also framed on the show when one becomes the most masculinely attractive when out of drag among the season's cast. Through all these frames, the show privileges masculine actors performing femininity as more difficult and therefore more prized than historically feminized bodies performing in drag, much like professionalized sports over-represent and over-value male athletes in comparison to female athletes. This is accomplished by showcasing contestants with more masculine traits performing drag as a professionalized skill. Conversely, contestants with feminized traits are framed as possessing and sometimes "unfairly acquiring" (through surgeries and hormones) embodied feminine advantages, which in competition with cisgender gay males is devalued to favor male performances of femininity without such enhancements.

Marginalizing Transgender Drag Queens in Media



Figure 2: RuPaul Charles. [@RuPaul]. (2018, May 5) “You can take performance enhancing drugs and still be an athlete, just not in the Olympics.” Twitter.

Primarily, *RPDR* judges how well contestants transform along the traditional gender binary as set metrics to judge and track seasonal growth. Similar to sports leagues, Figure 2 shows the franchise imagines itself as the highest level of professionalized drag in entertainment as evident in this controversial tweet by RuPaul claiming, “[y]ou can take performance enhancing drugs and still be an athlete, just not in the Olympics” (Charles, 2018). This statement, referencing transgender inclusion, implies there should be an equalizing criterion in which all contestants face fair evaluation. However, it also casts suspicion on trans performers who take hormones and/or have gender affirmation surgeries as having an unfair advantage compared to cisgender males. The show has had some transgender representation and contestants with

feminizing body modifications,⁴³ though no trans queens have competed with breast enhancement surgery. Given that RuPaul flatly answers he would not accept a contestant who had transitioned, the line for inclusion seems to be at breast augmentation and/or gender confirmation surgery (Aitkenhead, 2018).

Viewing the show with a sports lens, I see this as excessive oversight privileging male contestants. In essence, barring biological women and transgender contestants from competing with cisgender males is framed as enforcing all contestants to play with the same equipment. This standardization seeks to regulate the amount of time and physical tasks all contestants have to engage with while getting into drag. However, this unfortunate conception privileges the art of drag as being male-dominated.⁴⁴

Analyzing how media discourse interacts with a main text, sports media scholar Adam Love demonstrates how discriminatory discourses regarding transgender athletes in sports media can lead to further marginalization within their sport (Love, 2019). He identifies the media frames of pathology, marginalization, and speculation of unfair advantages as tools those within sports media use to circumscribe trans athletes from a sport (Love, 2019, pp. 212-217). Surprisingly, as examined above, RuPaul and *RPDR* employ similar frames while discussing transgender performers in media. For example, fixating on biology and anatomy, cosmetic surgeries, hormone usage, and unfair advantages resembles discourses reinforcing the gender

⁴³ For example, Chad Michaels (S4, AS1), Detox (S5, AS2), Cynthia Lee Fontaine (S8–9), and Trinity The Tuck (S9, AS4), have all had silicone fillers and feminizing enhancements in which their entire show narratives frame their enhancements as a masculinized professional sacrifice to enhance their drag careers through feminizing elective surgery.

⁴⁴ I recognize other drag reality-competition programs, like the Boulet Brothers' *Dragula*, the Sugar Baker Twins' *Camp Wannakiki*, and even *RPDR: Thailand* has cast transgender queens, assigned female at birth (AFAB) queens, and drag kings on their respective programs. However, this makes it all the more peculiar why *RPDR* has yet to more visibly and vocally integrate its competition and allows for greater scrutiny of mainstream gay assimilationist politics in media.

binary and privileging cisgender male contestants.⁴⁵ These mixed messages in media regarding trans inclusion excessively scrutinize non-male performers within the series. Paradoxically, in trying to champion the subversion of male-dominated culture, *RPDR* views cisgender males as the best option for doing this at the expense of essentializing womanhood as not subversive enough to satirize patriarchy.

Drag & Sports Media's Paratextual Parallels

Reading the *RPDR* brand further, their production company and streaming platform, WOW (World of Wonder) Presents Plus, is fast becoming an international authority, distributor, and organizer of drag performance art across international media. At the heart of this media control lies a specific white, U.S., gay male-centric way of representing other drag cultures, honed by a group of privileged homonormative storytellers (Vary, 2020). I argue what comes along with this adaptation is a sports media conception of drag, with the *RPDR* brand resembling an authoritative *ESPN*-like hub of drag coverage. Relating *RPDR* to *ESPN*: both frame themselves as the authoritative leader of sport and drag (per their respective media niches) and overwhelmingly construct U.S. masculinity as the normative center of sport and drag despite diverse practices. Both also produce an imagined community around heteronormative and homonormative consumption of televised sport and drag pageants, respectively. Below, I examine paratext theoretically and then draw parallels between *RPDR*'s paratextual content and sports media. Especially highlighting *RPDR*'s fantasy league platform. I then situate how *RPDR*

⁴⁵ While perhaps traumatically negligible, I don't think *RPDR* is actively malicious towards the transgender community, though some former contestants do. For more on this perspective, see Kim, 2020. The show could be evolving to validate gender fluidity and non-conformity, as evidenced in Gigi Goode's S12 storyline. Even if so, I still perceive the show as privileging masculine aspects of gender non-binary contestants and circumscribing trans, biological, and assigned female at birth (AFAB) drag performers from the show. For more, see Sanders, 2020.

instructs audiences to perform a homonormative masculine reading of the franchise with its digital content.

A key place to discern the multiple readings a text holds is in its paratextual spaces. Media scholar Jonathan Gray asserts paratexts go beyond “the thing itself” to “frame expectations” and offer ways to “structure a sense of what the text is actually about” (2017, pp. 199-200). Along with context and intertextual readings, paratexts constantly make and remake a text and its meanings across different audiences. A few examples of paratexts include production notes, budgets, media promotions, merchandising, and fan interpretations. These multiple sites of meaning often contradict and complicate any one reading of a text, however, dominant readings can be made when assessing the cultural context, intertextuality, and paratext of a main text.

Regarding sport paratexts, sports media scholar Lindsey J. Meân (2011) contends *ESPN.com* helps reproduce white male heterosexuality as the central membership and primary consumers of sport and sport’s media, despite a diverse field of sport they could feature. This reproduces male sports as dominant, worth market share, and media attention while also constructing the *ESPN* brand—and this hegemonic male group—as authorities in regard to all sports coverage (Meân, 2011, p. 166). This framing also guides audience’s individual and mediated consumption of sport within an imagined community of sport consumers around masculinity, whiteness, and heteronormativity. This construction is exemplified by the lack of women’s sport coverage, lack of female representation in sports journalism, and lack of women within sport’s organizations.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ The privileging of male identities within all levels of sports and sports media production of course also circumscribes not only women but all gender expressions within sporting structures. In addition, when women in sport are more prominently featured, they are again relegated to a peripheral space within sport discussions and even within the *ESPN* brand itself, exemplified by the presence of the *ESPNW(omen)* brand.

Utilizing these frames, *RPDR* produces a substantial amount of paratextual content that cultivates dominant readings of homonormativity throughout the franchise, similarly to *ESPN's* masculine privileging of sport. Often, these texts teach why certain judgements are made and juxtaposes them with more marginalized performances. *RPDR* paratexts, hosted by show authorities, past winners, and experts position audiences to critically evaluate contestant's drag through the franchise's homonormative values. Also, these paratexts continue audience engagement with the franchise when seasons are not airing by producing commentary, interviews, and news similarly to *ESPN's* continual (re)presentation of prioritized masculine sport's during their off-season.

RPDR's employment of drag paratexts then relates to sports media by presenting masculinity as the dominant form of representation, regardless of whether audiences challenge or reify that positioning. This is partially due to World of Wonder's dominance, notoriety, and early success within the drag media field. That *RPDR's* founders and executive producers are mostly white gay males also reifies the position of the franchise as gay male oriented, in which women, transgender, drag king, and gender non-conforming drag artists are marginalized, if at all represented (Young, 2019). *RPDR* scholar Carl Schottmiller has also noted the franchise prioritizes gay white male cultural referents at the expense of more diverse LGBTQ+ cultural forms (Schottmiller, 2017). To these ends, *RPDR's* official and fandom paratexts offer deeper meanings that code the franchise like a sports league to reify homonormative masculinity throughout the franchise. While possibly parodic, I argue the franchise can be read beyond parody through the actual utilization of sports media tropes.

Below, I will highlight official paratextual content on VH1 and World of Wonder's *YouTube* channels and streaming services, most notably *The Pit Stop*, *Whatcha Packin'*, and

Fashion Photo RuView. These paratexts echo the sports-like structure of the main text, which ultimately evaluates and disciplines contestants to conform to homonormative values for economic gain. First, *The Pit Stop*—an official episode review show in which a season winner interviews former contestants to discuss strategies, plays, and stats—acts as an almost *SportsCenter* like review providing expert opinions while offering a player’s perspective. Next, *Whatcha Packin’* with show judge Michelle Visage offers an almost locker room reporter perspective about the previous episode, featuring an exit interview with that week’s eliminated player. As the only permanent show judge who is a woman, Michelle’s position could be read as echoing female sideline reporters who enter masculine spaces to interview players about their choices, feelings, and strategies regarding past plays. And finally, *Fashion Photo RuView* with past contestants Raja and Raven discuss the outfits worn on each episode and throughout off-season appearances. Raja and Raven are framed as experts in makeup, styling, and fashion who judge contestants based on westernized notions of hyper-femininity and economic value. Opinions are framed through taste level, fit, and uniqueness to center what the franchise expects in terms of a professionalized drag appearance in the “glamazon” style RuPaul and *RPDR* champion. In essence, these paratexts teach homonormative values through contestant failures and successes. By highlighting past plays, behaviors, and tactics (similarly to sports media), *RPDR* produces preferred values and identities for contestant and audience consumption.

RPDR Fantasy League

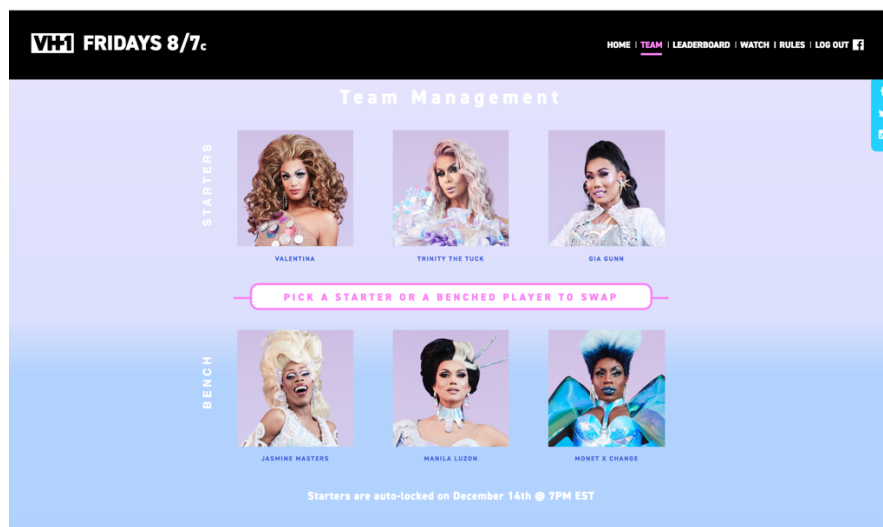


Figure 3: VH1/Viacom. (2018, December 14). Screenshot of my RPDR: All Stars Four team management tab. Vh1dragracefantasyleague.com/#!/team

Through various paratexts, fans are positioned to imagine the show as a drag sports league and often perform this relationship through fantasy leagues and stat tracking. Fantasy leagues are a paratextual aspect of sports media that allows fans to imagine or virtually gamify the real athletic performances of a professional sport. Throughout a sport's season, athlete's performances are converted into points according to who the fan chooses for his fantasy team and then compared with other teams in the fantasy league. Importantly, this teaches audiences to evaluate contestants as individualized homonormative commodities in competition with each other and not for their conciliatory or communal behavior. Sports media scholar Victoria E. Johnson frames the individual vs. communal affordances of sports media saying "watching sports television *on* television, the fan can feel part of a broad community [...] while online and with mobile technology in hand [they are] simultaneously addressed as an individual with specifically tailored a la carte requests" (2009, p. 131). The fantasy league's mediation of drag

cultivates an imagined community of drag consumers by individuating the consumption of drag through algorithmic preferences. These limitations reimagine how drag performance art is experienced from in person and communal spectatorship to privatized consumption. I propose digital paratexts like the fantasy league encourage audiences to reproduce the show's homonormative evaluations and reify societal prejudices through technological filters. This is particularly a problem Black contestants experience online when subject to racist viewer interactions (Henry, 2019). A toxic mix of sportifying a drag pageant which evaluates westernized beauty aesthetics and homonormativity, I argue, contributes to individuals reproducing aspects of this practice in particularly inflammatory ways.

The *RPDR* fantasy league has been a staple of the franchise since AS3 (VH1, 2018).⁴⁷ As Figure 3 shows, this social media promotional tool invites viewers to draft a group of contestants to their team before a season starts. Modeled after U.S. football culture, *RPDR* fans select three contestants to play each week, with the rest of one's chosen team safe on the bench. Your active players must accumulate enough points each episode to ultimately win you two tickets to the season finale. In essence, players are playing to how they imagine production will frame storylines and how contestants will be evaluated. This curtails choosing contestants who historically do not embody the show's preferred looks or identities, whether due to financial limitations, structural biases, or other conflicts. Influencing audience perceptions before a season even begins, fans are encouraged to choose contestants economically, homonormatively, and aesthetically privileged to maximize their potential points.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ This platform has not been continued for S12. Previous season fantasy leagues are also deleted once the promotion ends, however, there is a video on VH1's *YouTube* channel featuring S11 queens discussing the rules and platform. <https://youtu.be/-ahdfzs2xdA>.

⁴⁸ Further gesturing to the interrelatedness of sports and reality television, ABC's *The Bachelor/Bachelorette* also have fantasy leagues that allow audiences to rank and gamify the chances that an individual will ultimately "win" a season by receiving a marriage proposal. While outside the realm of this analysis, it is interesting to consider more

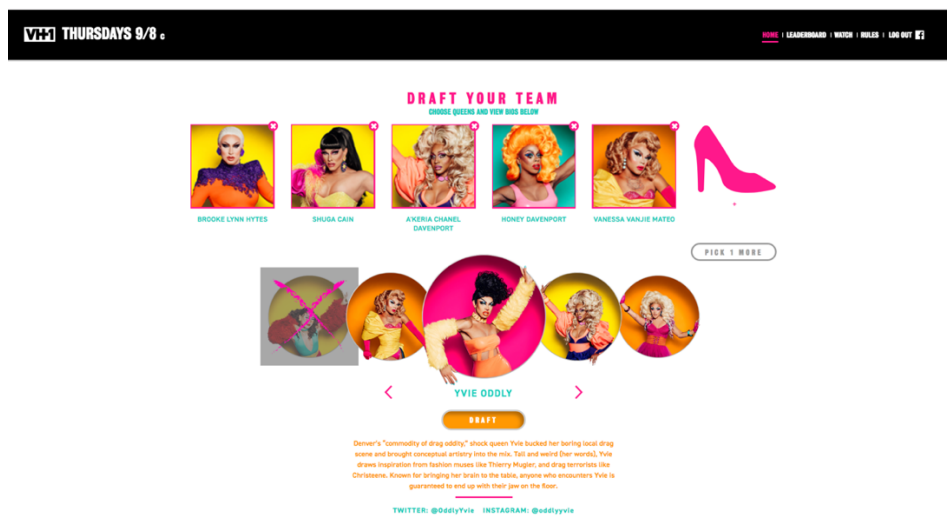


Figure 4: VH1/Viacom. (2019, March 5). Screenshot of S11 fantasy league team selection and contestant bios.

Furthermore, a trailer promoting the S11 fantasy league corroborates the masculine gendering of the franchise in embodied terms. During their promotional week contestants were told to provide three reasons why fans should draft them.⁴⁹ Parodying the juxtaposition of drag queens in a sport-like atmosphere, contestants highlighted their bodily assets and/or professional drag qualifications to convey their value. Notably, Nina West compares her look to a linebacker, however, most relied on femininized beauty features as a selling point. Highlighting her maleness, however, S11 winner Yvie Oddly tells fans to choose her because she is well endowed. Yvie's fantasy league bio in Figure 4 also privileges homonormative conceptions of drag. This production bio paints local drag as “boring” compared to *RPDR*'s national league. It also portrays the confrontations Yvie had on her season in masculine terms by equating verbal altercations to a physical punch or leaving contestants “with their jaw on the floor” (Fig. 4).⁵⁰

aesthetic and identity politics considerations between *The Bachelor* franchise and *RPDR* through these respective fantasy leagues as both embody aspects of beauty pageant culture.

⁴⁹ This promotional video has been taken off VH1's YouTube channel. The video depicted all of the contestants answering with three reasons as to why fans should draft them to their S11 fantasy league teams.

⁵⁰ Yvie's bio in Fig.4 reads “Denver's ‘commodity of drag oddity’, shock queen, Yvie bucked her boring local drag scene and brought conceptual artistry to the mix. Tall and weird (her words), Yvie draws inspiration from fashion

Scoring Categories		Scoring Categories	
Core			
Crowned Winner/Joins the All Stars Hall of Fame	500	Mentions Being "Gooped" or "Gagged"	5
Wins Maxi Challenge	100	Michelle and Ross agree on Critique	5
Wins Lip Sync for Your Legacy	83	Flirts with Guest Judge	4
Placed in the Top 2	50	Breaks the 4th Wall	3
Double Saved	50	Dances into the Werkroom	3
Wins Mini Challenge	45	Self-Referential/Mentions Own Catchphrase	1
Clock the Phrase Guess Correct	44	Wears Green on the Runway	-1
Wins Snatch Game Maxi Challenge	40	Gets into Werkroom Fight	-3
Safe / Survives the Week	35	Messes Up Choreography During Dancing Main Challenge	-5
Pulls a Mainstage Stunt	18	Mentions Prize Money	-5
Mentions Chad Michaels, Alaska or Trixie Mattel	15	Messes Up Lines During Acting Challenge	-5
Runway Reveal / 2-in-1 Outfit	14	Cries on Mainstage	-6
Runway to Lip Sync Wardrobe Change	14	Loses Lip Sync for Your Legacy	-9
Shade Music is Played After a Read	13	Storms off Set during Main Challenge Rehearsal	-10
Mentions Vanessa Vanjie Matteo Catchphrase	10	Makeup is Clocked by Michelle Visage	-14
Wears a Beret in Confessional	9	Needs Help Sewing Garment	-15
Tongue Pops	7	Runway Wardrobe Malfunction	-20
Cries in Confessional or Werkroom	6	Placed in the Bottom	-25
Mentions Being "Gooped" or "Gagged"	5	Argues with Ru	-50
Michelle and Ross agree on Critique	5	Forgets Lip Sync Lyrics	-68
Flirts with Guest Judge	4	Eliminated	-69
Breaks the 4th Wall	3	Quits/Self Eliminates	-100

Figure 5: VH1/Viacom. (2019, December 26). Screenshot of RPDR: All Stars Four official scoring metrics

Importantly, the winner is not determined until the finale airs long after the season was originally filmed and production films multiple crownings to safeguard against spoilers. This gives fans some power to influence the show's final result and industry partners valuable feedback to award further developmental opportunities, of which fantasy league involvement and social media interactions could contribute to. Victoria E. Johnson (2009) further discusses sports television in the multi-platform era, claiming:

“Mobile technologies, online access, and fantasy leagues encourage the sports fan to engage with [their] team and fan community virtually, no matter where [they] may be physically located, suggesting that sport remains a field of everyday, localized, and individuated identity as much as it is spectacular and communal” (p. 128).

muses Thierry Mugler, and drag terrorists like Christeene. Known for bringing her brain to the table, anyone who encounters Yvie is guaranteed to end up with their jaw on the floor” (VH1/Viacom, 2019).

While digitally connecting audiences nationally and internationally, aspects of this connectivity also privatize and culturally mediate the consumption of drag. Further study into audience engagement with digital drag spaces is needed to understand how various communities interact with performers and drag content online. As Figure 5 exemplifies, the fantasy league is another tool that instructs audiences to evaluate contestant's skills, behaviors, and identities through homonormative marketized equality frameworks while displacing in person communal consumptions of drag in favor of a nationally mediated experience. The digital affordances of *RPDR* paratexts and the official fantasy league exemplify how the franchise disciplines audience values in accordance with the brand's homonormative privileging.

Conclusions

RPDR is popularly imagined as “*Monday Night Football* for the LGBTQ crowd,” however, this chapter has revealed the value of a more serious consideration of this perceived relationship (Gudelunas, 2017, p. 240). However parodic these comparisons were when they began, there is a lot to learn about homonormativity and LGBTQ+ intra-community politics by delving into its posturing as “the gay Super Bowl.”⁵¹ This lens considers how hegemonic masculinity adapts to and disciplines alternative challenges to its tenuous social control and ultimately how investments in homonormativity reproduce inequality among marginalized groups.

RPDR has a burden of representation problem despite its truly historic impact for diverse LGBTQ+ visibility on television. Their present patterns of representation still privilege and reproduce homonormative varieties of drag within their media discourse, narrative framings, and

⁵¹ *RuPaul's Drag Race: All Stars*: S4 E6, “LaLaPaRUza,” VH1, January 18, 2019. 27:03.

paratextual content. *RPDR* positions the cisgender gay men who own, produce, and judge the franchise with expert knowledge and authority to evaluate performers through a lens of homonormative capital gains and returns on industry investments. Sports media scholarship offers a focus in how Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity is practiced and produced within media systems, often privileging constructions of masculinity as "white, middle-class, and heterosexual" (Brookes, 2002b, p. 131). Examining *RPDR*'s homonormative privileging, examined from intersectional constructions of identity and representation in conjunction with LGBTQ+ communities, reality-television, and sports media, offers a lens to analyze how "subordinate masculinities [can] support hegemonic masculinity" (Brookes, 2002b, p. 131). Viewing *RPDR* like a sports league is key to analyzing inequalities regarding racism, sexism, and transphobia among fan behavior, production decisions, and contestant opportunities post-show (Henry, 2019).

Problematizing conceptions of *RPDR* as a drag sports league has here been practiced to help lead to more equitable relations and representation, particularly regarding race and sex. Scholars studying trans-athlete experiences and sex segregation in sports, Adrienne N. Milner and Jomills Henry Braddock II, argue the elimination of sex categories in sport would benefit not only transgender athletes but all individuals as athletic integration would lessen stigmas around "certain sports, body types, and behaviors [regarding] masculinity and femininity," and "promote freedom of identity, interest, and behavior for all" (2016, p. 112). Brookes also comments on masculine privilege within sports saying, "the overexposure of sportsmen and the underexposure of sportswomen is likely to reinforce the idea that women in sport are unusual" (2002b, p. 126). In essence, the longer *RPDR* positions itself as the homonormative masculine authority governing a drag sports league, the longer a self-imposed separation benefitting cisgender gay

male drag queens will continue within the franchise and influence audience and market perceptions of drag more broadly. Currently, how *RPDR* imagines marginalized audiences can access an expanding conception of societal capital and representation—through the mediation and monetization of queer cultural practices—privileges homonormative conceptions of drag and cisgender gay males.

Importantly, audiences are not homogenous and can challenge or subvert parts or all of this positioning. *RPDR* fandom and audience studies would elucidate more ways the franchise and different audiences come to interpret the show's homonormative positioning. For instance, my analysis primarily examines how *RPDR* utilizes sports references to privilege gay male audiences and its homonormative ethos. This messaging is enacted when certain audiences reproduce this, like the *RPDR* drag queen *YouTube* review show *In My Homosexual Opinion* (IMHO) who recently reviewed the *AS5* cast announcement like sportscasters announcing player stats (IMHO, 2020). However, as previously noted, RuPaul himself has said the expanding audience for the franchise is “13-year-old suburban white girls (Lawson, 2019/2020, p. 87). Importantly, fandom is not a monolithic category. Reconciling how *RPDR* appeals to multiple audiences in multiple spaces could potentially reveal how the franchise makes financial and ideological decisions, responds to criticism, and who they envision is their most valued demographic market.

RPDR has brought various queer influences together from different regional, cultural, and historical spaces, but with this, they have also reproduced histories of LGBTQ+ oppression, conflict, and erasure. Through the mainstreaming of drag, marginalized LGBTQ+ history and groups are either erased from representation or asked to perform at higher standards and receive greater scrutiny for the same recognition within structures privileging homonormativity.

Marginalized LGBTQ+ contestants face biases within online and community spaces as well and face limited opportunity post-show within this supposedly queer-friendly franchise.

However, at its best, drag as an artform fosters inclusion, integration, and communal gathering. Drag has a vital history of activism, community organizing, and fundraising which continues today even within the *RPDR* brand.⁵² This spirit of togetherness will likely continue to broaden and address racism within LGBTQ+ communities, transgender violence, and media representation. In viewing *RPDR*'s sporting influences through a homonormative lens, I seek to resituate the communal work and liberatory efforts of diverse groups within the LGBTQ+ community coming together through drag entertainment. As a large LGBTQ+ transmedia franchise, *RPDR* cannot be everything for everybody, however, the LGBTQ+ story is best told honestly and inclusively by recognizing all cultural practices, spaces, and people that continue to contribute to the dream of queer liberation.

⁵² *RuPaul's Secret Celebrity Drag Race* (2020) donated to celebrity's charities of choice. Also, S12 saw a lot of disqualified contestant Sherry Pie's episode winnings either matched or moved entirely to LGBTQ+ charities. The brand has also become more vocal about social issues online, as many corporate brands have, and in advocating for LGBTQ+ voting efforts.

CHAPTER III
LGBTQ+ CONSUMPTIVE CITIZENSHIP: THE BRAND CULTURE AND PROSOCIAL
MESSAGE OF *RUPAUL'S DRAG RACE*

The 2017 Women's March for sex and gender equality protested the election of Donald Trump, systemic misogyny, and an unprecedented hate-filled 2016 election campaign. Protestors used commercial and branded messages to voice their political and moral opposition, of which *RuPaul's Drag Race* (*RPDR*) was one of many brands referenced (Rudolph, 2020). Catchphrases employed expressed a desire for sexism to "sashay away" and satirized Trump's orange skin color with the S5 retort "look how orange you fuckin' look, girl."⁵³ The infusion of branded references into political life and identity formation exemplifies the contemporary relationship brand culture has with consumers. These acts are an example of commodity activism, or a process that merges consumption with political and social dynamics of power, and prosumption, or a consumer who also produces a product (Banet-Weiser, 2012a, p. 7; Ritzer & Jurgensen, 2010, p. 14). *RPDR's* brand identity is here employed against the values of the Trump administration. However, in so doing, consumers are also validating their own consumption habits. Consumers construct identities in relation to brands as a way to understand themselves and as a language to relate to others. To this extent, *RPDR* exemplifies the role brands play in our contemporary moment and specifically in constructing the LGBTQ+ consumer citizen, or "the shared identity of consumers [in] [...] increasingly meaningful *national* connections among members of a community" (Banet-Weiser, 2007, p. 10).

Consumers actively engage with brands by co-producing brand cultural practices in ways that construct their own identities, politics, and habits. These practices notably further the

brand's own market aims as well. Importantly, this example shows how protesters are co-constructing brand community with their consumption and political habits by including those who agree with their political ideologies (co-produced through brand affiliation) and excluding those in conflict to their relationship to the brand, and thus their own identity and morals values (Ouellette, 2012, p. 67). Importantly, as media scholar Sarah Banet-Weiser asserts, brand culture is notably ambivalent as to who consumes their product (2012a, p. 5). Brand culture's ambivalence means brands are not implicitly advocating for political resistance, radical anti-capitalist strategies, or collective organizing in opposition to their own profit interests.⁵⁴ In this way, brands like Disney, Netflix, and Viacom (*RPDR*'s corporate parent) are also ambivalent to important but less-profitable political and moral social goods. If their advocacy cannot generate more consumption or engagement for their brand, then the issue will remain unpromoted. This ever-present eye towards capital generation limits the political possibilities of brand culture.

RPDR is a media franchise whose existence inherently speaks to gender and sexuality politics. This chapter explores how viewers cultivate identity, community, and a political sensibility with the brand through their consumption of it. And reciprocally, the chapter considers how *RPDR* practices "ethical capitalism," or various philanthropic and activist marketing tactics to build and maintain relationships among its consumers (Ouellette, 2012). Applying media scholars Sarah Banet-Weiser's formative work analyzing brand culture, corporate social responsibility, and consumer citizenship with Laurie Ouellette's analysis of prosocial messaging, I examine how *Drag Race* produces a homonormative LGBTQ+ consumer

⁵³ *RuPaul's Drag Race* S5 E5, "Snatch Game," Logo/Viacom. Feb 25, 2013.

⁵⁴ Recent 2020 Black Lives Matter protests have seen brands gesture to economic strategies supporting bail funds for protestors, medical care, and justice initiatives. However, these are also largely symbolic and individual ways one's consumers can become more involved monetarily and politically through consumer activism rather than practicing more collective forms of protest, like boycotts, organized and sustained protest, and other personal sacrifices for systemic change.

citizen disposition and how/why consumers engage and identify politically, economically, and socially with the brand. By examining RuPaul and *RPDR*'s brand identities and their relationship to LGBTQ+ communities through various historical, activist, and prosocial campaigns, I argue *RPDR* exemplifies the contemporary relationship between brand culture and consumptive citizenship, and how this relationship reflects consumer activist traditions marginalized communities employ in tandem with more radical and anti-consumption movements.

Debates & Tensions within the *RPDR* Brand

Contemporary brand culture links “brands to lifestyles, politics, and social activism,” in increasingly affective, relational, and constitutive ways (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Consumers form loyalties to brands expressing ideologies and practices they agree with, leading to increased profits for the brand through further engagement, evangelism, and/or co-production. Brand culture within neoliberal societies also shifts labor and creative energies onto consumers to advertise, circulate, and produce content towards corporate profit generation. However, commodity activism is not altogether exploitative or merely symbolic. Brand culture reflects solutions to social issues communities practice within our neoliberal age. Also, brand culture and consumer relations to politics, citizenship, and markets have historically driven rights and social reform movements. Even if only discursive in advocacy, brand culture influences consumer behavior and ultimately address necessary social issues, albeit through market ideology.

RPDR is emblematic of brand culture in that it exists in tension between profitability and politics. Though not entirely separate in brand culture, this dichotomy reveals the limitations and inequalities of consumption as an activist force. RuPaul and the *RPDR* brand commodify drag as a political and lucrative entertainment form. Within U.S. LGBTQ+ culture, drag has been

simultaneously radical and mainstream, exemplified by LGBTQ+ icons like Marsha P. Johnson and RuPaul respectively. I assert these poles are not separate. Community and identity can be formulated through consumer practice and social justice can be furthered through market interest, as Banet-Weiser explores with the Civil Rights movement (2012d, pp. 136-138).

By mediating drag to international levels, the RuPaul and *Drag Race* brands have attached their values to a long and diverse lineage of LGBTQ+ gender performance practices and more radical activist politics. However, the brand's representational (and monetary) priorities are apparent in its exclusions. Notably, the space is solely for drag queens—not drag kings—and often reflects a homonormative identity politics.⁵⁵ Many instances of LGBTQ+ identity, history, and activism depicted on the program are shown from a privileged homonormal perspective. Problematically, RuPaul and the *Drag Race* brand place themselves within a lineage of more radical LGBTQ+ politics by relating the consumption of their commodification of diverse LGBTQ+ cultural practices to participation within wider social justice struggles, patronizing of LGBTQ+ businesses, and more broadly, co-forming contemporary LGBTQ+ identity through the values of their neoliberal reality-competition media brand (Rosiello, 2017; Gudelunas, 2017).

⁵⁵ Except oddly when this reframe is blurred when cisgender men, as their drag queen personas, perform celebrity impersonation of male celebrities, mainly in Snatch Game challenges. Also, S1 E2 of *RuPaul's Secret Celebrity Drag Race* (2020) featured a mini challenge that saw the invited female celebrities performing male characters. It is notable to include, though that episode's main challenge still saw the female celebrities perform as drag queen characters. This also follows mini challenges within main seasons of *RPDR* in which the drag queens sometimes perform hyper-masculine drag king characters, reminiscent of Halberstam's analysis of actor Mike Myers as Austin Powers practicing "kinging," or a cisgender male gender performance of masculinity reminiscent of female drag king performances of hyper-masculinity. For more on drag king representation and value (or lack thereof) within normative entertainment systems, see: Halberstam (2001). Oh Behave! Austin Powers and the Drag Kings. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*. 7(3), 425-452.



Figure 6: RPDR. [@rupaulsdragrace]. (2020b, June 8). “How to Protest Safely,” Instagram picture slideshow. VH1/Viacom.

For example, in the S2 makeover challenge, mostly white gay-male elders are thanked as the representation of all LGBTQ+ activism and visibility in previous generations.⁵⁶ On a S6 “Drag Herstory” segment, *RPDR* relates to queer activist Marsha P. Johnson as a drag queen on the front lines of the Stonewall Riot when their gender identity and performance habits are not necessarily known in a modern sense of transgender, gender non-binary, etc.⁵⁷ And on S9, the highly educated and white Sasha Velour acts as the season’s narrator in confessionals about many queer of color issues. Particularly shown in confessionals, Velour summarizes the impact of the Pulse nightclub shooting for Latinx queer communities after Cynthia Lee Fontaine explains her more personal connections as a Latin person to the event.⁵⁸ Similarly, Velour also explains queer Russian oppression (having studied abroad there) after fellow contestant Peppermint shares her experience trying to get into the country as a Black trans woman when her official identification did not match her gender presentation.⁵⁹ Within current Black Lives Matter

⁵⁶ *RuPaul’s Drag Race* S2 E8. “Golden Girls,” Logo/Viacom. Mar 29, 2010.

⁵⁷ *RuPaul’s Drag Race* S6 E14. “Reunited!” Logo/Viacom. May 19, 2014. 22:55.

⁵⁸ *RuPaul’s Drag Race* S9 E3. “Draggily Ever After,” VH1/Viacom. Apr 7, 2017.

⁵⁹ *RuPaul’s Drag Race* S9 E8. “RuPaul Roast,” VH1/Viacom. May 12, 2017.

messaging from the brand as well, Figure 6 illuminates how VH1 and *RPDR*'s Instagram posts discuss how to get involved with protests or anti-racist organizations from a privileged position to an imagined privileged audience when using language like “how to use your privilege to protect and amplify Black voices” (*RPDR*, 2020b). In short, *RPDR* frames the consumption of its product to intersectional queer politics, but in actuality, they speak from a privileged homonormative perspective about LGBTQ+ history and activism, often collapsing members of that coalition into the definition of “drag” to increase the brand’s proximity to political activism.

However, questioning *RPDR*'s authenticity and/or commitment to social activism obscures how interconnected brand culture is with consumer citizenship and contemporary political discourse. These criticisms rightfully frame the limits, exclusions, and tensions of brand culture’s relationship to social issues, especially when market logics are used to facilitate solutions for systemically marginalized groups. In brand culture, if the market does not deem an issue brandable it will not be included within the brand’s platform. In *RPDR*'s case, the brand faces criticism from former contestants, fans, the press, and scholars because it is influenced by, takes, and profits from Black, transgender, gender non-conforming, and other marginalized LGBTQ+ cultures but cannot provide solutions for systemic issues these groups face outside of individualized and market-based solutions to inequality, disenfranchisement, and oppression (Schottmiller, 2017). However, emblematic of contemporary brand culture, *RPDR* provides a large platform to showcase consumer value and social need while facilitating a brand community to help address such disparities.

In essence, *Drag Race* is not altogether progressive. Social activism brought up by the brand through casting and discourse reproduces ongoing systemic issues for LGBTQ+ individuals and communities, with profitability often driving representation. Criticisms levied at

the brand highlight its homonormative politics that unequally privileges cisgender gay male drag performers. Also, racial tensions within and outside of the LGBTQ+ community exacerbate inequality and complicate the brand's all-inclusive messaging. The brand's position centers its facilitation of individual opportunity through market-based solutions like self-branding, social mobility, and commodity activism as pathways consumers can emulate to realize success *within* current economic, social, and cultural systems, like RuPaul. *RPDR* critics in this vein minimize the historical relationship between consumption and citizenship for marginalized groups; such criticisms accurately portray *RPDR* as reifying of capitalist systems working to maintain hierarchies of oppression necessary for its continued growth and profitability.

Drag Race should be understood as a branded platform facilitating personal identity formation through market-driven consumption. A more productive line of discourse centers the benefits and limitations of brand culture's consumer activism. Sarah Banet-Weiser reminds us:

“Individuals may indeed be ‘empowered’ through their participation within brand cultures, but if this empowerment is directed toward normativity because they desire the ‘utopic’ feeling of belonging, what is its value? This is, the normativity of brand cultures more often than not reinscribes people back within neoliberal capitalist discourse rather than empower[s] them to challenge or disrupt capitalism” (2012e, p. 221).

As a brand showcasing the societal inequalities, economic value, and labor of marginalized LGBTQ+ people, *Drag Race* is inherently groundbreaking within a media industry historically unfavorable to such groups.⁶⁰ However, *Drag Race*'s approach to empowerment is neoliberal. It

⁶⁰ Although certain genres of television have allowed for marginalized and LGBTQ+ representation despite TV's often hegemonic control. Joshua Gamson explores this within the daytime talk-show genre in *Freaks Talk Back: Tabloid Talk Shows and Sexual Nonconformity* (1998), of which RuPaul famously appeared on Geraldo with the NYC club kids (and the *Paris is Burning* case appeared on the Joan Rivers Show). Notably also, gender performance and drag as popular entertainment forms found widespread mainstream success before television and also during television's golden era in certain contexts. In summation, drag is both mainstream and radical depending on the performer and contexts of the practice, culture, and intentions.

is a competition-reality makeover brand demonstrating how to access heteronormative capitalist ideals to marginalized consumers. Problematically, social mobility into existing exploitative systems is coded as success. This follows how the makeover reality television genre frames social issues (Weber, 2009). Viewers are presented with education, discipline, and behavior modeling to apply to their own lives through the reality television subject (Ouellette 2009; 2013). Although *RPDR* champions individual expression, audiences and contestants learn to emulate certain homonormative standards to realize visibility, success, and enhanced citizenship within a capitalist society.

Theoretical Background & Context

Analyzing brand culture's ambivalence regarding commodity activism and consumptive citizenship will further elucidate how brand culture can both be earnest in its advocacy and also limited when advancing social movements, though always concerned with profitability. To understand brand culture and its personal and political role in identity, community, and citizenship, I employ Sarah Banet-Weiser and Laurie Ouellette's respective works investigating the role of corporate social responsibility, consumer citizenship, and commodity activism (Banet-Weiser, 2012b, pp. 35-36; Ouellette, 2012, 2018).

Ouellette contends corporate social responsibility and brand's prosocial messaging are emblematic of market-based governmentality within neoliberalism (Ouellette, 2012; 2018). Neoliberalism is a form of (late) capitalism which over-trusts market forces to operate ethically and virtuously with little-to-no government oversight or outside regulation (Wilson, 2018c, p. 239). This, of course, has not been the case. Governmental deregulation and low corporate taxes have exacerbated income inequality. To deflect from these economic disparities, brands have

increased donations and advocacy campaigns to largely non-controversial social goods. While market solutions pale in comparison to more equitable and massive government initiatives, market solutions can cultivate consumer activism and advocacy in tandem with, or in the absence of, government responses.

Therefore, prosocial messaging has been adopted by brands as virtue signaling to increase profitability, or ethical capitalism.⁶¹ Ethical capitalism seeks to position a brand as politically aware, active in social justice, and responsible in their production and consumer relations (Ouellette, 2018). This market strategy imagines more profit will be generated through consumer's increased agreement and engagement with a brand's moral or ideological positions. While profit-seeking, in the absence of social or government intervention regarding such issues, brand activism offers consumers a market-friendly way to engage in an activist practice. This close political, moral, and economic relationship also calls consumer's values into question when brands they patronize exhibit unethical or unvirtuous behavior. Part of shopping for good constructs a consumer's identity as good (or their subjective idea of "good") through their consumptive practices. Problematically though, limitations facilitate only profitable (or socially palatable) ideas as brandable. Necessary social action is not always popular and corporate social responsibility is largely non-radical.⁶² Often, this leads to brands simply raising awareness, education, and/or providing individual solutions instead of systemic changes.

⁶¹ Though in the current post-network and globalization era, I'd argue the state is increasingly seeking to regulate and censor content, technology, and media that threatens national profitability while letting certain technologies maintain monopolistic practices as long as they are nationally compliant and sympathetic to current government aims.

⁶² And often brands will associate with others doing the action, so they are not seen as the leaders of such activism, which is an ambivalent way to have you cake and eat it to. If press goes bad, the brand can blame the association, if press goes well, the brand can publicize their support for the associated action. For example, in August 2020, in response to the Jacob Blake shooting, NBA players refused to play in scheduled games. Corporate interests then publicly backed the player's collective decision, turning the boycott into a profitable ethical capitalism opportunity. NBA corporate importantly did not lead with the action to boycott.

Through these lenses, the RuPaul and *Drag Race* brands of consumption citizenship work to advocate for LGBTQ+ rights through consumer activism and purchasing power. Consumer citizenship can help further political action and social justice, however, branding LGBTQ+ rights within the *Drag Race* brand also homogenizes diverse cultures, representations, and identities within corporate practices. Brand culture seeks to accumulate more lucrative and diverse markets to realize the ever-present goal of maximizing profits. In so doing, corporate responsibility, representation, and prosocial messaging are carefully evaluated for their market value, ethical capital generation, and compatibility within the brand's identity.

Applying this to reality-television, Skeggs and Wood's "economy of personhood" finds further utility (2012, p.12). Consumer activism and citizenship through brand culture can help further social causes, however, those causes must be in agreeance with their profit directives. Often, this leads to a politics of appearance as opposed to achieving tangible rights for groups historically outside of market interests. It also means casting, representation, and marketing targets demographics believed to be the most lucrative and not necessarily the most inclusive. Human rights should not be dependent on market value; however, brand culture has come to express social causes through profitability rather than inalienable right. As such, marginalized groups appeal to these capitalist structures through consumptive citizenship practices, of which RuPaul and the *Drag Race* brands have become representative of within LGBTQ+ rights struggles.

RuPaul and the *Drag Race* brand have amassed a large voice within the diverse LGBTQ+ community but mainly portray homonormative drag queen cultures as representative of the LGBTQ+ experience. This representation is meant to stand in for other allied or marginalized

groups who similarly identify outside of normative heterosexual culture.⁶³ The brand's homonormative identity constructs market value, consumption, and representation around the normativity of cisgender gay males (who originally were the target demographic when the show was on *Logo*) in relation to other identities represented on the show (Griffin, 2016) As stated before, RuPaul notes the growth of the brand now targets a more family-friendly demographic (Lawson, 2019/2020, p. 87). Part of their mass appeal means appealing to consumers imagined having the most money to further their mainstream growth. This has manifested in corporate partners imagining the (homonormative) LGBTQ+ community to be more lucrative due to larger discretionary incomes, family, and lifestyle affordances (Griffin, 2016, pp. 84-86). In short, gay men still benefit from masculine dividends in pay and social autonomy to cultivate a culture of consumption within gay bars, spaces, and markets. At the show's inception, this community lifestyle was targeted with alcohol sponsorship and contestants touring gay businesses throughout S1-4 (Rosiello, 2017). Currently, however, *RPDR* has expanded into family-friendly markets, having benefitted from *RPDR*'s commodification of LGBTQ+ cultures through its homonormative representation practices.

To these ends, this chapter considers just how progressive branding LGBTQ+ consumption and political action through the RuPaul and *Drag Race* brands really are for all within LGBTQ+ communities. It also centers their social responsibility within brand culture and

⁶³ See also, *RPDR* S4 E3, "Glamazons vs. Champions," in which superfan Piyah Martell, a disabled trans influencer, visits during the episode's mini challenge (Feb 13, 2012). Also, on *Celebrity Drag Race*, S1 E2, Comedian Loni Love discusses identifying with the program as an outsider from normative society due to her weight (May 1, 2020). Also, various drag kids have been affiliated with the brand through DragCon, though framed within medical/voyeuristic TLC/Discovery Health Channel type media conventions, which represents socially "odd" individuals deemed different from able bodied normative heterosexuality. *I Am Jazz* (2015–), a TLC docu-series reality program about a transgender girl named Jazz Jennings and her family's navigation of her gender identity within childhood is emblematic of this type of media representation focusing on diverse gender expression among children. These are necessarily different media portrayals in comparison to able bodied cisgender gay men's life experiences and the representations of their drag careers, however, their homonormative identities and platform are being used as an exemplar for other marginalized identities to rally around.

questions how much their advocacy furthers LGBTQ+ social causes in the vein of collective social struggle the brand often references (i.e. Stonewall Riots, radical Queer liberation movements, etc.). Branding LGBTQ+ consumption citizenship and activism within the RuPaul and *Drag Race* brands pulls at tensions historically present within diverse LGBTQ+ groups regarding integrationist or separatist tactics. Increasingly, the brands are being looked at to speak for diverse groups within the LGBTQ+ community of which they are simply not representative of.

Prosocial Campaign: Self-discipline & Consumer Citizenship

Practicing corporate social responsibility, one of the many social issues *RPDR* has advocated for is alcohol and substance abuse among LGBTQ+ groups. However, such warnings against over-consumption exist in tension with how LGBTQ+ community, identity, and culture have been forged. *RPDR* presents narratives of personal responsibility from contestants affected by addiction while still partnering with alcohol companies in which the consumption of their product partly makes the social and working conditions of LGBTQ+ performance and cultural spaces possible. Thus, brand culture's ambivalence to social issues is exemplified when on AS5 Jujubee, Mayhem Miller, and Blair St. Clair display a prosocially responsible message warning against addiction to an at-risk audience, while simultaneously mimicking the consumption of alcohol in bar/lounge areas drag is typically dependent on within LGBTQ+ culture.⁶⁴

RPDR's ambivalence to their own involvement within such interconnected consumption is a prime example of activism targeting social responsibility. According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration and Centers for Disease Control, LGBTQ+ groups

⁶⁴ *RuPaul's Drag Race: All Stars* S5 E3. "Get A Room!," VH1/Viacom Jun 19, 2020.

are statistically more likely to smoke, drink, and abuse substances than heterosexuals (SAMHSA 2016; CDC, 2019). Another example can be seen in the “This Free Life” public service campaign (from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services) employing *Drag Race* alum Shangela, Trixie Mattel, Manila Luzon, and Tammie Brown in a commercial discussing the negative health effects of smoking within LGBTQ+ groups (This Free Life, 2016).⁶⁵ Appealing to the consequences of one’s actions and personal responsibility to manage such systemic effects, the campaign is indicative of *RPDR*’s neoliberal consumer activist practices.

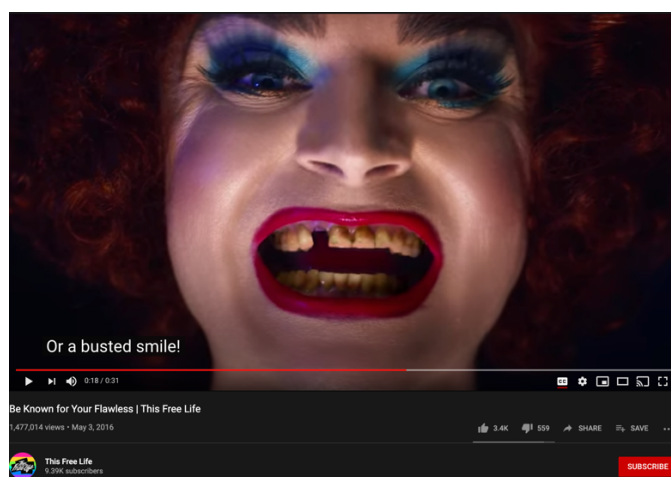


Figure 7: This Free Life. (2016, May 3). Anti-smoking commercial with S1 & AS1 *RPDR* contestant Tammie Brown. YouTube.

The commercial invites LGBTQ+ viewers to practice “the Freedom to be, Tobacco-Free,” through various appeals to individual vanity. In various glamour shots, Shangela purports she is known for her “cute face and flawless skin,” Trixie, her “sensible nail[s],” Manila, her “hair,” and Tammie her “smile” (This Free Life, 2016). Harsh lighting and grotesque exaggeration then run through what the queens will “never be known for [...] “wrinkled skin,

⁶⁵ In addition, the campaign also made a beat-em-up style web-game starring Valentina and Shangela from *RPDR* called “Toxic City.” <https://thisfreelife.betobaccofree.hhs.gov/toxic-city/>

yellow nails, smelly hair, or a busted smile,” as Figure 7 demonstrates. Essentially, the campaign equates LGBTQ+ empowerment with beauty and self-management as what they’re known for, especially evident in Manila’s line, “I’m known for my flawless.” The campaign is obviously gesturing to body positivity discourse as well, however, this also sets up one’s aesthetic value as what empowers them and constructs how LGBTQ+ people should value themselves. The casting of drag queens also depicts how glamorized beauty aesthetics can be lucrative. In market-based terminology, the campaign imagines LGBTQ+ individuals’ value through beauty ideals and vividly depicts how smoking depreciates that value.

The campaign does little to address how or why someone would begin smoking, why someone keeps smoking, or indeed how *RPDR* depicts smoking in itself. Usually, contestants (as recently as 2020’s AS5) use smoke breaks as a therapeutic or meditative break from on-set production (or a break from capitalistic labor practices) in which they cultivate friendships or vent about personal or interpersonal conflict on set. The program has taken a more active position in curtailing depictions of smoking, most likely to do with self-censoring based on shifting audience demographics.

This collaboration with the no-smoking campaign educates a targeted community about a specific systemic concern and urges self-discipline and anti-consumption rather than advocating for greater health care access or addressing the root causes as to why more LGBTQ+ individuals become addicted to smoking in comparison to heterosexuals. Such issues would highlight greater LGBTQ+ homelessness, segregation, and marginality within society which corrals individuals into LGBTQ+ bars and spaces encouraging excessive vice to remain profitable. Also, historic discrimination experienced by LGBTQ+ communities within medical industries keeps groups from accessing prevention and treatment. While socially responsible to advocate against

overconsumption, the campaign does little to systemically challenge why LGBTQ+ communities are more vulnerable to addiction or indeed how such consumption has co-produced LGBTQ+ cultural identity.

In addition, *Drag Race* has discussed substance abuse, alcohol dependence, and DUI's as part of the work culture drag queens balance, as mentioned above through narratives featuring Blair St. Clair, Mayhem Miller, and Jujubee. These narratives have been featured throughout the series as well, with S4's Alisa Summers and S10's Blair St. Clair both discussing DUIs. Both of these cases discussed the liminal position of being a nightlife worker hired to initiate a consumptive party atmosphere with the real-world limitations of how one navigates working a job in which drinking is encouraged and perpetuated as part of one's employment. However, most of these conversations are framed as individual challenges to overcome instead of environmental and systemic obstacles perpetuating community oppression. Drag artists are often hired to facilitate consumption for LGBTQ+ businesses. Concurrent with this, *RPDR* frequently recreates bar atmospheres during main challenges and has also shown queens in popular local bars and gay businesses. In addition, the drag queen restaurant chain Hamburger Mary's was a prominent S9 sponsor who provided the usual *Untucked* cocktail drinks.⁶⁶ Thus, alcohol consumption is a double-edged sword allowing for LGBTQ+ businesses to operate and act as spaces facilitating the creation of LGBTQ+ community outside of work and home, but also perpetuates systemic harms that disproportionately affect marginalized communities without the resources to literally afford (both economically or medically) the ill-effects of addiction.

Advocating for consumer discipline is the most corporate socially responsible way the brand can appeal to ethical consumption without radically upsetting the historical, cultural, and

⁶⁶ *RuPaul's Drag Race* AS1 E6, "The Grand Finale." Logo/Viacom. Nov 26, 2012.

economic position drag has held within LGBTQ+ consumption practices. Often cigarette representatives will be in LGBTQ+ bars issuing coupons and alcohol representatives have even funded LGBTQ+ amateur sports teams and been early sponsors of *RPDR*, so much so in fact that Jeffrey Moran, Absolut Vodka public relations ambassador, was a reoccurring guest judge on many early seasons from 2009-2012. This sponsorship deal was so much a foundation of the early seasons that queens who appeared to sell the alcohol brand's product irresponsibly (seemingly to Moran's discretion) were eliminated. Most famously, this included Shannel on S1 E6's "Absolut Drag Ball" (2009) and S2 E7's Jessica Wild in "Once Upon a Queen" (2010).



Figure 8: WOWPresents. (2019, March 9). Raja (S3) and Aquaria (S10) on World of Wonder's Fashion Photo Review with alcohol sponsorship.

Tension inherent to consumptive citizenship is pertinent to how the *RPDR* brand participated in national LGBTQ+ tours and business promotions with Absolut Vodka after a season ended.⁶⁷ Though a long history of drag balls emulating beauty pageants exist prior to its mediation within *Drag Race*, the relationship between consumption, community, and content can

⁶⁷ For more on this relationship, see Rosiello (2017) who was a "National Promotions Director" for an "LGBTQ+ focused marketing agency," working with clients like PepsiCo and Absolut Vodka (p. 124).

also be viewed through alcohol sales. Sarah Banet-Weiser's early research in U.S. beauty pageants discusses how the Miss America Pageant "was funded through sponsorships" noting particularly, "the spectacle had initially been produced to extend Atlantic City's tourist season by drawing more people and more revenue [...]" (1999, pp. 36-37). At its foundation, *Drag Race* (and drag artists) cultivate community and revenue simultaneously. *Drag Race* has long included sponsors like gay tourism, alcohol, and cruise companies. As seen again through certain eliminations to appease their sponsors, consumption also constructs community and representation and can be discriminatory and/or culturally misrepresented. Also, alcohol advertising has not left the brand entirely. Figure 8 shows this partnership has moved to its digital content (WOWPresents, 2019). Thus, the brand ambivalently works all sides by presenting itself as a platform for a host of associations and relationships to social issues.

Drag Race's part in corporate social responsibility educates and presents examples of excessive consumption, however, does nothing to redefine how this system operates to create addiction and encourage over-consumption. Indeed, when consumption has historically been tied to LGBTQ+ liberty, part of *RPDR's* brand identity is to celebrate that lineage and the current affordances LGBTQ+ spaces provide LGBTQ+ communities. *RPDR* in fact represents a departure from only experiencing LGBTQ+ culture within LGBTQ+ spaces. However, the brand continues to prioritize consumption as necessary to the continuation of a shared LGBTQ+ culture. From contestants drinking cocktails in *Untucked* after judging, to sponsored content, and historicizing the necessity of bars and clubs after the Pulse nightclub shooting, *Drag Race* relies on LGBTQ+ consumption to create community and brand identity around the commodification of attending drag shows, viewing parties, and patronizing LGBTQ+ ventures (including their own). *RPDR* presents contradictions between the dangers of overconsumption and the cultivation

of consumption to produce LGBTQ+ rights, community, and citizenship. *RPDR* as a brand community practicing corporate social responsibility and prosocial messaging complicate this history as the brand moves further away from the spaces that once sustained its practice.

LGBTQ+ Consumer Activism & Ethical Capitalism

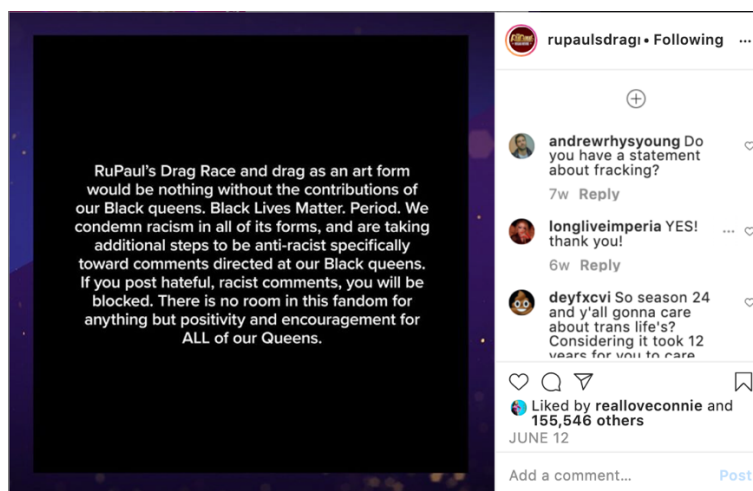


Figure 9: RPDR. [@rupaulsdragrace]. (2020d, June 12). “BLM Solidarity Post,” Instagram.

In addition to directives that align the consumption of LGBTQ+ culture, spaces, and identity within *Drag Race*, brand culture necessitates an ethical relationship with consumers to generate profits. Ouellette has described “television as a technology of citizenship,” and a vehicle for brands to display corporate social responsibility, or “corporate and nonprofit sectors promot[ing] action on [political and social] issues,” through various prosocial messaging campaigns (Ouellette, 2018, pp. 147-150). Therefore, it makes sense that 2020’s Black Lives Matter protests would influence *RPDR* to integrate consumer activism more directly addressing race within their brand. While altruistic and ethical (especially as a platform featuring queer

BIPOC performance cultures on VH1 (Viacom's cable channel targeting African American audiences through reality programming), this activism also benefits their brand. *RPDR* cultivates an identity stemming from LGBTQ+ activist traditions with intersectional links to police brutality. Figure 9 demonstrates audiences questioned the authenticity and political effectiveness of *RPDR*'s BLM advocacy. However, these tensions engender the continuous virtuous consumption of their product within shifting political and social conditions, which is the ultimate goal of brands and franchises.

Whether consumers follow links to get involved or give to activist partners, the presentation of these avenues cultivates a community of virtuous consumption among the brand's supporters and generates ethical capital for the brand. So, rather than cynically implying the brand only produces "hashtag" activism, *Drag Race* can and does generate political action through their platform. The cultivation of *RPDR*'s brand of LGBTQ+ consumer citizenship does speak to issues other brands and media companies simply don't. *RPDR* has been a mainstream presence for LGBTQ+ advocacy within media during significant moments of the contemporary LGBTQ+ rights movement. Whether coincidental, incidental, or part of the cultural conversation, *RPDR* has had a part in crafting a national LGBTQ+ narrative. However, whether this activism addresses systemic change or could be more broadly utilized is debatable and emblematic of brand culture's ambivalence. To these effects, it is critical to analyze how and what narratives have been furthered by the brand and in addition, how these frames exist in tension with consumer's maintenance of their own political and moral selves.



Figure 10: RPDR. [@RupaulsDragRace]. (2020c, June 12). Breonna Taylor interstitial aired before S12 episodes. Twitter.

RPDR's Black Lives Matter activism highlights these issues while engaging with the limits of consumer activism facilitated by brand culture. Reiterating Banet-Weiser's approach to corporate social responsibility postulates that "brand communities offer an ethical and moral context in which one can "take care of the self," in terms of consumer activism. This care of the self, unlike maintaining the self-brand, maintains "the politically virtuous self," or one who participates in the commodity activism produced within brand culture" (2012d, p. 146). Under this lens, sharing information, raising awareness, and giving monetarily to anti-racist organizations is not only about social justice, but also about a structure of feeling that allows *RPDR* and its consumers to feel good about their consumption, relationship, and identification with the BIPOC cultural representation *RPDR* champions.

Within the brand community, this activism also reflects on one's increased level of engagement and harmony with the brand beyond casual engagements with BLM or as Figure 10 shows, justice for Breonna Taylor interstitials airing before new episodes of *RPDR* on VH1 (*RPDR*, 2020c). This example of activism from *RPDR* signals their commitment and

identification with BLM and specifically addresses the racial and gendered violence Black women experience in America. In so doing, the brand is also maintaining its own virtuosity by using this to respond to its own criticisms regarding its representations of women and transwomen of color specifically.

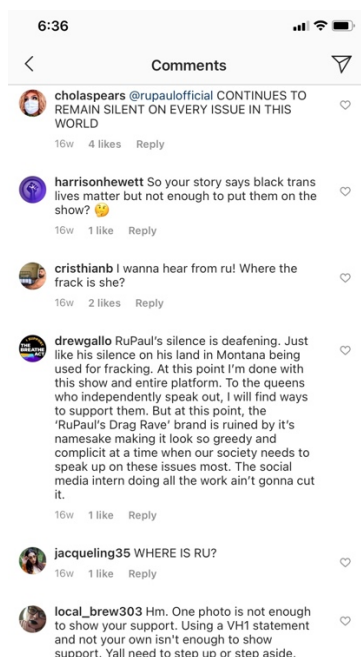


Figure 11: RPDR. [@rupaulsdragrace]. (2020a, May 31). BLM solidarity post Instagram comments.

However, it is again important to note the limits of this activism. *RPDR* did not boycott airing its program to raise awareness for BLM, like some NBA players forced their league to do when refusing to play as scheduled after the shooting of Jacob Blake (Mitchell, 2020). The language of *RPDR*'s digital activism also spoke from a place of privilege to a consumer base with privilege (*RPDR*, 2020b).⁶⁸ Mostly their activism utilized their platform as a hub of

⁶⁸ For example, the caption to their Instagram post about how to safely attend BLM protests assumes the audience has more "privilege[s]" to employ than presumably Black protestors, mentioning also to "use your privilege to protect and amplify Black voices" (*RPDR*, 2020b; Fig 6). Indeed, this is important, but this shows the main audience for this post is imagined to be an audience of privilege.

information to join other's more substantive plans. The brand's personal actions regarding BLM activism also appears limited. As Figure 11 shows, much online discourse questioned the authenticity of their activism because RuPaul himself was not making statements directly in support of BLM. It matters who and where prosocial messaging comes from. The brand can deviate from RuPaul's authorial footprint, however, much of the brand's identity rests on their association with RuPaul as a Black gay man. It is not a surprise then that audiences do not believe the brand's activism when filtered through social media managers instead of RuPaul directly, and even then, many question RuPaul's political and activist intentions since achieving such homonormative prestige, fame, and success. Thus, *RPDR*'s BLM consumer activism is emblematic of the relationship between the market logics of brand culture and consumer's political and moral self-maintenance.

Accordingly, the consumer's own identity, activism, and moral standing is reflected through their affiliations, consumption habits, and engagement with(in) brands and branded communities. *RPDR*'s prosocial messaging (in addition to helping their own moral positioning) also furthers their appearance as a socially responsible company that claims to care about the experiences of the marginalized LGBTQ+ performers they cast, communities they represent, and histories they align with. This cultivation is necessary and takes place within the context of reality-television production culture in which cast and staff labor is often exploited for the entertainment and profitability of the program in question (Mayer, 2017). This engagement with BLM, the transgender community, and other LGBTQ+ political causes seeks to ethically use *RPDR*'s success as a political platform to deflect from criticisms that the brand (and RuPaul) are inauthentic and exploitative commodifiers of drag, gender performance artists, and LGBTQ+ cultures.

Problems with consumptive citizenship and activism arise when causes are brandable based solely on their market value. Recent LGBTQ+ rights gains, as articulated previously in this thesis by Lisa Duggan and Julie Wilson, center their success based on their profitability to existing homonormative and neoliberal economic and social systems (Duggan, 2003; Wilson, 2018b). Gay marriage is not only a moral issue, but a boom to the wedding industry. And gays in the military is not only righting discriminatory policy but increasing the military's ranks and furthering U.S. imperial projects. Likewise, BLM and the Breonna Taylor activism specifically has framed her murder within the societal and economic loss that comes with systemically devaluing Black lives. An article on WorldofWonder.net about Breonna Taylor describes her as “[a]n aspiring nurse, she had dedicated her whole life to serving others. [...] She survived repeated exposure to COVID-19 only to have her life cut short by illegal police action and violence”⁶⁹ (Nguyen, 2020). In addition to centering the intersectionality of issues related to state violence, modern brand culture also frames Taylor's murder within the language of profit and value (within the medical industry) to further Black citizenship rights in language emblematic of the neoliberal economy.

This framing and advocacy of Taylor's murder within brand culture identifies her death as especially atrocious because of her traditionally valued potential to contribute economically as an educated professional. Framing citizenship around one's economic value to an unequal capitalist system often leaves existing class disparities in place. For instance, Black trans women are still left undervalued within activism that centers economic value because such policies fight for inclusion within existing normative systems and not for their radical reimagining. Rather, this

⁶⁹ Which to some critics, Taylor's murder has become a “meme.” Essentially, critical of the circulation of information without monetary or political action, the circulation of her image constructs and signals the sharer's own virtuosity, or self-brand, to be seen as sympathetic to BLM, anti-racism, and specifically the valuing of Black women's lives rather than doing more material or substantive activism. For more, see NPR, 2020.

would intersectionally address systemic inequalities such as sexism and racism which doubly oppress Black trans women (Crenshaw, 1995). Relating to *RPDR*, their consumer activism largely relies on homonormal social inclusion rather than systemic change. Within such consumer activism, familiar economic and social disparities will remain while highlighting individual exceptions as false proof social change is possible. Indeed, fighting for inclusion within existing systems does little to address the inequality that existing systems produce.

To reiterate what the brand could have done instead to prove the limits of market activism, *RPDR*'s social responsibility largely shared education, donation links, and behavior to model from former contestants rather than donating directly or organizing their own coordinated protests (though they did encourage "safe" attendance at BLM sponsored protests) (Fig. 6). Highlighting brand culture's ambivalence, being seen advocating for BLM protests is more lucrative for the brand than direct donations or boycotts in solidarity with the movement, such as withholding its program from air, or producing a completely different program dedicated to the advocacy of the issues at hand. This would be closer to systemic change, could potentially disrupt corporate and sponsor relations, and would more actively align the *RPDR* brand to social activism. However, the brand uses its platform for advocacy within current systems without sacrificing towards systemic change. In short, basing rights on the promise of active or increased consumption does little to address those who cannot exercise consumptive citizenship.

Conclusions

While commodity activism participates in social action, market solutions dictate a universalizing and mass appeal to consumers which can obscure localized needs. However, in summation, consumers find utility in carrying *Drag Race* into their personal, political, and social

lives while *RPDR* as a corporate entity benefits from such increased engagement. Drag has always had a place within entertainment, whether more counter-cultural and underground or mainstream and family-friendly.⁷⁰ Recognizing this lineage, branding drag under the *RPDR* umbrella makes it a more concrete LGBTQ+ practice in the public imagination (as opposed to straight male Hollywood representations) while enhancing its economic, political, and symbolic utility for LGBTQ+ visibility and expression. However, this form of consumptive citizenship necessitates the production, consumption, and homonormative synthesis of LGBTQ+ cultural practices rather than simply granting increased rights to citizens unequally treated in society based on their innate identities. Should Black rights be based on contribution to society? Should Women's rights be based on contribution to society? Should male, cisgender, white, straight citizenship be granted based on contribution to society? And how is this contribution accurately quantified and qualified? Constructing rights based on consumption and market value keeps the same unjust systems in place. Systemic change is necessary to value all within a society based on their natural rights to citizenship, not their economic contributions. While this consumption also produces community, who does it leave out because they can't afford or don't engage with the product?

For RuPaul and *Drag Race*, their approach attempts to cultivate community through the shared mass consumption of specifically homonormative applications of queer culture. In this way, their brand identity cultivates a status of insiders as outsiders. In this process, there is a loss of smaller, more local, and diverse groups for greater unity benefitting the brand's visibility,

⁷⁰ Which this also depends on who the drag performer is. Straight cisgender male actors have practiced the artform with relative impunity pertaining to any reflections about what participating in the practice means for their personal sexual orientation, gender identity, or political persuasion (for example, *Some Like It Hot* (1959), Dustin Hoffman in *Tootsie* (1982), and Eddie Murphy in many projects). Drag has also been underground. Even within vaudeville days, there were mainstream performers and more niche performers. And representation matters within this space. Performers of color, women, and lower classes were more underground than normative and socially privileged performers in the mainstream.

evangelism, and consumption. This creates standardization into consumable and stereotypical units, narratives, and identities for existing mainstream recognition beholden to advertisers, sponsors, and corporate profits, or in other words, identity dependent on returns on investment.

Drag Race provides a case study in how brands and one's consumption of them create citizens and solicit political engagement within our late-capitalist moment. With the role of the nation-state in Western societies abandoning some of its responsibilities to markets, increasingly political decisions and citizen values are expressed through consumption (or anti-consumption). As Sarah Banet-Weiser examines, it is a fallacy to assume consumption is not politicized or that citizenship does not foster consumption practices. Citing others, Banet-Weiser centers how Civil Rights Era activism was based on the right to consumption and access within retail, businesses, and public utilities for African American and Black populations (2012d, p. 137). LGBTQ+ rights movements have also centered consumption rights as pathways to greater citizenship within society.

When examined with a lens to the relationship between consumption habits and citizenship, *RPDR* echoes a tradition of marginalized populations achieving greater rights and visibility through consumptive practices. In addition, *RPDR*'s commodification of drag culture can be viewed as a natural extension of brand culture and consumer activism. In this way, *RPDR* branded partnerships with seemingly mundane products like FunkoPop dolls, Target T-Shirts, or RuPaul Party City branded wigs are not simply exploitative commodification, but the expression and integration of LGBTQ+ consumer citizenship within a society that has long practiced LGBTQ+ segregation in representation, visibility, and business. Though, how such market integration helps LGBTQ+ populations unable to express citizenship through consumption remains a critical limitation of brand culture.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSIONS & FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This research examines the utility of media representation in identity, community, and political composition while also engaging with how consumption can communicate personal and relational meaning. Analyzing new media systems, brand culture, and intra-LGBTQ+ community relations, this thesis concludes *RPDR* continues to perpetuate stereotypes and privileges homonormative ideological values. However, the brand also exemplifies groundbreaking narratives and representations of LGBTQ+ individuals navigating such complex tensions towards the possibility of Queer liberation and/or utopia (Muñoz, 2009, pp. 185-189). *RPDR*'s growth through changing media systems reveals much about how gender, technology, and sexuality currently interact within U.S. and global contexts. How history, identity, and consumption influence our community formations and political possibilities are exemplified within *RPDR*'s contemporary success.

I conclude that the branding and corporatization of LGBTQ+ culture through *RPDR* offers potentials for greater representation and media visibility. However, this commodification of intersectional drag cultures into individualized and homonormative consumption also reifies oppressions for non-white, feminine, and lower-class individuals. Such discrimination is emblematic of capitalism's unequal power (and profit) relations. *RPDR* is a brand of and for LGBTQ+ representation and is authentic to its own representational goals and liberal politics, but it is by no means radically feminist, anti-capitalist, or anti-racist. This is doubly concerning when *RPDR* places itself in lineage with Queer liberation movements dedicated to such radical equality and social equity.

Ultimately, this thesis contends the discourse is the message and that *RPDR* is achieving its goals in utilizing television as a cultural forum to increase and produce LGBTQ+ consumptive citizenship (Newcomb & Hirsch, 1983). This thesis contends scholars must examine media paratexts, digital engagement, and economic factors in conjunction with traditional cultural and media methods (Martin, Jr. 2018; Mayer, 2014; Miller, 2009, p. 146; Johnson, 2018). *RPDR* is an example of how controversy and discourse engendered within the post-network era is exactly what grows brands. Radically altering their casting or activism to appease queer progressive causes would cease online debates about such concerns while leaving unaltered their practices continues the privileging of homonormativity within the brand. The incremental changes *RPDR* makes continue such discussions and the audience's reception (good or bad) propels its digital visibility. Algorithmic chatter like comments, likes, shares, and fan productions afforded in new media spaces benefit the brand through quantifying metrics of consumer engagement.

In other words, within a post-network media environment, the brand seeks to be a platform for discussion rather than an activist force for change. Who and what becomes brandable within new media environments is reminiscent of who held power within previous media and social regimes. While groundbreaking, *RPDR* reifies homonormative constructions of power, identity, and narrative within technologies and economic models invested in the maintenance of—and inclusion with—the status-quo. Fundamentally, *RPDR* is a neoliberal celebration of queer assimilation into heteronormative society rather than a platform advocating for that regime's reform, reconstruction, or revolution. Though *RPDR*'s success has created an explosion of different drag programs on television (which have diversified and increased LGBTQ+ media representation), *RPDR*'s homonormative practices have also commodified the

cultural subversiveness of drag for profitability within existing neoliberal systems and continues to promote individual rather than collective social activism.

Future Directions

This analysis examines current debates within the *RPDR* brand and gestures to further study in audience reception, new media LGBTQ+ representation, and/or fandom and anti-fandom theories. The brand elicits distinct positive and negative engagement from its audience, of which casted performers receive hate messages, racist comments, and death threats primarily driven by colorism, gender identity, and beauty regimes consumed and reproduced across cultures. Studying conflict emerging between various Queer groups through the storytelling and production practices of *RPDR* could add to the growing field of audience studies and fandom analysis, with *RPDR* as a prominent LGBTQ+ case study.

Also, archival and historical work within LGBTQ+ studies, and particularly among the beauty pageant system drag balls emulate, could elucidate the contemporary expressions of racism, sexism, and classism within Queer communities through case studies utilizing the *RPDR* brand. For example, as discussed in this thesis, there are separate cultural histories between Black and white Queer groups but often they came together. Beyond racial separations, contemporary drag pageants still separate by weight, age, and other cultural and community factors. How geography, class, region, and other various histories influence this and how/if digital technologies are collapsing these divides or exacerbating them (or both) is compelling to consider. *RPDR*'s large digital presence provides a jumping-off point for such historical, cultural, and digital analysis.

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Education

- Old Dominion University (Aug 2017 – Dec 2020)
Master of Arts: Humanities
Certificate: Women's Studies | Concentration: Media Studies & Popular Culture
- Old Dominion University (Aug 2014 – Dec 2017)
Bachelor of Arts: English (Literature) | Minor: Studio Art
- Tidewater Community College (Aug 2008 – May 2012)
Associates: Graphic Design

Work & Teaching Experience

- Graduate Research Assistant | May 2018–May 2020 | ODU — Norfolk, VA
ODU Women's Studies and Gay Cultural Studies assistant working with chair of WMST, Dr. Jennifer Fish, and Gay Cultural Studies President, Cathleen Rhodes. Aided faculty research, produced content for department operations, and provided office assistance. In addition, chief archival researcher for Cathleen Rhodes' Tidewater Queer History Project.
- Graduate Teaching Assistant | Fall 2018–May 2020 | ODU — Norfolk, VA
T.A. for Cathleen Rhodes' Queer Studies & Queer Oral History classes. Duties included student advising and research assistance. In addition, assisted on LGBTQIA+ grant committee "Writing the Rainbow: Improving Undergraduate Writing to Create LGBTQIA+ Texts."

Conferences

- April 2020 | "Drag TV: The Generic Structures of Drag Reality-Competition Programming" | Philadelphia, PA | National Conference for the Popular Culture Association / American Culture Association
(cancelled due to COVID-19)
- April 2019 | "The RuPolitics of Representation: Problematic Legacies in Queer Cultural Production" | Washington D.C. | National Conference — Popular Culture Association / American Culture Association
- May 2019 | "Gay Super Bowl: *RuPaul's Drag Race* as Contact Sport" | Seattle, WA | National Conference — Society of Cinema and Media Studies