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Christopher D. Way

Lake Forest College, waycd@lakeforest.edu

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Abstract

Drag is a performance identity that is based in gay culture. Drag has recently become popularized through various visual media. This study uses visual media and political queer theory to analyze drag's association with the building block of society: the family unit. Through use of contemporary content analysis and survey data, this thesis examines how the rise of drag in visual media, specifically the television show *RuPaul's Drag Race*, has transformed the political structure of drag families. This thesis also argues for a family structure model that is based on collective identity, which has resulted in the popularization of chosen families.

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Elizabeth Benacka

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Miguel de Baca

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Printed Name: Christopher D. Way

Thesis Title: We Are Family! I've Got My Drag Sisters With Me: An Examination of the Relationship Between Visual Media and Drag Family Structure

LAKE FOREST COLLEGE

Senior Thesis

We Are Family! I've Got My Drag Sisters With Me:
An Examination of the Relationship Between Visual Media and
Drag Family Structure

by

Chris Way

April 1, 2014

The report of the investigation undertaken as a
Senior Thesis, to carry two courses of credit in
the Departments of Politics and Communication.

Michael T. Orr
Krebs Provost and Dean of the Faculty

Siobhan Moroney, Chairperson

Elizabeth Benacka

Miguel de Baca

Abstract

Drag is a performance identity that is based in gay culture. Drag has recently become popularized through various visual media. This study uses visual media and political queer theory to analyze drag's association with the building block of society: the family unit. Through use of contemporary content analysis and survey data, this thesis examines how the rise of drag in visual media, specifically the television show *RuPaul's Drag Race*, has transformed the political structure of drag families. This thesis also argues for a family structure model that is based on collective identity, which has resulted in the popularization of chosen families.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my mother and father, Barb and Dean Way. You both taught me how to persevere throughout life's challenges. I am eternally grateful for the sense of optimism you instilled in me. Without your encouragement and faith I wouldn't have accomplished this work. Thank you for providing me with a vibrant life filled with love, happiness, and inspiration. I love you.

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Introduction

Family structure is the crux of society, and today family units appear differently from ever before. It is important to examine this transformation, because families serve as the building block for society. Family units appear in a contemporary context through the visibility of drag families. The term drag family refers to an entity of kinship consisting of drag queens who mutually support one another based on collective identity. As this thesis will show, drag has traditionally operated as a subculture through which disempowered constituents find agency. Drag has become highly popularized in contemporary mainstream culture due to visual media, and through these media mainstream audiences have become acquainted with drag culture, which includes the recognition of drag families. This thesis examines the relationship between the rise of drag in visual media, specifically through the television show *RuPaul's Drag Race (RPDR)*, and the transformation of political relationships in drag families. Along with this, I connect my research to broader trends in traditional family units in order to understand how conceptions of the family unit affect society.

I argue for a new conception of the contemporary drag family. I begin with an overview of the history of drag in visual media. This examination allows for an understanding of how drag in visual media has evolved: from a “pansy” character to today a powerful art form respected by large audiences. Through a historical account of visual media we see that drag has become *demarginalized*. Next, I engage in a content analysis of the television show *RuPaul's Drag Race* through a drag family-focused lens. After the content analysis I review the survey responses from numerous drag queens in the Chicagoland area. These queens’ insight provides

more depth in regards to the study of familial relationships in both drag culture and traditional family units. From here I use the survey results to build theoretical connections to broad trends in traditional family structure. Based on this analysis I express what trends and patterns are evident in both drag and traditional family structure as well as what future research can be conducted in relation to this topic.

This subject is unique, and it should be noted that scholarship is rather limited regarding the study of drag families. Many scholars have examined visual media, the effects of RuPaul's celebrity status, and drag culture in general, but the study of drag families is somewhat restricted. Most of the previous studies were conducted at least ten years ago if not longer. These studies remain valid, because of the scholarship they have provided regarding drag culture. Along with this, scholars have not provided much contemporary scholarship on drag, because it has recently been transformed due to popular visual media such as *RuPaul's Drag Race*. The arguments in this thesis are based on insight from previous scholars as well as my independent research, which focused on interactions with drag queens, critically viewing *RPDR*, and survey data analysis. I originally hypothesized that since drag became popularized through visual media drag queens engaged in a more self-reliant experience that diluted the importance of drag families in drag culture. After careful examination, it is evident this is not the case. The rise of drag in visual media has in fact strengthened both drag and traditional family units, and drag's visibility in popular culture has positively affected drag culture as well as provided a platform for the popularization of chosen families.

Several operational definitions will assist in understanding the subject matter in this thesis. First, the basic member of a drag family is a drag queen. A drag

queen is an individual who possesses biologically male reproductive organs and impersonates women through physical appearance (i.e. dress, make-up, voice, etc.). Queens sometimes use drag as a hobby, but others rely on drag as a full-time profession. Drag queens are occasionally referred to as female impersonators, but through research I found that drag queens and female impersonators sometimes operate within different contexts. Female impersonators primarily desire to appear, act, and occasionally identify as women, whereas drag is a characterization based on female aesthetics. While female impersonators and drag queens have the potential to overlap as identities, I limit my terminology in this study to drag queen. It is important to note that drag queens do not necessarily identify as women, even while they are dressed as such, but drag identity can act as an extension of one's self, a completely new character, or the same individual underneath makeup. Along with this, while drag queens usually possess biologically male organs, I use the pronoun "her" in reference to individual queens, because their self-proclaimed identity is based on female characterization. Drag queens participate in a culture that is rooted within the gay community. Performance is a major component of drag culture, which usually occurs in the form of lip-synching at gay-related venues or events. According to Esther Newton, "the status of female impersonators has two fundamental and inseparable parts, show business and homosexuality. Just as 'blues singer' is a status in the context of Black culture, 'female impersonator' is a status in the context of the gay world" (31). Drag culture has evolved over time, and while there are many aspects to this culture I will be focusing primarily on the family units within this community.

Broadly defined, drag families are “larger kinship units that offer a support nexus for female impersonators and present opportunities for strong interpersonal relationships to be forged” (Schacht and Underwood 145). Drag families use the term “house” to identify their family unit. As we will see later on, “house” has a historical basis within drag culture. Drag families are typically made up of three primary relationships. At the top of this family hierarchy there is a drag mother. A drag mother usually has the most experience of the queens within a house, but she is not always the oldest member. A drag mother has at least one daughter. A drag daughter is a queen who uses a drag mother as a mentor to learn practices such as makeup techniques, how to sew, and sometimes relies on having shelter provided for her. It is important to note that a drag daughter can be both a daughter to an experienced queen and a mother to an even less experienced queen. If there are several drag daughters within a house they commonly refer to each other as drag sisters. Drag sister is the most liberal term in defining relationships between queens, because in contemporary drag culture queens refer to each other as drag sisters at times even when they are not members of the same house. Drag sister is more of a general term of respect that bonds queens together based on their collective identity. These three relationships provide the skeleton for drag family structure.

Another definition that will be beneficial for this thesis is “collective identity,” the shared sense of belonging to a group. Individuals usually choose to identify with a certain group, because it provides a base for growth, mutual support, and acceptance. Critics such as Judith Butler argue that the “collective” can be dangerous for political movements, because groups are often too broadly defined (i.e. race,

gender, sexual orientation.)). But as we will see, drag queens are exceptions to this argument, because individuals opt into drag culture. It is a choice to participate in drag culture, thus we can argue that collective identity is a powerful factor that has allowed queens to bring drag up from invisibility and become a respected form of entertainment.

Finally, visual media is an intermediate through which an audience receives a message accompanied by pictures in motion. Visual media usually aim to reach a large amount of people in a short amount of time. Various forms of visual media such as film, television, and music videos have portrayed drag differently throughout history. I begin this study with a historical examination of drag in visual media.

Section 1: The History of Drag in Visual Media

Throughout history drag has experienced many transformations, but today we still see drag as a form of entertainment commonly expressed through various forms of visual media. These forms of visual media have differentiating characteristics, and one of these primary variations is the context in which the medium is viewed. Some forms of visual media are categorized as mainstream, which I define as a film, television program, or music video that brings in large viewership and portrays a subject that has been accepted by various audiences, both gay and straight alike. Other visual media are labeled as award-winning, meaning they have received at least one prestigious award (i.e. Academy Award or Emmy). Finally, visual media are sometimes described as independent. I define independent visual media as content that is not largely distributed and attracts smaller audiences. Although the aesthetic of drag has evolved in various contexts of visual media, drag has remained founded in the genre of camp. This section studies the history of drag in visual media in order to understand how drag has become *demarginalized* in American society.

Before examining visual media, it is important to note the etymology of the term “drag.” Drag originated in the mid-19th century to describe the petticoats that men wore when they were playing female parts in productions of all sorts (Schacht and Underwood 5). The contemporary drag queen, who is often associated with gay bars and entertainment, can trace her roots back to the drag balls held in Europe in the 1700s and later brought to America in the late 19th century (Schacht and Underwood 5). While these performance queens existed for many decades drag was portrayed differently when visual media first entered mainstream society.

Film was the premiere major form of visual media that allowed drag to be seen by large audiences. In the early 20th century, silent films in Hollywood took advantage of the “pansy” character in order to portray stereotypical gay men. The pansy wasn’t explicitly associated with female impersonation, but the behavior and actions of pansies “reinforced notions of homosexuality as gender inversion” since the pansy would typically engage in affectionate acts with other male characters (Benshoff and Griffin 25). An example of a pansy exists in Charlie Chaplin’s film, *Behind the Screen*. In this film a man witnesses Chaplin engage in a kiss with another male, who is actually a woman dressed up as a man, and he goes on to portray effeminate actions to tell the audience that he believes the two lovers are pansies. The pansy was a popular character during the 1920s, but once the Production Code was published by Hollywood in 1930 the pansy became less visible. The content allowed on the big screen drastically changed once the Production Code was enacted, which reflected the impact of radical religious movements and the Depression (Benshoff and Griffin 29). Authors of the Production Code were concerned with “the influence of cinema upon its audience and which agencies should be permitted to communicate society’s values” (Vaughn 41). One of these societal values was the preservation of heterosexual relationships. The Production Code resulted in the pansy becoming asexual, if he was present at all, until the 1940s when gay men began being portrayed as predators (Benshoff and Griffin 35).

After the 1940s, depictions of transvestism in film took on a new form that has transcended decades of visual media for drag, and this has to do with what is known as “camp.” Susan Sontag says, “(C)amp is a certain mode of aestheticism. It is one way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon. That way, the way of

Camp, is not in terms of beauty, but in terms of the degree of artifice, of stylization” (2). Camp is directly associated with the gay community because, as Sontag notes, “(H)omosexuals have pinned their integration into society on promoting the aesthetic sense. Camp is a solvent of morality. It neutralizes moral indignation, sponsors playfulness” (12). Camp became a genre and aesthetic drag queens could easily relate to due to the popularity of female stars whose roles were eccentric and radical for the time. Camp “emerged primarily out of urban gay male communities during the classical Hollywood era, and was a highly idiosyncratic approach to appreciating not only films but also music, theater, art, architecture, fashion, and (straight) culture in general” (Benshoff and Griffin 68). We will later see that camp has transformed and redefined itself due to the popularization of drag culture.

In 1961 the Production Code Administration amended its policies so that filmmakers could actually speak of homosexuality in a discrete manner instead of only hinting at it through subtle visual cues (Benshoff and Griffin 93). During the 1960s America experienced a sexual revolution, which led to many changes in cinematic themes. One of these transformations came in the form of “sexploitation films,” a genre that displayed graphic forms of bizarre nonprocreative sexualities that did not explicitly show intercourse, but alluded to it (Benshoff and Griffin 131). Drag was one of the main ways to display homosexuality in sexploitation films, but it was used primarily for humorous purposes. The late 1960s produced more films that engaged in queer inversions of traditional morals, which caused critics to rally against these movies and send homosexual themes back into the closet.

There was one outlying film during this period that withstood the backlash and became a notorious cult classic for the queer community: *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*.

Rocky Horror was an independent, but profound film, because it threatened the dominant order and challenged the societal norms at the time of its release, which included depictions of drag and homosexuality. The movie used signs commonly found in both horror films and musicals, and fused them together to create a story that connected with queer audiences who regularly appreciated the two genres independently. The film left a negative impression of drag within American culture due to drag being characterized in a villainous context. *Rocky Horror* was released in 1975 and starred Tim Curry as a cross-dressing, bisexual mad scientist, Dr. Frank-N-Furter. Frank-N-Furter separately seduces Brad and Janet, a heterosexual couple. While mainstream audiences were repulsed by the movie's images, the film gained a cult following from those who appreciated the genre parody as well as the queer sexualities explicitly expressed throughout the film (Benshoff and Griffin 147). Perhaps the best way to explain *Rocky Horror's* success is by examining it as a "deconstructive genre hybrid – that is, a film that uses the icons and conventions of two different genres in order to contrast and critique the social and cultural meanings found in them" (Benshoff and Griffin 147). Gay and straight audiences enjoyed these two genres independently as well as queer audiences, but only gay audiences saw the entertainment value in this genre hybrid. This effect still exists, because *Rocky Horror* is recognized as a notorious camp and cult classic film in the gay community.

The 1970s were also a time when one of drag's most iconic performers dominated the film world. Actor, Divine and filmmaker, John Waters teamed up to create some of the most recognized independent camp films such as *Pink Flamingos* and *Female Trouble*. Divine's cinematic popularity marked the first time where drag served as a lucrative career path in the entertainment industry. As mentioned earlier, drag relies heavily on camp. Dan Harries sums up the relationship between Divine and camp nicely: "An important element of camp is the exaggerated dressing and acting like women by men. Divine, a male actor playing female characters, is parodic, operating through the collapse and reformulation of gender boundaries deemed normal in Western society and thus exposing the construction of such roles" (15). To build upon this, Harries explains that, "camp is characterized based on the idolizations of female stars in the classical Hollywood era. Divine modeled this trait by parodying and critiquing three primary Hollywood stars: Jean Harlow, Mae West, and Jayne Mansfield" (18).

After Divine's reign on the big screen drag experienced a radical transformation in visual media. The 1980s and 1990s created greater visibility for drag, because of greater visibility for the gay community in general. One major event that led to gay visibility was the AIDS crisis and its public representation. American society expressed a strong sense of fear and stress regarding the gay community, because AIDS became a worldwide crisis. Hollywood responded to this fear by portraying drag in a sanitized and sympathetic fashion. Along with this, pride parades became extremely popular, which meant that more American citizens were being presented with gay images as these events were aired on news

programs across the country. Drag became a primary form of comedy in mainstream movies instead of being a marginalized tactic used in independent films.

The following films strongly signified the importance of drag within the gay community, therefore raising awareness about drag within larger society. *Tootsie* kicked off this trend in 1982 when Dustin Hoffman played an out-of-work actor who dressed up as a woman in order to get hired. *Tootsie* received rave reviews, and was even nominated for Best Picture at the Academy Awards. A little more than a decade later, *Mrs. Doubtfire* came to theatres. Robin Williams played the divorcee and loving father who, in an attempt to spend more time with his children, dressed up as a British nanny and worked for his ex-wife. Williams earned a Golden Globe for Best Performance by an Actor in a Motion Picture in this film. While both of these movies had straight characters using drag as a medium to achieve a goal it was still an opportunity for drag to be perceived in a positive light by large audiences across America.

Throughout the 1990s drag became a radical concept when defining normal social behaviors. However, the iconic drag documentary, *Paris is Burning*, premiered in 1990 and for the first time audiences witnessed a film that provided commentary on the lives of black drag queens. The film won numerous awards at film festivals across the country such as the Grand Jury Prize at the Sundance Film Festival and Best Documentary at the National Society of Film Critics Awards. *Paris is Burning* offered viewers an intimate look inside the world of drag queens and the struggles they experienced. *Paris is Burning* allowed people to openly discuss the topic of drag, so filmmakers ran with this idea, but reframed drag into a friendlier concept for larger American audiences.

An Australian film, *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* inspired Hollywood to produce the 1995 film, *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar*. *To Wong Foo* finally showed gay characters whose lives were lived in drag. The film starred traditionally masculine actors Wesley Snipes, Patrick Swayze, and John Leguizamo as drag queens who drive cross-country to Hollywood and experience a series of humorous and heartwarming events along the way. This was Hollywood's first time embracing drag as a lifestyle and using mainstream actors to enlighten audiences about drag queens. It also challenged gender stereotypes by using actors who were typically cast in heterosexual, masculine roles. Swayze was nominated for the Best Performance by an Actor in a Motion Picture – Comedy/Musical at the Golden Globes for his leading role in *To Wong Foo*. Robin Williams returned to drag in 1996 with *The Birdcage*, a remake of the French film *La Cage aux Folles*. The film shows a gay couple whose son is engaged to a woman whose father is a conservative senator. Williams and Lane own a gay bar where drag queens regularly perform, and in the end Lane dresses up as a woman to save his family's dinner party from disaster. The most important part of this film occurs when Lane's male identity is revealed and his non-biological son refers to Lane as his one and only mother even though his biological mother is present. His biological mother notes she is proud, and Williams and Lane's son takes his place with his two male parents. The movie received positive remarks around the nation, and its use of popular actors allowed audiences to appreciate the gay themes that were expressed throughout the film. This was one of the first times an out, gay Hollywood actor (Lane) played a gay character who dressed in drag. *The Birdcage* won a Screen Actors Guild Award for Outstanding Performance by a Cast, and Lane earned an

American Comedy Award for Funniest Actor in a Motion Picture. These films mark a major point in Hollywood's expansion of breadth in the portrayal of societal norms.

Critics contend that drag should be represented more accurately, but I argue that Hollywood has come to embrace camp as essential within drag culture, and has shown audiences a more honest interpretation of drag culture. Camp has always been a critical component of drag culture. Esther Newton lived and studied with drag queens for two years and in *Mother Camp* expressed how a clever drag queen must possess "a sense of 'camp' (homosexual humor and taste)" (Newton 3). Through Newton's comment we can see it has been noted for decades that drag queens use humor to portray a theme or deliver a message. The films listed above display how camp functions as a necessity within drag culture even in mainstream Hollywood productions.

As stated earlier, larger audiences became aware of gay culture through the display of pride parades on news programs. These parades included the exhibition of drag queens in public settings. Once the public recognized the gay community, television was able to rapidly respond to the acceptance of homosexuality and depict gay themes on popular programs. Television entered American households in the 1950s. Throughout television's history various programs have used drag to achieve comedic goals, such as *Saturday Night Live* and *30 Rock*. I could cover an extensive account of drag in television, but it is more important to examine the individual who transformed the portrayal of drag on television.

RuPaul is commonly referred to as the world's most famous drag queen, and her popularity has revolutionized the portrayal of drag in America and around the globe. RuPaul's television career spans almost 30 years, but it took off when her

music video for *Supermodel of the World* aired in 1993. When the song became popular RuPaul was invited onto televised programs such as the MTV Awards, *Saturday Night Live*, and the *Arsenio Hall Show* (RuPaul 180-191). In 1996 RuPaul aired her first talk show, *The RuPaul Show*. *The RuPaul Show* premiered on VH1 and featured guests such as Diana Ross, Olivia Newton John, and Cher. These examples of guests on *The RuPaul Show* illustrate how RuPaul connected audiences with popular gay icons. *The RuPaul Show* aired for two seasons and released 100 episodes. When the talk show ended RuPaul continued to appear occasionally on television shows in smaller roles, but she reappeared in a larger context when the television network, Logo, premiered the program *RuPaul's Drag Race (RPDR)*.

According to Logo's website, Logo is a television network component of VIACOM Inc., which also possesses other networks such as MTV, Spike TV, and Comedy Central. Logo launched on June 30, 2005 as a brand-new gay cable network (Collins). Logo produces television shows and films geared towards the LGBT community. While the primary audience for Logo programs is lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals, many other audiences consume its content. Logo's website states, "Logo TV is a gateway to a world where wildly original characters live surprising and unapologetic lives. Entertaining a social, savvy audience of gay trendsetters, Logo TV also attracts a straight audience that wants to be ahead of the curve." As of August 2013 it was estimated that 52,204 homes actually receive the Logo network, which means that 45.71% of homes with televisions are capable of accessing its programs (Seidman). Since its creation in 2005 Logo has served as a major programming force for the LGBT community. Logo

struck ratings gold when the network premiered the groundbreaking competitive reality show, *RuPaul's Drag Race*.

RuPaul's Drag Race has a brief history, but within five years has been projected into popular culture as an extremely popular reality show. The executive producer of *RPDR* is none other than RuPaul who serves as the host and head judge. The show subscribes to an elimination reality show format in that contestants compete against each other throughout weekly challenges in order to win a grand prize. The show has won several awards including best reality television show on Ryan Seacrest's website as well as winning the title of Best Reality Show Competition Series and Best Reality Show Judge or Host on TV.com (Updegraff). World of Wonder Production Company produces *RPDR*, and on February 2nd, 2009, the show premiered on Logo. *RPDR* has aired a new season every year since 2009. The latest season of *RPDR*, season five, reeled in 1.3 million viewers on its premiere night, a record for the Logo network (Gorman). *RPDR* shows no signs of slowing down since its sixth season premiered on February 24, 2014, and it has already been green-lit for a seventh season. *RPDR* appeals primarily to gay audiences who understand the references and language since drag is rooted in gay culture, but the show is also reaching straight audiences who are coming to appreciate its images and storylines.

The format of *RuPaul's Drag Race* is as follows: Each season of *RPDR* begins by introducing the contestants, and subsequent episodes begin with a recap of the previous week along with brief discussion amongst the contestants regarding the most recent elimination. After this, the contestants receive a visual message titled "She-mail," which is a televised clip of RuPaul presenting a vague, humorous clue

about the weekly challenge. RuPaul then leads the queens through a mini challenge. The winner of the mini challenge wins a prize usually aimed to benefit the queen in the main challenge. After the mini challenge, RuPaul explains the main challenge for the week. The bulk of the episode is spent following the queens as they compete in teams or individually to complete the main challenge. During this time RuPaul talks to the queens one-on-one: to give advice about the contestant's ideas and/or hear about their personal stories. Once the main challenge is completed the queens have a certain amount of time to create an outfit and makeup-look based on certain criteria usually related to the theme of the main challenge. Each contestant receives the opportunity to strut down the runway and display her, hopefully, *fierce* (amazing) look to a panel of judges consisting of RuPaul (in drag), two other regular judges, and two guest judges. Next, each contestant is critiqued based on both her performance in the main challenge and appearance on the runway. Before the elimination begins the judges deliberate while the queens chat backstage. The footage from the queens' conversations backstage is seen on an extra show, *RuPaul's Drag Race: Untucked*, which airs after the main episode. Once the judges deliberate, the top-performing contestant is announced and receives a prize. The rest of the cast is narrowed down to the bottom two, and then those respective queens must *lip-synch for their life*. The queen who performs the best earns the chance to compete for another week. The queen who loses must *sashay away* (a term RuPaul popularized in her early career) and is eliminated. RuPaul makes the final decision as to who stays and who leaves each week. This weekly cycle continues until the contestants are narrowed down to the top three. There is a final challenge to determine which queen wins the grand prize along with the title of "America's Next

Drag Superstar.” Seasons four and five began a trend by announcing the winner on an extra reunion episode, whereas previous seasons announced the winner during the final episode.

RuPaul’s role on the show confirms her reputation as the world’s most famous drag queen. She is the most validated figure, because she doesn’t only host the show, but she guides the queens throughout the challenges, and ultimately decides who sashays away each week. The judges assist RuPaul in that they provide feedback regarding fashion choices, and sometimes they comment on the contestants’ attitudes during the challenges. The celebrity guest judges don’t usually contribute much, but their presence authenticates the show’s status as a respectable pop culture television program. Overall, RuPaul remains the most prominent individual, whose celebrity status is worthy of being included in every aspect of the program, including the title.

By bringing drag into the American home and mainstreaming its practices, I argue that *RuPaul’s Drag Race* has changed public perception of drag. *RPDR* is a television phenomenon, because it is the first program to portray drag as a respectable identity. Larry Gross argues that, “television has become the key source of information about the world, creating and maintaining a common set of values and perspectives among it worlds” (6). Along with this Gross says that, “when previously ignored groups or perspectives do gain visibility, the manner of their representation will reflect the biases and interests of those powerful people who define the public agenda” (4). This is exactly what *RPDR* does. It gives insight into drag culture and teaches audiences about a subject that has been previously deemed deviant. The rise of drag visibility is seen in practice through the increase of drag as

a form of entertainment on popular shows such as *Toddlers and Tiaras* and *The Real Housewives of Orange County*. *RPDR* also connects with mainstream audiences, because the elimination reality television show format is similar to that of fellow reality television competitions such as *America's Next Top Model* and *Project Runway*. *RPDR* even draws references from these television programs (i.e. She-mail vs. Tyra mail). While the format may draw in viewers, it is the substance of the show that has resounding effects. I argue that *RPDR* educates consumers about the norms that exist within drag culture. The program has many potential effects on drag culture, the gay community, and even society at large, but those effects will be examined later on. For now, it is important to note that *RPDR* has served as a catalyst for propelling drag into popular culture and due to this more people are understanding drag in a fresh, contemporary, and positive light.

One final note regarding RuPaul is an explanation of how she has been accepted by large audiences. In November 2013 RuPaul guest starred in drag on *Lady Gaga & the Muppets Holiday Spectacular*, which aired on ABC, owned by Disney. The Thanksgiving holiday television special is a tradition for ABC and families across America. The show raked in 3.6 million viewers (Hibberd). RuPaul's presence on this popular televised program is a testament to the fact that RuPaul has ushered drag into popular television programs and transformed the ideology behind drag; turning it into a respectable art form for all audiences.

Outside of film and television, drag has also been portrayed most recently through music videos. Music videos may not be the most popular form of visual media, but they still play a role in perpetuating images and concepts that are necessary in understanding the rise in popularity of drag. Today drag queens are

able to build music careers based on their performance identity instead of incorporating drag into their performance identity. RuPaul was the first drag queen to prove that this was possible. RuPaul's iconic hit "Supermodel (You Better Work)" reached number 45 on the Billboard Hot 100 in 1993 and the video consistently aired on MTV (Wass). RuPaul has gone on to release five albums and has used her success to start *RuPaul's Drag Race*, which has given drag queens a platform for their own music careers.

Some *RuPaul's Drag Race* contestants who have dabbled in the music industry include Bebe Zahara Benet, Pandora Boxx, Tammie Brown, Nina Flowers, Mimi Imfurst, Venus D. Lite, Manila Luzon, Honey Mahogany, Milan, Raja, Tyra Sanchez, Shangela, Tatianna, and Jessica Wild. The fact that 14 queens, the equivalent of one season of contestants on the show, have become involved in the music industry is evidence that *RPDR* serves as a platform to propel queens into various forms of visual media, which allows for drag to become even more popular. These queens have been able to experiment with music, because of their success in the drag world. Their videos are available on sites such as YouTube, which thousands of people view on a regular basis.

Three queens from *RuPaul's Drag Race* have gone on to become successful in the music industry. The camp group DWV shows that drag is a profitable commodity in the music industry and that the use of camp is appealing to large audiences. The "D" in DWV stands for Detox who was on season five of *RPDR* and the "W" stands for Willam who was on season four. Detox has experience working in the music industry with mainstream artists such as Rihanna and Ke\$ha. Willam has been frequently involved with television, starring on shows such as *Nip/Tuck*. In between

seasons four and five Detox and Willam released a viral video for a parodical song titled, "Chow Down (At Chick-fil-A)" with their drag sister, Vicki Vox. As of March 16, 2014, the video has received 4,387,551 views on YouTube. Its success convinced Detox, Willam, and Vicki to continue their musical venture and title themselves DWV. DWV released their second video "Boy Is A Bottom," which has earned 13,110,729 views on YouTube as of March 16, 2014. DWV has gone to release several other parody videos. DWV has also embarked on an unofficial tour together and travelled internationally to perform their hit songs.

Another *RuPaul's Drag Race* breakout star, Sharon Needles, is evidence that drag can serve as the basis for a successful music career. On January 29, 2013, Needles released her debut album titled, *PG-13*. The album sold 3,000 copies in its first week and entered the Billboard 200 at 186 (Caulfield). Beyond this, the album reached number four on the iTunes top albums chart, between Josh Groban and Justin Bieber. Needles became a powerhouse in the music industry once her second single's video, for "Call Me On The Ouija Board" found itself on regular MTV programming. Most recently Needles performed at the South by Southwest (SXSW) music festival in a tribute to Lou Reed. Needles' music career illustrates that drag queens can be successful in the mainstream music industry, and she has laid the groundwork for future queens to build music careers based on their drag queen identity.

This is not an exhaustive list of how drag has been portrayed in visual media, but we have seen how drag has continuously been contextualized as comedic, and the use of camp has remained an integral component to the aesthetic portrayal of

drag. These themes remain present as we examine the role of drag families in drag culture.

Section 2: The Family that *Drag Races* Together Stays Together

Since 2009 *RuPaul's Drag Race (RPDR)* has reached millions of American households. The show introduced viewers to new images rarely seen due to the marginalization of drag in American culture. One of these images is of the family unit within the context of drag culture. A historical analysis allows for a better understanding of the structure and purpose of a drag family. Then a content analysis of seasons two through five of *RPDR* presents the opportunity to articulate a conception of the modern drag family. Through this process I interpret the importance of drag family representation in a contemporary example of visual media.

Drag has been popular in gay culture for decades. George Chauncey explained in the 1920s, “gay men created cultural institutions and rituals that fostered a sense of collective identity...the most prominent of these were the drag balls, some of which drew thousands of participants” (291). Drag balls were events where gay men dressed up as women and competed against each other in a community-building manner. Drag became an iconic component of gay culture in the 1920s, because the drag balls “symbolized the continuing centrality of gender inversion to gay culture” (Chauncey 297). In the 1970s Esther Newton, a prominent drag scholar, lived with drag queens for two years in an effort to gain insight to this unique lifestyle. One of Newton’s most important notions was how “it is through the process of group support and approval that the drag queen creates himself” (37). Along with this group support, Newton observed how the collective consciousness amongst a group of queens allowed these individuals to feel empowered.

Chauncey and Newton provide historical accounts of drag scholarship, but modern scholars have recognized a transcendence of several themes. In 2003 Leila Rupp and Verta Taylor conducted a study similar to Newton, spending significant time with a group of drag queens. Even 30 years after Newton's groundbreaking study Rupp and Taylor noticed, "making friendship into kinship is typical of the gay and lesbian world in general...but the (drag) family extends beyond their own little group to other drag queens in the community. By creating family ties with one another, they construct a collective identity as drag queens" (159). Rupp and Taylor defined these groups of drag queens as drag families, but it is important to note that familial terminology had been used for decades within the drag community, as seen in *Paris is Burning*. In 2004 Hopkins defined drag families as, "larger kinship units that offer a support nexus for female impersonators and present opportunities for strong interpersonal relationships to be forged" (145). Hopkins also presented a concise examination of drag family structure.

Hopkins said "'drag mothers,' as they are fondly referred to, are usually older and help the younger performers create and nurture a drag identity" (145). As mentioned earlier, the younger queens under the tutelage of the drag mother are known as her "drag daughters." If there are numerous drag queens in a single family then they may refer to themselves as a "house" (i.e. House of LaBeija and House of Xtravaganza in *Paris is Burning*). A house may include the queens sharing an adopted last name, but this is not always the case. The drag daughters in a house refer to each other as "drag sisters," but we will see that this terminology has expanded to describe queens from separate houses that share respect for one another.

Regardless of experience, location, race, or gender identity, drag queens use collective identity as a driving force to empower themselves and create positive representation. Scholars variously articulate the terms that make up a drag family throughout the decades, but all scholars mention collective identity. This major factor cannot be ignored, but it is a concept that some scholars, such as Judith Butler, have argued against. Butler believes that the identity of a subject is a false concept, because one cannot have political movements based around identity due to the varying ideas of what a subject is (20). For example, it is difficult to use identity politics for women, because women have no control over their biological female nature. Along with this, every woman has a different perception of her personal identity as a woman, and has different aspirations compared to other women. However, I argue that drag is an exception to this concept, because participants choose to identify as a queen, which means that individuals are aware that they are not acting within the bounds of their traditional gender characteristics. Drag, then, allows queens to bond and create support units such as drag families. Drag deconstructs and challenges binaries and social constructs, such as gender and patriarchy, which force us to view the world in a given way. Drag would not be as powerful an act if it weren't for collective identity, because it allows drag queens to create a close-knit, supportive bond that embraces traditional familial terminology and structure to dispute the social norms in regards to kinship and family relationships. While most social groups struggle to use collective identity to progress political movements, drag queens are able to use their common bond to form groups that challenge and reform the basic building block of society: the family. Butler explains her thoughts on drag families, saying that:

What becomes clear in the enumeration of the kinship system that surrounds the (drag) ball is not only that the “houses” and the “mothers” and the “children” sustain the ball, but that the ball is itself an occasion for the building of a set of kinship relations that manage and sustain those who belong to the houses in the face of dislocation, poverty, and homelessness. These men “mother” one another, “house” one another, “rear” one another, and the resignification of the family through these terms is not a vain or useless imitation, but the social and discursive building of a community, a community that binds, shares, and teaches, that shelters and enables thus, it is the elaboration and resignification of kinship systems that creates the discursive and social space for community (137).

This statement speaks directly to the notions that I have described in relation to the traditional drag family. It is noteworthy that Butler’s quote comes from the 1990s, when *Paris is Burning* was the definitive drag film, both reflecting and constructing the local drag subculture in New York City. Drag has transformed since this time, and my content analysis will focus on how the drag family is portrayed today.

While *RuPaul’s Drag Race* does allow for greater visibility of drag, it is still a peculiar form of fiction that results in mediatized representation for drag culture. It is first and foremost an entertainment television program, which means that its content and substance has been manipulated and tainted to attract a certain audience. However, it is the first television series to positively promote drag culture and the content is beneficial when it comes to studying contemporary drag culture. I examine four seasons individually in order to argue that *RPDR* has shifted from

emphasizing biological family narratives to creating a new conception of the drag family. The show emphasizes both biological and drag families in many ways. Family conception is framed through conversations between participants, actions, and other events on the show. There isn't much scholarship that has analyzed *RPDR's* portrayal of the family in-depth so the following comments will be based on my own analysis. I watched seasons two, three, four and five in an effort to understand how *RPDR* has framed families chronologically as well as how the latest season has created a concrete image of a new drag family. This analysis includes the reunion episodes from seasons two through five. My viewing experience did not include *RuPaul's Drag Race* season one (*RPDR1*) due to limited access of the season during the time of content analysis, nor did it include an analysis of *RuPaul's All Stars Drag Race*. It also did not include behind the scenes footage in episodes of *RuPaul's Drag Race: Untucked!*. As I watched the episodes I kept a record of when the queens would discuss biological and drag familial topics as well as any concepts that were practiced in association with familial themes. My content analysis involved an inventory of references made on the show regarding both biological and drag families. In an effort to compress my analysis I will be focusing on three or four major queens and/or events from each season. As I watched the seasons I noticed a transformation in family portrayal as the seasons progressed chronologically.

In *RuPaul's Drag Race* season two (*RPDR2*) I noticed a drastic difference in the number of references made regarding biological and drag families. Biological families were mentioned almost twice as often as drag families, but this did not prevent season two from commencing a new drag family image. The queens/events I will be focusing on for *RPDR2* are:

1. Tyra Sanchez's role as a biological father;
2. Jujubee's televised discussion of her biological family;
3. The final three contestant's televised "lunches" with RuPaul, staged as an interview before the final elimination;
4. The reunion episode.

Immediately in Episode 1 Tyra Sanchez announced she has a biological son named Jeremiah ("Gone with the Windows"). She parented the baby with her high school girlfriend, and has tried to be an active, loving father for Jeremiah. Sanchez frequently mentions missing her son and even shows a picture of him. In Sanchez' televised lunch with RuPaul she says that winning the competition would mean that she would be able to provide and care for her son in a stable manner. Thus from a viewer's perspective, when RuPaul crowned Sanchez the winner of *RPDR2* it amounted to the perpetuation of biological familial importance, because the other two final contestants did not use family as an argument for why they should win the competition. In the reunion episode Sanchez notes that she was able to gain custody of her son once the show was completed ("Reunited"). Sanchez's story is crucial, because she provides average viewers a connection to traditional family struggles such as teen pregnancy, fatherhood and custody. Sanchez assists in the demarginalization of drag, because family is a topic to which all viewers can relate, and her story of fatherhood in conjunction with her career in drag allows audiences to understand how drag can be a respectable profession and/or artistic expression that assists in stabilizing biological family units.

Another queen from *RPDR2* with a noteworthy biological family story is Jujubee. Jujubee did not receive unconditional love from her mother, which is

typically associated with biological family units, but she found acceptance and love through her drag family. Jujubee began discussing her family in episode two when she and Pandora Boxx bonded over their adoration for their fathers who each fell ill (“Starrbootylicious”). Jujubee also mentioned that she learned to live life to the fullest when her father passed away (“The Snatch Game”). In episode seven Jujubee described the family discrimination she experienced from her mother (Once Upon a Queen). We eventually find out that Jujubee never talks to her biological mom, who abandoned Jujubee (“The Diva Awards”). Even after the season ends Jujubee she notes that she still hasn’t spoken with her biological mother (“Reunited”). Jujubee’s loveable and humorous characteristics helped attract viewers to her story, and connect with the familial themes of grief and abandonment. Jujubee’s story allows viewers to see drag as a tool of perseverance. While Jujubee experienced family tragedies - death and abandonment - she overcame these challenges and found joy through her drag and humor.

One event that allowed viewers insight to the biological families of several queens was the televised lunch each of the final three contestants shared with RuPaul in the final episode. Each of the final three contestants discussed some aspect of her biological family with RuPaul. Tyra discussed the fear of losing her son, Raven shared her experience with her parents’ divorce, and Jujubee predicted how she thought her father would feel about drag if he were still alive (“Music Video Finale”). Each conversation portrays a different aspect of family relationships. Their discussions allow various viewers to connect with the queens, because they cover family topics such as parenthood, divorce, and mourning. Each of these topics could be a component within traditional family struggle, and by seeing the queens

overcome these challenges and succeed in a competition allows viewers to read drag as a positive, empowering act.

Throughout the *RPDR2* reunion we see all competitors come together and share stories about their experience during the show as well as where life has taken them since the show ended. Nicole Paige Brooks, Sahara Davenport, Pandora, Jujubee and Tyra Sanchez noted aspects of their biological families that have been affected, or unaffected, due to the show. Some of the queens, such as Pandora Boxx, Davenport, and Sanchez expressed appreciation, because the show brought their families together, while Jujubee still hadn't spoken with her biological mother. Regardless of biological family struggles the queens came together and took part in a shared experience that helped them create their own family. RuPaul not only referred to herself as the mother of the queens, but stated that "win or lose, love or hate, we are family" (Reunited). This is the first instance where the show expresses the importance of collective identity between the queens, because even if they "hate" each other they are all drag queens sharing in a common bond.

RuPaul's Drag Race season three (*RPDR3*) had nearly twice as many references to biological families compared to drag families, but the portrayed scenarios emphasized a drag family image. The three queens/events I will be focusing on are:

1. The biological family references from Raja, Carmen Carrera, and India Ferrah;
2. The divide between the "Heathers" and the "Boogers";
3. The reunion episode.

While most of the queens on *RPDR3* referred to their biological families, three contestants provided specific personal stories regarding their biological families. Raja revealed her hope that her parents are rooting for her and that they see her happy doing what she loves, because they haven't understood her drag career choice ("Grand Finale"). Carmen Carrera mentioned having to fight for the right to marry her husband in episode eight, and noted that her stepdaughter watched the show and admired Carrera's beauty ("Reunion"). Finally, India explained how her drag mother is her brother's ex-boyfriend and that she has a very supportive family ("Totally Leotarded"). These three queens' stories allow viewers to see many aspects of biological families such as disapproval, marriage, and a blend between drag and biological families. These varying family relationships show audiences that drag can play a role in biological families without tearing a family apart (i.e. Carrera and Ferrah), and in fact it can play a supportive role by bringing families together.

RPDR3 was defined by the divide between the "Heathers" and "Boogers." In episode six Carmen Carrera, Manila Luzon, Raja, and Delta Work began referring to themselves as the Heathers ("Face, Face, Face of Cakes"). This moniker was in homage to the 1988 film, *Heathers*, in which a clique of pretty, popular girls dominate their high school. The remaining contestants, Alexis Mateo, Shangela, Stacy Layne Matthews, and Yara Sofia were referred to as the Boogers, which we later learn is a term for an unpolished queen ("Reunion"). Throughout the remainder of *RPDR3* we see the Heathers persevere as a worthy group of contestants, but the Boogers held on strong until the end even though Raja, a Heather, ended up winning. This divide between the Heathers and the Boogers

reminded me of the unavoidable family dynamic that individuals end up sharing closer bonds with some relatives than they do with others. During the show it seemed that there was no hope for sisterhood between these two groups, but the reunion episode helped to alleviate this tension.

The reunion episode of *RPDR3*, similar to *RPDR2* in visual representation and format, read a bit differently. As in season two, several queens referenced how the show affected their biological families. Carmen Carrera, Manila Luzon, Alexis Mateo, and Stacy Layne Matthews mentioned increased acceptance within their biological families. The most important part of the reunion was the conversation between the Heathers and the Boogers. Delta Work explained that the Heathers resulted from a small friend group who knew each other before the season was recorded. Manila and Carmen knew each other from working together in New York City, and Raja and Work referred to each other as “pure family” immediately in episode one (“The Queen Who Mopped Christmas”). RuPaul mediated a discussion between the Heathers and the Boogers, which resulted in Delta apologizing to the Boogers and offering her Heather necklace to Stacy as an apology. Since the two groups overcame their differences viewers are able to understand the importance of sisterhood in the drag community, because all of the contestants shared a collective identity as drag queens that outweighed the televised drama. The reunion episode left *RPDR3* portraying the importance of embracing forgiveness in order to promote sisterhood among a group drag queens.

Early in *RuPaul's Drag Race* season four (*RPDR4*) I noticed a drastic shift in family references. For the first time there were more drag family references than biological family references. There were plenty of biological family comments, but

the focus was on framing a sisterly bond between the queens. In order to analyze *RPDR4* I will be focusing on the following four queens/events that are strongly related to drag families:

1. The character tropes created by Phi Phi O'Hara and Chad Michaels;
2. Sharon Needles' advocacy for sisterhood;
3. Episode eight's drag family conversation;
4. Connecting previous seasons by involving past winners;

Early in *RPDR4* we see two character tropes being acted out by Phi Phi O'Hara and Chad Michaels. O'Hara is portrayed as the instigator of the season who maliciously manipulates the other queens in an effort to win the competition. She is not concerned with sisterhood and instead is hungry for success. Michaels, on the other hand, is seen as the experienced queen who fulfills a maternal role. Both O'Hara and Michaels made it to the final three, which shows how their character tropes played off each other in order to create a relatable narrative. The dichotomy between their personalities helps viewers to interpret these queens in relation to family structure. Most families are familiar with rebellious children and this is the role that O'Hara fulfills. There is a moment in the final episode where Michaels apologizes to O'Hara for telling her to grow up, which shows how O'Hara is viewed as an immature queen throughout the season ("The Final Three"). Michaels was the oldest contestant in *RPDR4* and there were several queens in the competition who were already familiar with her from previous experiences. Michaels is referred to as "Mother Dust," a reference to her role as a motherly figure to the other queens. Together these two queens form an image of drag sister relations due to O'Hara's

abrasiveness and Michaels' polished role that eventually leads Michaels to mentor O'Hara.

Another queen who stood out in *RPDR4* was the winner, Sharon Needles. Needles not only stood out because she entered the competition as an underdog, but also because she stood up vocally for sisterhood during the competition. In one instance, Chad Michaels is bullied by Needles' hyper-masculine main challenge partner, and instead of siding with her partner Needles tells him to stop harassing her "sister" in reference to Michaels ("DILFs: Dads I'd Like to Frock"). In another episode, RuPaul asks the contestants why they think they should win the competition and Needles says she believes that the winner should promote family morals and sisterhood ("The Fabulous Bitch Ball"). This is the first time that a queen vocally stood up for sisterhood in front of the judges. Needles is a popular contestant in season four, because she serves as a beacon for drag queens aiming to celebrate their collective identity as drag sisters.

In episode eight the queens discussed their drag family experiences together as a group for the first time. The participants were paired with the queen who they had the least in common with, which meant that they had to overlook their differences in an effort to win the main challenge. Sharon Needles started the conversation by noting that she missed her drag family, the House of Haunt ("Frenemies"). Latrice Royale explained how her drag family throws potlucks if they haven't seen each other in a while ("Frenemies"). Some of the other queens commented that they'd love to join in one of Royale's drag family potlucks someday. Willam contributed that she never had a drag family, because she didn't come up through the club scene ("Frenemies"). Chad Michaels ends the discussion by saying

that she couldn't live without her drag family ("Frenemies"). This conversation shows how drag families take on many different forms. Some drag families communicate constantly while others are separated for extended amounts of time, but all of the queens share a respect for the existence of drag families. Even Willam, who does not have a drag family, is jealous of the support and friendships the other queens have. While Willam is evidence that a drag family is not requisite for commercial success, her comments regarding drag families lead audiences to understand how drag families help queens feel embraced within the drag community. This conversation provides commentary on the importance of drag families in order to feel supported within drag culture.

Finally, *RPDR4* connected *RPDR2* and *RPDR3* to the current competition. In the final episode Sharon Needles, Phi Phi O'Hara and Chad Michaels are told to enter a room where a surprise is waiting for them. *RPDR2* and *RPDR3* winners Tyra Sanchez and Raja are waiting to help the queens train for an acting challenge. Michaels breaks into tears when she sees Raja, because they have worked together for over ten years ("The Final Three"). Raja offers pieces of "sisterly advice" to the queens ("The Final Three"). These events help establish a connection between the seasons. The queens may know each other from various drag communities before being on *RPDR*, but the show helps to unite the queens throughout the seasons and create a sisterly bond even if they did not compete together. These four queens/events allow *RPDR4* to be interpreted as the season that serves as a catalyst in the visual representation of sisterly bonds among all *RPDR* participants.

RuPaul's Drag Race season five (*RPDR5*) built upon the foundation for drag family representation. The biological family references were present as they have

been in every season, but *RPDR5* left an impression as the most sisterly season yet.

In order to analyze *RPDR5* efficiently I will be focusing on the following three queens/events:

1. Ro-Laska-Tox;
2. Alyssa Edwards' drag relationships with other *RPDR* queens;
3. RuPaul's comments regarding family.

A clique of queens is formed in episode two. Roxxy, Alaska, and Detox start referring to themselves as "Ro-Laska-Tox, the newest prescription drug for people who are gagging" ("Lip Synch Extravaganza Eleganza"). This clique is similar to that of the Heathers in that they view themselves as superior competitors and use their bond to succeed in the competition. Unlike the Heathers, Ro-Laska-Tox is eventually split up due to comments made by the judges and Alaska's yearning to stand apart from a clique. At one point judge Michelle Visage even refers to Ro-Laska-Tox as a "sisterly thing" ("Can I Get an Amen?"). We cannot ignore the sisterly bonds made in this group, because all three members of Ro-Laska-Tox made it to the top four.

While no members of Ro-Laska-Tox won *RPDR5* they were all successful, because of their various accomplishments throughout the season. The show led audiences to interpret that these sisterly bonds allowed the queens to support each other and reach the top of the competition.

One queen who stood out amongst all the others was Alyssa Edwards. Edwards played a critical role in the portrayal of drag family relationships, because she had a strong connection to both past and present seasons of *RuPaul's Drag Race*. Edwards notes in Episode 2 that she put Shangela, a participant in *RPDR2* and *RPDR3*, in drag for the first time ("Lip Synch Extravaganza Eleganza"). Edwards'

experience is challenged by fellow *RPDR5* competitor, Coco Montrese. We find out that Edwards and Montrese have history, because Edwards originally won the title of Miss Gay America, but her title was revoked when she could not fulfill her duties. Montrese took Edwards' place as the reigning Miss Gay America. This rivalry was ever present throughout *RPDR5*, but eventually Edwards and Montrese made up after the show aired, and they were shown together as sisters during the reunion episode ("Reunited!"). Edwards' role as both a drag mother and sister are important, because she shows that drag queens can fulfill multiple familial roles at once. Edwards also reinforces the importance of queens overcoming their personal differences with one another in an effort to celebrate their collective identity as drag queens.

RPDR5 also provided viewers with commentary from RuPaul concerning the topic of families. In episode two RuPaul tells Alyssa Edwards that "the family that drags together stays together," in reference to Alyssa's drag motherhood with Shangela ("Lip Synch Extravaganza Eleganza"). Then, in episode four, RuPaul provides dialogue for the ballet portraying the story of her life and refers to the contestants as her "legendary children" ("Black Swan: Why It Gotta Be Black?"). RuPaul made a powerful statement in episode seven when Roxxy broke down, because Roxxy was feeling unwanted like when her biological mother abandoned her at a bus stop. RuPaul comforted Roxxy by stating that, "We love you. You are so welcome here. We as gay people, we get to choose our families. I am your family. We are a family here. I love you" ("RuPaul Roast"). RuPaul follows up this conversation in the reunion episode when Roxxy explained that her drag mother had recently passed away. RuPaul consoled Roxxy again by saying that Roxxy is her child now,

and that all the girls on the show are one big, happy family (“Reunited!”). RuPaul’s final comments reinforce a standard of emotional support that is critical within drag family structure. *RPDR5* depicts drag families as units that bring drag queens together to form a positive, supportive community. RuPaul uses this opportunity to formally create a drag family unit that extends to all queens who have partaken in any season of *RPDR*.

There are two major practices on the show that help frame new drag family image: camp and what is known within drag culture as “reading.” Traditional families have customs and values that are rooted in a cultural context. Camp and reading are two concepts that are incorporated in drag culture that have come to be practiced within drag families.

Gross defines camp as the gay male strategy of subversion, and that camp is “an ironic stance toward the straight world rooted in a gay sensibility” (18). Gross’ further comments on camp are critical when it comes to understanding the importance of camp:

Rooted in sensibility, camp serves several purposes. It supplies an opportunity to express distance from and disdain for mainstream culture. Exchanged in private settings, camp helps forge in-group solidarity, repairing some of the damage inflicted by the majority and preparing us for further onslaughts. Used as a secret code in public settings, it can also be a way to identify and communicate with other ‘club members’ under the unknowing eyes of the straight world – itself an act of subversive solidarity. Politically, it can also be a form of public defiance, a flamboyant expression of sexual variation that dares

to show its face. Finally, camp is the quintessential gay strategy for undermining the hegemony of mainstream media images” (18-19).

RuPaul's Drag Race employs camp on a regular basis, but it is peculiar and fascinating, because the queens use camp to build bonds with one another in a private setting while filming, but they also flaunt their camp for the whole world to see through the medium of television. This plays into Gross' argument that camp is the “gay strategy for undermining the hegemony of mainstream media images,” because we see the contestants on *RPDR* both challenge and support the stereotypical images we see on mainstream television programs (18). Camp helps to forge in-group solidarity amongst the contestants unlike any bond we see on other mainstream reality television programs. Camp furthers a drag family interpretation, because the participants on *RPDR* are applying a shared value to strengthen their collective identity.

Another custom practiced frequently on *RuPaul's Drag Race* is reading, the act of criticizing another individual who shares a common identity while maintaining a sense of respect for one another. Just as traditional families have their own customs, reading is a tradition for drag families, because it is a common occurrence that helps queens become aware of outside perceptions, and encourages them to grow into more developed queens. Reading is different from insulting an individual, because it isn't considered rude, but instead is usually viewed as a type of humorous constructive criticism. The concept of reading was popularized through the film *Paris is Burning*. Every season of *RPDR* has an episode with a mini-challenge where the queens read each other, and reading is shown as a skill highly valued

among the participants. For example, in the *RPDR2* reading challenge, Jujubee asks Tyra Sanchez, “Was your barbeque cancelled? Your grill is fucked up!” Jujubee said this in reference to Tyra’s unattractive teeth. In the *RPDR4* reading challenge, Jiggly Caliente tells Chad Michaels, “It’s call Forever 21, not forever 41, baby,” in reference to Chad’s age. Reading has been engrained within drag culture as a way of offering constructive criticism to fellow drag queens even if they are considered your sister. Reading also helps to fortify queens against the harsh comments made by uneducated, discriminatory individuals in mainstream society. The regularity of reading on *RPDR* allows for an interpretation of the queens creating a new drag family due to the traditional value of this practice.

Through my analysis I interpret a new drag family image. I term this new drag family, the Drag Race Family. The Drag Race Family uses semiotics to interpret a drag family image on *RuPaul’s Drag Race*. Bill Nichols explains that the signifier (form of an object) and the signified (concept that is represented) work together to form a sign, which can be interpreted differently (32). Nichols says that, “a film signifier will not mean the same thing to every viewer,” therefore the following interpretation of a drag family will be based on my own analysis of the signs on the show (33).

RuPaul is represented as the mother of this drag family. Seth Silberman argued RuPaul’s presence in mainstream media invokes the use of myth to create a recognizable narrative as a black (drag queen) mother. Silberman stated, “(T)he black mother...has been used as the mythical figure of transformation and deliverance from chaos back to order. Only she who knows the uncontrollable can conquer it” (187). RuPaul has been in show business for decades and has witnessed

all sorts of transformations throughout the history of visual media. Today, RuPaul is using her experience in drag and television to create a show that affirms her celebrity identity and alters her role from the self-proclaimed “super model of the world” to drag mother *extraordinaire*. She refers to the contestants on the show as her “legendary children,” and they call her “mother” or “mama Ru”. Throughout each episode she visits the queens to offer advice, listen to their stories, and help guide them through the challenges. RuPaul acts as a mother by watching over her drag daughters as they endure the competition. Even after the queens are eliminated RuPaul still acts as a mother in that she brings back her daughters together and reassures them that they all possess the charisma, uniqueness, nerve, and talent that she admires so much. While RuPaul acts as the mother, the competing queens all come to act as sisters and fulfill the Drag Race Family structure.

RuPaul's Drag Race has existed long enough that the program is able to provide a format for gay culture representation on popular television. Even before the latest season of *RPDR* aired, scholars were noticing familial aspects within the context of the show. De Villiers noted that, “*RuPaul's Drag Race* contains the kind of intergenerational tutoring, communication, competition, and transformation of drag occurring between ‘mothers’ and ‘children’ in the drag world” (2). De Villiers’ article included an examination up to season four, but it wasn’t until season five that we see a strong connection between the seasons that led me to understanding the entire corporation of *RPDR* as one large drag family. Although I did not include *RuPaul's All Stars Drag Race* in my analysis, we cannot ignore its presence during the show’s existence. *All Stars* brought queens from the first four seasons together to compete for the first spot in the Drag Race Hall of Fame. The queens acted sisterly

when brought together, because they already knew each other due to the intermingling among the seasons of *RPDR*. Audiences witness these sisterly relationships, and continue to relate with the queens on the show. Hicks argues that, “*Drag Race* remains an enormously popular show largely because it creates a community of support and love within the show that draws its audience into that community” (156). I take this argument further by claiming that *RPDR* forges its own drag family through this community of love and support, which thrives off viewership. This ties back to Rupp and Taylor in that drag queens at the 808 Cabaret drew in audience members to their drag family for an evening while the contestants on *RPDR* are drawing in viewers to share in their familial experience for extended periods of time. Another difference with *RPDR* is that this community is popularized and has longstanding effects that are being witnessed across the country. Edgar argued that *RPDR1* was focused primarily on cheap entertainment value instead of quality queer education, but now the show has existed for several years and its been able to educate viewers about drag culture and *demarginalize* drag in American culture. *RPDR* has transformed drag into a respectable and acceptable form of entertainment.

One final noteworthy concept is Butler’s theory that language can be changed, thus providing possibility for all of the traditional notions of a given subject to change as well (36). The manner in which drag queens on the show reappropriate familial terminology to fit their drag family structure assists in the dismantling of the heterosexual hegemony within the context of traditional families that has long been engrained into society. This reformation in language and discourse affirms my interpretation of the Drag Race Family.

Many of the concepts and language in the Drag Race Family is similar to that of the traditional drag family, but this contemporary drag family has a component that is new to drag family culture. The Drag Race Family has extended drag beyond television and into mainstream commoditized entities across the country. Since the show began there have been travel packages that bring the *RPDR* contestants and their fans together for exotic cruise vacations. The queens on the show have also been featured on popular television programs such as *Glee*, *The Bold and the Beautiful*, *America's Got Talent*, and *Toddlers and Tiaras*. The Drag Race Family has brought drag out of the closets and into American homes across the nation. Drag families have historically been exclusive entities reserved for participants in drag culture, but contemporary audiences can connect and relate with members of the Drag Race Family, which inverts traditional drag family practices and creates a more inclusive community. Since this rise in drag popularity has occurred within five seasons we can expect to see more queens appear in popular visual media, as the Drag Race Family grows larger.

RuPaul's Drag Race has brought drag up from invisibility and into a popularized context, and it has also played a huge role in influencing drag culture itself. The following section will use data collected from drag queens in order to examine *RPDR's* impact on existing drag families.

Section 3: Research Method and Findings

In order to better understand the relationship between visual media and drag families it is critical to contact those who know most about the subject, drag queens themselves. This section includes the research method along with observations from my data analysis and field research. After examining the findings we will be able to connect the importance of this study to broader concepts such as gender and the traditional family units.

The most effective way to examine this topic was to focus on drag queens in the Chicagoland area, specifically on the North Halsted area also known as Boystown. As the center of the gay community in one of America's largest cities, Boystown is home to some of the nation's finest drag performers. Boystown was recently voted the world's most "Incomparable Gay Neighborhood" in the *Out Traveler* awards in January 2013 (Farinas). In an effort to begin building a rapport with Chicago queens I started my study by meeting with Trannika Rex who has been a drag queen in Chicago for five years. When I started my study Rex introduced me to queens with whom she regularly performed. My friendship with Rex led to a snowball sampling technique. Snowball sampling is "a quick and efficient way to identify people regarded by fellow natives as relevant to the researcher's study" (Baxter and Babbie 313). In this case, I used Rex's references to contact other queens who were capable of answering survey questions.

After I became acquainted with several staple venues the Boys Town drag community I began to operationalize the concepts within my study for the purposes of inquiry. Operationalization is a process that "results in a commitment to a specific set of questionnaire items that will represent the concepts under study" (Baxter and

Babbie 113). Through this process I created a survey, which identified five key areas of interest allowing me to analyze responses in connection with the concepts in the study. The survey includes questions regarding experience, personal success, visibility of drag, biological familial relationships, drag familial relationships, and a broad question regarding final thoughts on drag culture in America. These questions were open-ended so that participants could respond with whatever answer and length they deemed appropriate (See Appendix). This survey was distributed to queens whom I had been introduced to through Trannika. I also contacted Chicago queens I saw perform around Boystown or who were used in advertisements for drag events. This allowed for diverse responses, because my research wasn't based on a select group of queens who regularly perform together. I distributed the survey primarily via Facebook since this is the medium by which respondents communicated most frequently and reliably.

The other principal method I used was field research. I went through the site selection process, which led me to attending drag shows in Boystown at gay bars such as Berlin, Spin, Scarlet, and Roscoe's. These are some of the most popular gay bars in Boystown where drag queens frequently perform. I attended one or two drag shows per week, usually on Fridays or Saturdays. While attending these shows I engaged in the complete-participant role, which Baxter and Babbie say is "characterized by participants' lack of awareness that they are being observed. In addition, the researcher is involved in the setting as actively as he or she can be, attempting to behave like the 'natives'" (307). This type of behavior included, but was not limited to, me acting as an audience member in that I cheered on the queens, handed out dollars to tip the performers, and participated in stage games

put on by the hostess. My field research allowed an intimate look inside contemporary drag culture. I also observed queens participating in many of the customs and practices I had been studying. The findings from my field research are shared in conjunction with my survey data analysis.

This qualitative approach provides a holistic narrative, which allows for a clear understanding of how I interpreted the relationships between the variables. I categorize the themes in my findings as follows:

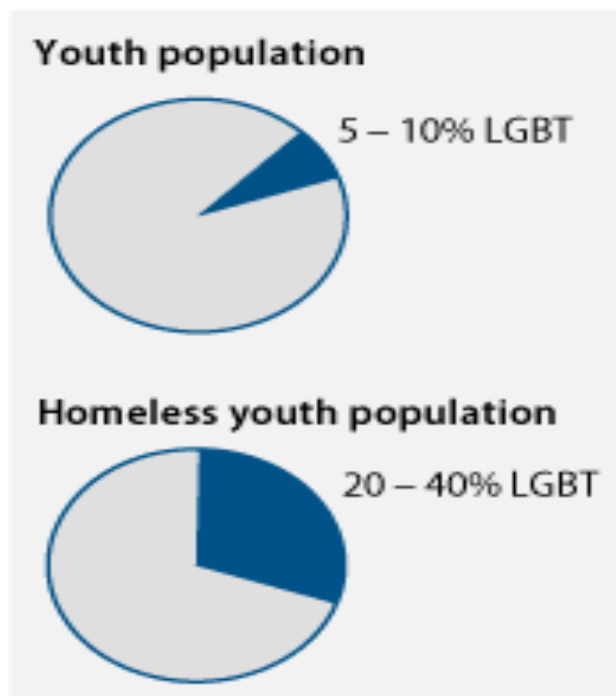
1. Increase in biological family support;
2. Political transformation in drag family structure;
3. Transcendent importance of drag families;
4. RuPaul's role as a catalyst for the increased visibility of drag.

Before delving into these categories it is important to know how I divided up my survey responses. I consider a queen to be "experienced" if she has been doing drag for longer than five years. Any queen with less than five years of experience I refer to as "new." I chose five years as the dividing line since that is how long *RuPaul's Drag Race* has been on television. I analyzed data based on the separation of those who have been doing drag since before *RPDR* premiered and those who began after. I received 15 surveys from drag queens containing their personal insight regarding the concepts in my study. Of these 15 respondents 11 are new while four are experienced.

The first observation I made was that drag queens are experiencing an increase in biological family support. Ten out of 15 of the respondents affirmed that their biological families are supportive of their drag career. The other five respondents didn't mention being disowned or excommunicated, but rather their

families didn't care to learn about their drag career. One queen wrote, "Only a few members of my family know that I do drag. They aren't necessarily supportive, but it's not like they can control what I do and don't do. For them, they do not understand the art of drag so they do not bother learning about it. To them they just think I want to become a woman." Two other queens detailed similar biological family situations, and they both used the phrase, "baby steps" to describe the progress in acceptance that is slowly occurring within their biological family. This comment demonstrates how progress is occurring within biological families, but at a slower pace than other respondents. Progress is critical and we must be aware of the role acceptance is playing in the political transformation of drag family structure.

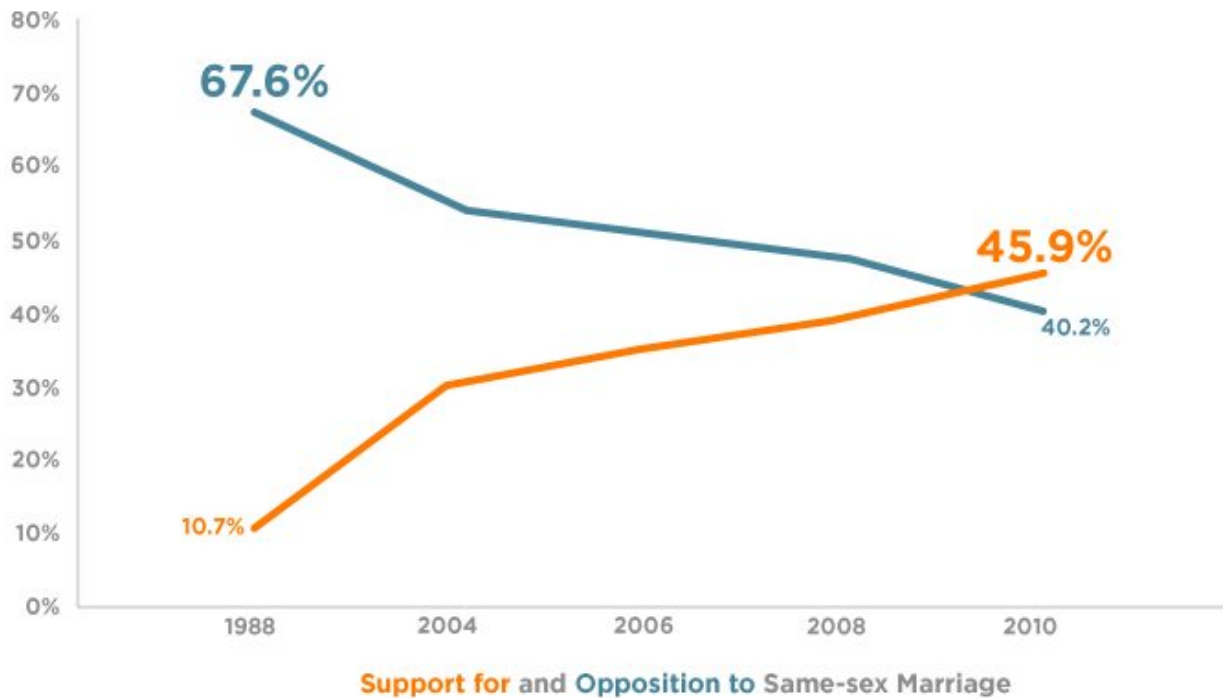
As mentioned earlier, drag mothers have historically taken in children who have been disowned by their biological families. The high rates of homeless gay youth in 2010 are shown in this chart from the Center for American Progress:



As seen above, LGBT youth make up a considerable portion of the homeless youth population. Most likely some of these youth identify as drag queens as well. Jezebel LaVey explained, "I think drag families are especially important to the girls whose birth families do not accept them doing drag or worse have completely disowned them because they want to do drag. To these people, drag families are more than just a support system. They are their actual families." (LaVey). These youth are usually kicked out because their families do not accept their child's homosexuality.

There is currently no research focused on homeless youth who identify as drag queens, but there is plenty of research regarding attitudes towards homosexuality. I will be using statistics surrounding the gay community as a proxy for drag data. It is clear that public opinion surrounding homosexuality has been rapidly changing. The National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at University of Chicago published several studies that show how homosexuality is more accepted today than ever before. For example, "support for allowing gays and lesbians to teach at colleges or universities rose from 48 percent in 1973 to 84 percent in 2010" (Smith). Also, support for same-sex marriage has dramatically increased. The NORC published this chart depicting the transformation of attitudes regarding same-sex

marriage:



As we can see, same-sex marriage has become much more accepted over a very brief amount of time. NORC described that this change in public opinion began in the late 1980s after years of remaining consistent (Smith). It has been over 30 years since this trend began, which means that the generation born at the start of this research is at a traditional age of parenthood. If parents are more accepting of their children's homosexuality then youth are less likely to become homeless due to this factor. If there are fewer homeless gay youth then drag mothers may not have as many children to care for.

My field observations also illustrate this point. When I attended one of Trannika's Most Wanted shows at Scarlet, Ivory had brought her grandmother to the show. Her grandmother sat in the front row, and at one point Ivory brought her grandmother on stage to introduce her to the audience. The crowd erupted into applause as Ivory and her grandmother embraced. A few weeks later Ivory's mother was in the audience at a Drag Matinee show, and she was brought on stage as well. It

was evident that Ivory's family supported her drag career, and was comfortable publicly celebrating her drag identity. I also heard from queens who have brothers, sisters, and other family members who support their drag identity by attending their shows. Pearl said that, "my mom sends me jewelry and came to a party I hosted when she visited me in Chicago" (Pearl). My survey data and field observations suggest that parents today are more open and accepting of their children expressing their sexuality through drag. I argue this because there was more joy than shame described in the survey responses. Ivory, Pearl, and Trannika Rex were not brought into drag culture through traditional drag families, but their biological families support them. These queens are evidence of my argument that due to the increase in acceptance of homosexuality from biological families the presence of drag mothers has become deemphasized, because queens are not reliant on drag mothers for the traditional training and care that used to be necessary to transition into drag culture.

The rise in acceptance of homosexuality plays into the next section of data analysis, which is the political transformation in drag family structure. My survey data found that the hegemonic model of drag family structure has been dismantled, and sisterhood has come to the forefront as the primary relationship in drag families. Drag families have historically consisted of a mother reigning at the top of a family unit since she is the most experienced. The drag mother has traditionally been responsible for housing children in the drag family who have sometimes been disowned by their biological families, and this in turn caused the drag mother to receive a great deal of respect from the younger queens. Along with motherhood, experience and success within the drag ball circuit have been the conventional

determining factors for power within a drag family. While pageantry achievements and experience still exist as indicators for power within drag culture the political role within drag families has changed according to my survey data. Each of the four experienced queens who responded to my survey answered that they were members of drag families, and their family structure resonated with traditional notions. Tiger Sky, who has over 16 years of experience in drag culture, explained that:

My drag mother's name is Maya Douglas. She is a legend and a very well respected queen. I personally believe that it is essential to have a drag mother/mentor as someone that will guide me and groom me into the entertainer I am destined to be. I do think that drag families are still important because some girls don't have families at all either because they don't accept them or because they never even had a family to begin with. (Sky).

Sky's testimony is evidence of the respect that drag mothers receive from their daughters, and the loyalty that experienced queens have towards their drag families. Tori Sass described drag families by saying that, "I feel drag families have always been and will always be an important foundation and support group to have. Everyone needs to keep themselves grounded and to constantly learn. That's what family is for" (Sass).

While the experienced queens support the traditional drag family structure the new queens offer a fresh perspective. Among new queens, only five out of 11 mention having a drag mother, but all of them comment on having drag sisters. This is a radical transformation, because we are now seeing that drag queens can create

their own families without relying on a drag mother for the foundation of that unit.

DiDa Ritz, a contestant on *RPDR4*, offers a unique outlook on drag family relationships. DiDa not only participated on *RPDR4*, but she has been doing drag for seven years so she relates to both the newer and more experienced queens in the Boys Town community. DiDa said,

I have a drag mother, and drag sisters, and people I work with that I have created these bonds with...always make sure you find yourselves a good couple of queens you can call true friends. You can call them your brother. You can call them your sister. You know, because those are the queens in this industry that are going to be your family and have your back and drop everything they're doing to come help you in any type of crazy situation you may be in (Ritz).

Ritz acknowledges and respects her drag mother, but doesn't idolize her drag mother as some of the more experienced queens do. Ritz' focus is on friendship and the bonds of sisterhood that are formed, because she believes those relationships to be the strongest. Ritz exemplifies the transformation in political relationships in drag families, because she was raised in a traditional drag family, but has experience working with newer queens.

Trannika Rex provides insight as well. Rex commented that, "My drag family is not the traditional drag family, and I do think a lot of that (family structure) has gone away almost in the way that a modern family has changed from what a 50s family was. There's a lot of girls who came up on their own." (Rex). Rex' last sentence speaks to my main argument regarding the transformation of drag family structure. If new queens are training themselves and creating their own careers

without a drag mother then this allows for a more fluid, self-selective drag family in that sisterhood becomes the primary familial bond that brings a group of queens together. For example, Trina Avalon-Piranha began her drag career working alone for three and half years. Trina was eventually approached by an experienced queen who took her in as a drag daughter, but Trina described her experience by saying that her drag mother “was a person I’d see once in awhile who I could confide in and share in her wisdom. Everything else I learned to do on my own...I learned make up by ways of the internet, watching queens paint, asking pointers, and trial and error” (Avalon-Pirahna). This sense of independent upbringing is common in contemporary drag culture. Many of the queens who responded to my survey noted how they have a small group of queens whom they rely on for support and education. Shea Couleé said,

It took me a while to really settle into a group of fellow queens that I felt comfortable with. Drag is a really personal art, so I wanted to make sure that queens who understood and supported my aesthetic surrounded me. Since gaining a strong support system, my skills and confidence levels have grown exponentially. I don’t think I’d be where I am today without their support (Couleé).

Shea is one example of a queen who mentioned self-selecting a group. It is current practice to befriend queens who support your personal goals and aspirations, but these relationships fluctuate more, because a modern drag family isn’t tied down by a shared last name or strict family structure.

I want to clarify that while I witnessed a more fluid practice in drag family structure, my analysis found that drag family relationships remain just as important

as previous scholars have argued. In section two I mentioned the essential trait of collective identity in drag culture. Drag queens use collective identity to form solidarity within their community. This solidarity manifests itself in the form of drag families. Jaymes Mansfield concisely stated, “I think friendship and solidarity among queens is what makes our community strong” (Mansfield). Mansfield affirms an important tenet, because every respondent mentioned at one point or another that they believe drag family relationships are beneficial. Drag houses still exist, but Avalon-Piranha explained, “I don’t think that not being a part of a house is going to hinder success, but if you’re a part of the right house the support factor that’s there is going to change things for you and make things easier” (Avalon-Piranha). There are benefits to abiding by the traditional drag family structure in drag culture, but today strict drag family structure is not a determining factor for success or support. While drag family structure is more fluid than it has been historically, drag family relationships, specifically sisterhood, are critical components that bond queens together and maintain the solidarity that queens use to base their community and culture.

These various sections of analysis play into the larger notion that drag has become more visible in American culture. My survey results found that RuPaul is recognized as the primary catalyst in this rise of visibility. It is important to note that I did not reference RuPaul or *RuPaul’s Drag Race* in the wording of this question. When asked “Has drag become more visible within American culture and why?” every queen responded with yes, and 14 out of 15 queens specifically mentioned RuPaul when describing why they believe this phenomenon has occurred. Thirteen of the queens included *RPDR* in their response. These comments

are indicative of my argument, because they support the notion that drag has become more visible due to RuPaul's role on television specifically with *RPDR*. Trina Avalon Phirana even included Willam and Sharon Needles' music videos in her rationale, previously described in section one. Shea Couleé concisely said,

Since the advent of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, drag has become far more visible in mainstream American pop culture. It used to be you could only go to the club on a certain night to get a glimpse of a drag queen. Now you can just turn on your TV. Drag queens have been invited into the American home. Television is a wonderful thing (Couleé).

Other respondents mentioned how other popular networks, such as ABC and TLC, have incorporated drag into their programming, and pop artists, such as Britney Spears and Ke\$ha, have included drag culture references in their hit songs. Ivory described the effects of this visibility saying, "people are kind of more understanding and more appreciative of drag...pop culture has really made drag a lot more known to people who typically don't care" (Ivory). These survey results support my argument that drag has become more discernible to large audiences, and that RuPaul's presence in pop culture has played a strong role in increasing this visibility.

This data analysis regarding acceptance from biological families, political power in drag families, the transcendent importance of drag family units, and RuPaul's role in the visibility of drag provides contemporary insight to drag culture. Trends and patterns are evident in my survey data and field research, but it is important to remember that each and every drag queen has their own personal

experience with drag families. Drag family units function as fluid relationships that are unique to the individuals who partake in that bond. This is a type of relationship that traditional family units are engaging in more frequently as we will see in the following section.

Section 4: The Big (Family) Picture

We have examined visual media and survey data to articulate arguments regarding the contemporary state of drag family structure, but we must go beyond drag culture to connect these theories and experiences with traditional family units. This connection begins with an examination of visual media. While modern television series are promoting homosexual narratives more explicitly than ever before these depictions are rather heteronormative regardless of their inclusion of homosexual characters (i.e. *Modern Family*, *The New Normal*). Doran illustrates this point, noting, “even though *Modern Family* prominently features gay characters in roles never before seen on mainstream television, it never actually challenges the structure or ideology of the nuclear family” (100). This section will connect my content analysis and survey data along with postmodern theory to examine how drag dismantles major social concepts such as patriarchy and gender. These challenges lead to the elucidation that *RuPaul’s Drag Race* and drag families confront viewers with a new perspective of the family unit that is based on collective identity instead of the traditional notions of kinship and biological ties. This in turn propels an acceptance-based model for family structure.

In order to understand the way in which visual media affects society we must briefly examine the field of media ecology. Postman explains, “(M)edia ecology looks into the matter of how media of communication affect human perception, understanding, feeling, and value; and how our interaction with media facilitates or impedes our chances of survival.” While media ecology is a relatively new discipline it has allowed researchers the opportunity to study the effects of popular visual media on society. Media ecology is directly connected to this study, because it

presents the potential to understand the effects *RuPaul's Drag Race* may have on its audience. While the viewership for *RPDR* may primarily be the LGBT community other demographics are consumers as well, and therefore are affected by its visual images. There has not yet been a study examining the effects of *RPDR* on consumers, but based on my content analysis we can interpret one prospective understanding from its images. Hicks explains, "*Drag Race* remains an enormously popular show, largely because it creates a community of support and love within the show and draws its audience into that community" (156). While the drag family unit is rooted in the underground subculture of drag it has been deracinated and presented to many pop culture viewers through the medium of *RPDR*. This means that larger audiences are exposed to the show's messages, and could reframe their conception of the family unit based on their interpretation. Along with challenging the notion of traditional family structure and ideology, *RPDR* also has *demarginalized* the art of drag itself. Hicks argues, "*Drag Race* helps empower queens at home. No longer must drag queens be seen as mere spectacle; they are becoming celebrated as talented performers. The show legitimizes drag as entertainment, making it more acceptable to the public" (57). While these concepts are beneficial to understand in relation to non-LGBT viewers it is also important to examine the effects of the show on drag queens themselves. My survey data is indicative of the content analysis regarding the effects visual media may have on contemporary drag family structure.

Three queens help to illustrate the argument that new queens are currently subscribing to a nontraditional drag family structure. These queens began their drag careers after viewing *RuPaul's Drag Race* when it originally premiered in 2009. None of these queens have a drag mother. They all are self-taught and have learned

about drag through sisterhood. Jezebel LaVey described her familial experience by saying, “As far as having a drag family goes, I do have a few ‘sisters’ that I am very close with but I am not part of a ‘house’...I can text my sisters whenever I want with whatever question I need and I know they will be there for me and they know I’ll be there for them” (LaVey). Kim Chi says, “I do have a small group of drag sisters I hang out with on a regular basis” (Chi). She goes on to describe these relationships as a “blessing” (Chi). Pearl explains her familial situation saying that, “I have my best girls who I consider my sisters” (Pearl). These queens also come from various cliques so we are able to see that contemporary queens are more apt to form sisterhoods that strengthen their communities instead of using a drag mother who traditionally would have held a drag family together. *RPDR* creates a community of support and love through sisterhood that is based on the notion of collective identity. I witnessed this concept while analyzing *RPDR*, and its effects are present in the survey data from new queens who consume images from the show. The comments from these respondents are indicative of the content analysis regarding *RPDR*. Through media ecology I can argue that *RPDR* is one of the components that has had an effect on the political transformation of drag family structure.

In addition to the effects of *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, it is pertinent to use family theory to make broader connections regarding this subject matter. Examining family theory allows for an understanding that drag families relate to many of the trends occurring in the transformation of traditional family structure. While studying family theory I recognized that patriarchy has been the prominent model for family structure throughout history. For this study, I define patriarchy as a hierarchical male-dominated family structure model, which implements the male figure as the

head of a family unit. Families became more liberal once the conception of marriage evolved and attitudes towards gender roles became more progressive. Families went from being strictly patriarchal to adopting a more heteronormative structure. Heteronormative structure refers to the notion that there were more opportunities for women in families, but heterosexual relationships remained as the foundation for family units. Heteronormative family structure was portrayed on popular television programs such as *Leave it to Beaver* and *The Brady Bunch*. These shows displayed progressive gender roles for the women in family units while maintaining a heterosexual image of what families should look like in American culture. As time went on, family structure continued to evolve, especially when homosexuality became a more accepted concept.

Since gay families have become more common, scholars are revising contemporary insight to family theory. Kath Weston describes this historical transition by explaining,

The emergence of gay families represents a major historical shift, particularly when viewed against the prevalent assumption that claiming a lesbian or gay identity must mean leaving blood relatives behind and foregoing any possibility of establishing a family of one's own unless a person is willing to make the compromise of hiding out in a marriage of convenience. This entire shift has happened within a relatively brief period of time (196).

Throughout her research, Weston recognized,

The subjective agency implicit in gay kinships surfaced in the very labels developed to describe it: 'families we choose,' 'families we

create.’ In the language of significant others, significance rested in the eye of the beholder. Participants tended to depict their chosen families as thoroughly individualistic affairs, insofar as each and every ego was left to be the chooser (109).

I will be using Weston’s term “chosen family” from here on. While traditional family advocates may disagree with this conception of family structure, Weston offers some solace by suggesting that, “chosen families do not directly oppose genealogical modes of reckoning kinship. Instead they undercut procreation’s status as a master term imagined to provide the template for all possible kinship relations” (213).

Chosen families form when individuals seek out acceptance from a given community, and in this case it is because individuals have been marginalized due to their sexuality and participation in drag culture. In fact, I argue that chosen families are similar to kinship-based families, because collective identity helps to fortify the bond of a family unit. Weston helps support my claim by explaining that, “(I)identity provided the linking concept that lent power to analogies between gay and consanguineal relations. Wasn’t this what families in the United States were all about: identity and likeness mediated by the symbolism of blood ties?” (127). This insight to contemporary chosen family structure provides us with a foundation to examine how drag families are examples of chosen families, and that the concepts practiced in these families are frequently applied to contemporary traditional families.

Also, I recognized that contemporary traditional family units and drag families are related through the dismantling of patriarchy and common trait of collective identity. As previously noted, the dismantling of patriarchy has allowed

for the visibility and expansion of chosen families. Drag families perpetuate the dismantling of patriarchy, because of the discourse within the community. Foucault wrote about discursive power, which is a concept directly applicable to drag culture. Discourse is defined as “a set of rules for producing knowledge that determines what kind of intelligible statements can be circulated within a given economy of thought” (Wilchins 84). Foucault argued that discourse allows for groups of individuals to transform restriction into pleasure, which is precisely what drag queens do. In an effort to battle their marginalized status drag queens use female-based discourse to create positive familial relationships. In addition to discourse drag families further dismantle patriarchy, because of the elimination of biological ties and genealogy.

Along with the dismantling of patriarchy, traditional family units and drag families are linked through the notion of collective identity. Polletta and Jasper say that,

Collective identity is an individual’s cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution. It is a perception of a shared status or relation, which may be imagined rather than experienced directly, and it is distinct from personal identities, although it may form part of a personal identity (285).

Collective identity is the driving force that bonds drag queens together. However, collective identity applies to various communities including traditional family units. Regardless if families use kinship, legal status, or some other form of relationship acknowledgement, families are formed because a group of individuals have chosen

to recognize shared respect and mutual support for one another. Collective identity becomes apparent when a group of individuals make a choice to bond, therefore both contemporary traditional family units and drag families are examples of chosen families. As cited earlier, Weston noted that, "(I)dentify provided the linking concept that lent power to analogies between gay and consanguineal relations" (127). Since collective identity is the driving force in determining relationships, and individuals must choose to share an identity, chosen families are a contemporary model for family structure that can be adapted by all groups of people, regardless of whether they're heterosexual, gay, or queens.

We cannot ignore the major role that gender plays within family structure. Through an analysis of gender theory we see the increase in visibility of drag has contributed not only to acceptance-based family structure resulting in the popularization of chosen families, but also to more understanding and awareness regarding the concept of chosen gender. Jacques Derrida is a prominent postmodern theorist who has offered his thoughts on the topic of gender. Riki Wilchins breaks down Derrida's argument explaining, "Derrida based his attack in contexts that were particularly useful for thinking about gender and queerness: language, reason, and meaning. Gender is a *language, a system of meanings and symbols, along with the rules, privileges, and punishments pertaining to their use – for power and sexuality*" (46). Gender isn't only a language; it is also a sensory experience. Thomas Laqueur discussed this concept in relation to the visual aspects of gender:

Laqueur forces us to confront the frightening, dislocating idea that – like our textual language – the visual language of bodies isn't transparent either. In other words, body parts aren't necessarily or

only what we see them to be, because, as belief changes, vision can change too. We learn to see things in a certain way, and by seeing them that way, we rely on our belief in that vision to inform us about what is ultimately *real* and *out there* (Wilchins 140).

Butler often uses the term “performative” when discussing gender theory.

Performatives are “the name for special kinds of speech that also qualify as official social acts. It sounds a little obscure, but consider that the words ‘I now pronounce you husband and wife’ – when uttered by the right person at the right time before the right audience – create a marriage between a couple” (Wilchins 198). Butler argues:

Gender is not a performance that a prior subject elects to do, but gender is *performative* in the sense that it constitutes as an effect the very subject it appears to express. It is a *compulsory* performance in the sense that acting out of line with heterosexual norms brings with it ostracism, punishment, and violence, not to mention the transgressive pleasures produced by those very prohibitions (Butler 381).

These theorists cumulatively articulate that gender is a concept that cannot be taken at face value. For example, while society raises us to accept the fact that a penis and vagina are to be used for procreation this is not their sole function. If a woman is incapable of bearing children then her vagina is not performing its expected purpose, but does that make her any less of a woman? I argue it does not, because her vagina does not control her choice in appearance or behavior. The choice belongs to the individual based on his/her personal gender identification.

Therefore, gender is a performative as Butler explained, because individuals are able to choose what acts they wish to perform to be perceived as a given gender. If we allow ourselves to challenge the social construct of gender then we can change our perspective, which is precisely what Laquer describes. Butler also argues that drag is a solution to the gender binary. With this in mind we can understand how individuals are able identify with whatever gender they so choose, and regardless of biological body parts they have the potential to be perceived as that chosen gender. Butler's comment regarding compulsory performance raises concern in relation to this argument, but this can be dissected further. Butler contends that if an individual acts outside of his/her biological gender role and challenges the heteronormative expectations of that role then he/she will experience discrimination and prejudice. I argue that since drag has become highly visible, through media such as *RuPaul's Drag Race*, gender identification and family structure have become more fluid concepts in popular culture. I am not insinuating that individuals who challenge heteronormative ideologies are no longer subject to chauvinism, but through my study I contend that the content analysis and survey data expose greater acceptance for ideas and concepts that were once considered perverse. The concept of chosen gender allows for individuals to perform gender in a fluid manner that challenges the hierarchical and binary society in which we live. It is important to recognize that chosen gender allows individuals to be brought closer together as humankind instead of separating us between man and woman. This conglomeration of gender identities may seem frightening, but I argue that it will eventually bring about a more accepting society that embraces individuality instead of restricting opportunities for individuals simply based on their gender.

The imagery on *RuPaul's Drag Race*, along with trends in drag family structure, substantiates the notion that an acceptance-based model for family structure is becoming more visible. *RPDR* actually does challenge the structure and ideology of patriarchy and the nuclear family. Behind the mediatized representation on *RPDR* lies a culture that is founded on collective identity. Collective identity along with the transformation in traditional family structure, has come to show that individuals are able to choose which relationships they cultivate in order to build family units. Individuals choose which constituencies they wish to relate to, which means they accept that respective social group as their family. Acceptance has become a prominent trait in chosen families, because blood ties and kinship no longer dictate family structure. While individuals may occasionally bicker, fight, or even hate members in a chosen family they still accept the members for who they are and the role they play in the respective family unit. *RPDR* and the study of drag families provide a platform that illuminates the benefits of chosen families as well as the notion that acceptance-based family structure is becoming more appealing.

Conclusion

One controversial topic in this study is drag. It has been argued that drag provides political power for the gay community, because historically it is an identity and aesthetic that brings gay individuals together. Now that the straight community is sharing in the appreciation of drag there are individuals who fear that the gay community will lose this political power, because drag is becoming normalized. The demarginalization of drag will not steal this political power from the gay community, but it will allow gay individuals to feel more accepted by society at large. Traditionally, drag has been identified as subversive and transgressive. Today, drag is illuminated in a new light due to media such as *RuPaul's Drag Race*. I argue that the popularization of drag is a community-building trend that will benefit all individuals, because audiences, gay and straight alike, are coming to perceive drag as a respectable art form, and this is bringing historically polarized communities together.

Another point of contention in this thesis is the conception and practice of chosen families. Critics argue that chosen families are dangerous, because choice is subject to change and if individuals decide to break their bond then that family unit may disperse more easily than if there were a line of biological kinship maintaining the familial relationships. However, according to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention there are 6.8 marriages per 1,000 population and 3.6 divorces per 1,000 population (Marriage and Divorce). This means that there is approximately a 53% divorce rate in America, which shows that even traditional family units are deciding to break their bonds regardless of marital status. Also, there is a general decline in marriage overall. Pew Research Center notes, "(I)n 1960, 72% of all adults ages 18

and older were married; today just 51% are” (Cohn, Passel, Wang, and Livingston). Along with this, there are 20 million emancipated youth in America as of 2011 (McDaniel). These statistics reveal that blood relations are no longer forcing families to stay together, and that instead we should embrace the chosen family model if we hope to allow individuals the opportunity to find acceptance within a familial context.

The history of political thought is founded on the family and its importance in society. Many philosophers have examined family relationships and the roles family members fulfill that contribute to the larger community. Today family units appear drastically different than ever before, and sexuality has played a major role in transforming the role of family units in society. Drag families provide a beneficial family structure model for contemporary traditional family units, because they display how chosen families lessen restrictions for opportunity based on gender and sexuality. As we have seen, drag deconstructs gender, and drag families use a vernacular that challenges the traditional family ideology by using biological men who refer to each other as women. Collective identity holds these families together, regardless of gender, and the notion of chosen families then becomes an advantageous model for mainstream family structure.

The contemporary drag family model that I have illustrated in this thesis is beneficial because it takes into the account the recent acceptance of homosexuality on behalf of traditional family units. If individuals can belong to drag families as well as their traditional family units, then this eliminates the competitive nature between these two family models. In today’s society, a queen can have the best of both worlds. Drag queens today are generally supported by their traditional family while

they are also able to establish bonds of sisterhood within drag culture. Schacht and Underwood said, “we live in a hierarchical society where, dependent on the social statuses we have been seemingly ascribed, we are continuously expected to undertake performances that demonstrate our gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and so forth” (13). Contemporary drag families dismantle this hierarchical model for family structure, and rising acceptance rates of homosexuality allow individuals to perform in whatever familial context they so choose.

While this study has viewed family structure through a gay lens there is still more to learn. Future research should examine a broader audience of queens so that we can analyze the responses from older queens who may have different interpretations since they have lived through transformations of visual representation and family structure. Also, my research focused on drag queens in the Chicagoland area, and other queens may feel differently based on their geographic location. Future studies of drag in popular television could be more exhaustive so that there is more information available regarding the visibility of drag in American culture. It would be helpful to examine *RPDR1*, *All Stars*, and future seasons of the show in order to understand if my content analysis has remained consistent throughout the progression of the program. Family structure is only one component of drag culture, and there are various aspects of this community (i.e. reputation, experience, pay level, etc.) that could be studied in an effort to examine what directly effects familial relationships within drag culture. Drag is constantly evolving, and faster than ever due to the popularization of this culture through visual media, such as *RPDR*. Queer theory provides scholars with an opportunity to

examine this culture from a newly respected discipline that can offer insight to a thriving culture.

The goals and rules of drag have transformed, but there are still certain components that have remained critical such as collective identity, camp, performance, and family. Just as the family unit is the building block for society, drag families provide the base for drag queens to cultivate a community filled with positive relationships and mutual support. Drag families and traditional family units share many common characteristics, which offer opportunities for growth in both contexts. Humans crave a sense of belonging, and it is through familial relationships that they achieve this bond. Through this study it is clear that chosen families provide individuals, regardless of sexuality or gender, the opportunity to find acceptance in a family unit.

Appendix:

Drag Queen Survey (Below):

Subject: _____

1. How long have you been doing drag?
2. Have you been successful with your drag career and why?
3. Has drag become more visible within American culture and why?
4. Does the family that raised you support your drag career? Do you maintain a relationship with them?
5. Are you/have you ever been a member of a drag family?
 - If yes, tell me about your experience and why you believe that was important. Do you maintain a relationship with your drag family? Do you think drag families are still as important as when you started?
 - If not, why?
6. What else would you like to tell me about drag culture in America?

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