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Drag Performance and Femininity: Redefining Drag Culture through Identity Performance of Transgender Women Drag Queens

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Drag Performance and Femininity:

Redefining Drag Culture through Identity Performance of Transgender Women Drag Queens

By

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This thesis has been examined and approved by the following members of the student's committee.

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ABSTRACT

Viewing gender as a performance reveals how gender identity is shaped and formed. There is currently tensions associated with drag queen performance as an act of subversion and transgression from the heteronormative definition of gender and drag as a perpetuation of heteronormative definitions of gender. There is also a tension between the affirmation of femininity and transgression from gender binaries of womanhood. In order to address these tensions, this thesis project examined the reasoning behind how transgender women and gay men drag queen performers navigate the world of femininity. Specifically, this study explored the varied reasons behind performing femininity through drag and to further understand what it means to perform femininity. This project also delved into gender scholarship and how it related to gender as performance, drag queen performance, and transgender identity performance. I collected the data through purposeful sampling and semi-structured interviews with three transgender drag queens and three gay man drag queens. The interview responses were analyzed using thematic analysis. The themes that were discovered in this project suggested that through drag performance, femininity is used as medium to access a unique understanding of the self. The data suggested that cultural and social understandings of gender influenced performance of the self on and off the stage and the participants still worked within these assumptions surrounding gender to make sense of their identity. Ultimately, this thesis explored what it means to perform femininity and identity in a culture that perpetuates cultural and social understandings and notions of gender performance.

Chapter One

Introduction

The first time I ever attended a drag performance was during my first year in college. I was just beginning my Gender and Women's Studies coursework, and my friends, who were active members of the Gay and Straight Alliance at our college, wildly praised the queens and their performances. As I entered the performance space, I was astounded by the florescent pink lights and loud and vibrant pop music echoing through the school auditorium. Each queen stepped onto the stage with their bright and dramatic makeup, five-inch stilettos, long voluminous hair, and tight spandex clothing. The drag queens used a variety of sexual innuendos and had members of the audience stuff tips into their bra. As a female-identifying individual, I wondered why I didn't dress and act like these drag queens. Essentially, it immediately made me question if I was expressing my femininity incorrectly.

As a female-identifying person, and someone who sometimes identifies with traditional presentations of womanhood, I had to stop and wonder if this question was a feeling associated with wanting to own my femininity, and if drag queens were threatening to my identity as a woman. I wondered if drag queens were threatening to my identity because I was curious to know why cisgender gay men could celebrate aspects of what society considers feminine qualities, while I am consistently policed on how I perform my femininity. I also wondered if I could participate in drag performances, as I too wanted to be able to tap into unperformed qualities of my identity. Although these uncertain feelings manifested during my first experience with drag performance, I continued to attend them. Their unapologetic performances of femininity became empowering for me to watch. While femininity seems to be policed constantly, I noticed that drag queens all have a different idea about what performing femininity

means and what these performances look like. Some seemed more subdued, some seemed to be subversive of preconceived notions of stereotypical representations of femininity. Specifically, I found myself laughing at the hyperbolic standards of femininity that were being performed, and felt grateful that these impersonations of women seemed celebratory of subverting the norms associated with how women should act. As I became close to many individuals who were drag queens, I had many discussions with them about this idea. I vividly remember a friend of mine, who was a drag queen, explaining to me that by recognizing the norms and roles that are often imposed on individuals who prefer to perform femininity, we are able to reclaim those roles, and even poke fun at them.

I originally felt as if my femininity was being taken away from me. As I immersed myself deeper into the drag community, coming to shows regularly and getting to know people who perform as drag queens, I began to realize that drag seems to be used as a celebration of queerness. I am someone who "passes" and performs traditional social roles of gender normativity, specifically associated with what society sees as feminine and womanly. Specifically, I am easily regarded as a cisgender woman. Due to this, people have often assumed that I am not a queer person. I have often struggled with my identity as a queer person. I identify as queer in terms of sexuality, but I also wonder about my gender presentation. I wish to break free from traditional norms of femininity but there are also days in which I feel comfortable performing as femme, appearing and engaging in behavior that is often seen as being traditionally feminine.

Drag performance made me ask, how much of my performance of femininity is constructed through the gender binary and how much of my performance of femininity transgress this binary? I also wondered about the ways drag exemplifies this tension. I realize

that this tension is simultaneously about my own gender performances about others' as well. I believe that performances of gender in drag can say a lot about how society views and makes sense of gender. I'm not entirely sure that someone could fully understand how people make sense of gender in drag performances by simply watching them. Rather, being cognizant of specific social representations of gender seem to guide performance choices in drag. Thus, understanding drag queens' individual reasoning behind performing as drag queens seems to be a sufficient way to truly understand how social constructions of gender are performed and what that performance says about how society views gender. To understand this tension more, I began seeking out various media outlets that would be helpful to someone who may be interested in performing as a drag queen.

Biological Restrictions in Drag Performance

As I sought out websites on drag queen competitions, I found a set of rules of asserting that contestants must be male; they must have no surgical enhancements below the neck; the use of any type of hormones or hormonal therapy is not allowed; and contestants may live their life as a female as long as they have not undergone any medical (hormone or surgical) procedures. Proof also may be required from a doctor if questioned (Miss Gay America, 2016). These restrictions seem to assume that femaleness and maleness are biological, disrupting past research on the social construction of gender. These restrictions also seem to suggest that only specific bodies perform in drag. Consequently, specific bodies may face barriers in attempting to perform drag in gay bars. These rules that ultimately restrict who can participate in drag warrant a needed discussion surrounding what role transgender drag queens play in drag performance and what the purpose of drag is for transgender women who perform as drag queens. This is a warranted discussion because not only is there rhetoric associated with which bodies are allowed to perform

as a drag queen, but there is also a much needed discussion regarding how different gender identities make sense of the performance of femininity.

When drag limits who can impersonate women, transgender women drag queens ultimately disrupts conventional notions of what drag and female impersonation is and creates a space in which cisgender bodies dictate identity development in drag culture. This emphasis on biological limitations in drag depicts a tension associated with which bodies are ultimately allowed to perform in drag. Although previous scholars have argued that drag is a representation of the fluid nature of gender, the exclusion of specific bodies ultimately counteracts gender as social construction, creating gendered categories based on biology. Although there are transgender women who participate in drag, trans activists have argued that there are instances in which cisgender male drag queens have questioned transgender women's role in drag queen performances. In order to explore this rhetoric, it is important to dive into the instances in which transgender queens' role in drag has been questioned and how this rhetoric refines notions of how to perform femininity in drag.

Redefining Femininity in Drag

RuPaul's Drag Race has been widely acclaimed by the LGBTQ community. This reality television show follows RuPaul, one of the most famous drag queens in the world, in her search for America's next drag queen superstar. In the 6th season of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, RuPaul challenged the queens to engage in a mini game entitled: "Female or Shemale." This challenge required the competitors to guess if a person in each picture was a cisgender woman or a drag queen. RuPaul phrased this distinction as a "psychological woman" or a "biological woman." Many transgender activists, and GLAAD (Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) expressed anger over this mini challenge and the recurring use of the words "shemale" and

"tranny." Specifically, GLAAD's vice president, Rich Ferraro, deconstructed why this is

harmful:

> While some drag queens may use the term to refer to themselves, 'she-male' is too often
>
> used by others as an offensive term to denigrate and hypersexualize transgender women.
>
> Unfortunately, most Americans are still unaware that there is a difference between gay
>
> men who perform in drag and transgender women. (Malloy, 2015, para 6.)

This show, and the grouping together of gay men who perform drag and transgender women,

reveal tensions surrounding the articulation and performance of gender, as well as the function of

femininity and how it is defined through drag.

Edgar (2011) argues that being successful on *Drag Race* has less to do with perfecting

the appearance of a woman; "rather it entails the successful employment of multiple acts or

qualities that illustrate femininity. Gender performance is complicated by slippages and

references to what is ultimately the performer's maleness peeking through the makeup and

artifice" (p. 138). Edgar demonstrates that there is a tension between gendered performance and

a sexed body. Rather than understanding the gendered body as something that is ascribed with

meaning through social and cultural contexts, Edgar suggests that *Drag Race* perpetuates the

rhetoric that the body is defined through sex and that it is organized and understood through sex.

There is also a clear tension in drag associated with who gets to perform as drag queens and

under what circumstances. Hence, it is essential to delve into how one should draw the line

between social and biological reality in terms of identity, gender and drag. This idea also raises

questions about the differences in the motivations behind performing drag for cisgender gay men

and transgender women drag queens. This project explores performance, not only through

theatrical performances of gender, but also gender as an everyday performance and the role of transgender women in drag queen performances.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the varied reasons behind performing femininity through drag and to develop our understanding of what it means to perform femininity. In order to explore this idea, this thesis will address two specific research questions:

1) What are the reasons why transgender women and gay men perform as drag queens?

2) How do transgender women drag queens disrupt what it means to perform femininity in drag?

These research questions help me outline the subjective experiences of gender performance, and bring forth a needed discussion about how femininity is perceived and performed in drag. I employed qualitative methods and used the research questions to inform my analysis of the interviews with gay male drag queens and transgender women drag queens.

In chapter 2, I engage in a review of literature of main concepts that will be relevant to this project, including drag queen performance, the history of drag performance, drag as a medium of subversion as well as drag performance and the gender binary. Second, chapter 2 will review literature associated with gender as performance and identity, multiple subjectivities in gender performances and performing femininity. Finally, in chapter 2, I detail a review of literature that has been written about trans identity performance.

Chapter 3 explains the methodology of this project. This chapter begins with a discussion surrounding qualitative methods as a transformative practice. Next, chapter 3 delves into my positionality as a scholar. I also explain how I recruited participants and the procedures used for

data collection and analysis. After the procedures and data analysis of this project are described, I explain how thematic analysis was implemented in this project.

Chapter 4 will outline the analysis of the data. Specifically, chapter 4 will examine themes that derived from the transcriptions of the interviews. These themes not only focus on discussions surrounding drag queen performance, but the themes also touch on gender as an everyday performance and how their drag performances and everyday performances of gender impact their identity. Chapter 4 will ultimately lay the foundation for chapter 5. Chapter 5 will expand on the analysis of themes by considering the implications of the findings. After the implications are detailed and examined, chapter 5 will go on to deconstruct the limitations of this study. Finally, Chapter 5 will expand on the various avenues of future research that this project provides.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

Before conducting interviews and analysis, it is important to engage in a review of literature associated with the purpose of this project. This review of literature will summarize and critique existing research, focusing on three major themes that inform this thesis project. First, I discuss gender as performance, including gender and sexual variance in gender performance and performances of femininity. Second, I address drag queen performance, including the history of drag queen performance, drag as a medium of subversion as well as drag and the gender binary. Finally, I conclude this chapter by addressing trans identity performance.

Gender as Performance

To begin, the body as a subject of identity and performance is highly contingent on its cultural environment. Butler (1990) explains, "the body appears as a passive medium on which cultural meanings are inscribed or as the instrument through which an appropriative and interpretive will determines a cultural meaning for itself" (p. 8). The body is a medium through which meanings are inscribed through cultural influence. Performance specifically refers to the ways in which individuals act in the world and how bodies situate themselves (Conquergood, 1995, pp. 137-138). Specifically, Butler's theory of performativity suggests that society directly and indirectly influences the performance and the body itself.

Salih (2002) argues that the performativity of gender assumes that "gender is not something one is, it is something one does, an act, or more precisely, a sequence of acts, a verb rather than a noun, a 'doing' rather than a 'being'" (p. 55). Butler (1993) also goes on to argue that gender is "a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame" (p. 33). In effect,

Butler suggests that there are restrictions and constraints insofar as gender is understood and established in society.

Viewing gender as a performative act through cultural influence can also be viewed through the social, cultural and political intersections of identity. Butler (1990) argues the following:

Gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. As a result, it becomes impossible to separate out "gender" from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained. (p. 3)

While Butler specifically argues that the performance of gender is socially and culturally influenced, scholars have also argued that gender variance is still present within strict cultural definitions of gender. Lips (2006) explains that gender variance can be seen through the many different intersecting identities the body maintains:

we should perhaps use the image of a kaleidoscope, where each turn produces different patterns and no single element dominates. That is, although there are common constellations of intersecting identities, there are so many variations and changing even one identity can alter the picture drastically. (as quoted in Keener, 2015, p. 486)

Defining bodies as a cultural and performative medium ultimately suggests that gender performance is fluid in its performative manifestations of the body. However, the fluidity of gender performance also indicates that performances of gender identity changes in a variety of contexts.

Scholars have long used performance theory and queer theory to deconstruct the gender binary and explore the fluidity of gender and identity performance. Faithful (2010) describes performance theory as an expression of assigned and designated feminine or masculine characteristics which ultimately can be identified as "female" or "male." Thus, the state of being of any given person's performative experience builds upon one's "male" or "female" identity (p. 456). Faithful goes on to discuss the complexity of those who refuse their assigned roles as either male or female, categorizing these individuals as "gender warriors" (p. 456). Queer theory has also been used to describe the way gender plays a role in performance and suggests the complexity of gender. In fact, queer theory has been incorporated into gender and performance scholarship in an attempt to emphasize the complexity of gender and performance and their mutual constitution.

Queer theory originated as a post-structuralist theory in the 1990s and is often used to deconstruct theories of LGBTQ identity and queer text. Queer can be described as "mismatches between sex, gender and desire" (Jagose, 1996, p. 3). While queer theory has commonly been used to deconstruct homosexuality and same-sex desire, this theory has been used to explore identities outside of being gay and lesbian. While queer theory is multi-faceted and devoid of a specific and concrete definition, queer theory aims to focus on deconstructing normative gendered and sexual identity categorizations. Butler (1990) argues that "gender ought not to be conceived merely as the cultural inscription of meaning on a pregiven sex (a juridical conception); gender must also designate the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established" (p. 7). Seidman (1994) also argues that rather than simply studying homosexuality or heterosexuality, queer theory attempts to delve into the manifestation of power in the naturalization of sexual and gender binaries. Although social and cultural expectations

regarding gender impact the body and dictate perceptions surrounding which bodies are the most natural, gender and sexual variance can help portray the subjective nature of gender performance.

Gender and Sexual Variance

While the body, as a performative agent, is not free from the cultural meanings of gender, gender performances are still subjective in how they function. Specifically, bodies may work within cultural constraints of gender, ultimately choosing to take on cultural constructions of what it means to be male and female. For example, the body can take on cultural constructions of maleness and femaleness at the same time, switching from one to the other, or simply deviating away from the extremities of what means to be male or female. This idea of working within cultural constructions of gender suggests that the body can perform gender and sexual variance.

Butler (1988) suggests that the fluidity of gender must be actively understood by the performer as a performance. She explains that gender is not a passive medium in which social scripts are put into a body, but rather, "Gender is what is put on . . . daily and incessantly. . . but if this continuous act is mistaken for a natural or linguistic given, power is relinquished to expand the cultural field bodily through subversive performances of various kinds" (p. 531). For the body to be performatively subversive, the performer must actively recognize the body as a performative agent. This can be seen through the ways in which the Ballroom community deviates away from preconceived notions of sex.

Ballroom culture also portrays the variant nature of gender and expands notions of what we conventionally define as a performance of maleness or femaleness. Bailey (2013) argues that ballroom members "create a wider range of gender and sexual subjectivities than is recognized and legitimized in the heteronormative world" (p. 30). Bailey goes on to explain that these

specific categories extend beyond the male and female binary as well as the gay/bisexual/straight divisions (p. 30). Bailey also argues that the Ballroom members do not view atomic sex to be an indicator of how each member performs their lifelong gender identity. Essentially, categories of sex are unfinished and the Ballroom community demonstrates this by understanding that the "sex of the body is the result of an ongoing process or activity as opposed to being a biological fact" (p. 34). Understanding multiple genders regarding sex also raises discussion surrounding the importance of deconstructing multiple genders and the performance of gender.

Stryker and Whittle (2006) explain that the number of sexual varieties is unending, performances of gender also demonstrate gender variance. Nicholson (2014) examined how selfies in digital spaces (Tumblr) are used by femme-identifying individuals to resist gender norms. These selfies were used as a performative platform in which femme individuals could control and perform specific attributes associated with their identity. This performance choice was not static, but rather could shift based on the individual's choice, feelings and actions. "Gender identities are mapped onto bodies, constructed by bodies in action, in process" (Nicholson, 2013, p.79). This idea concludes that the making of a specific gender identity is a process marked by individual control. This process is an aspect of individual control and a political act of resisting societal expectations of gender. Hence, acts of gender performance can be employed to resist societal expectations of gender. After examining gender as performance and identity, it is crucial to deconstruct research related to femininity.

Performances of Femininity

In understanding how gender and sexual variance can be present within cultural and social constructions of sex and gender, the lived experiences of bodies also play a role in how bodies perform their gender. Specifically, in relation to the performance of femininity, studies

have deconstructed womanhood as a biological indicator of femaleness. Anders asserts the following:

> Clearly, theories about orientations rooted in sex binaries are problematic in that they fail to address known ''gaps'' (i.e., real people's lived experiences) The ways in which women and men are operationally defined are muddy . . . and fail to acknowledge that what even counts as sex is contingent. (Anders, 2015, p. 1181)

Hence, scholars have attempted to move beyond sex as an indicator of gender and gender differences. Specifically, womanhood is more of a social and cultural experience.

Garber (1992) explains, "Genders, therefore, are not attached to a biological substratum. Gender boundaries are breachable, and individual and socially organized shifts from one gender to another call attention to 'cultural, social, or aesthetic dissonances" (as cited in Lorber, 1994, p. 57). Although womanhood and constructions of gender have been deconstructed as a social and cultural experience that are contingent and subject to change, Lorber explains, "For human beings there is no essential femaleness or maleness, femininity or masculinity, womanhood or manhood, but once gender is ascribed, the social order constructs and holds individuals to strongly gendered norms and expectations" (p. 58). Definitions of womanhood and femininity are therefore dictated by societal norms, values, and hierarchies.

Scholars who have explored what it means to perform femininity have delved into discussions surrounding how femininity is performed under male hegemony. Schippers (2007) argues that hegemonic femininity is prevalent only insofar ast traits specifically associated with performing femininity perpetuates a gender order that ultimately values masculinity and perpetuates patriarchy. Connell (1987) writes, "Femininity organized as an adaptation to men's power, and emphasizing compliance, nurturance, and empathy as womanly virtues, is not in

much of a state to establish hegemony over other kinds of femininity" (as cited in Schippers, p. 94). Scholarship seems to essentially argue that femininity is often constructed through hegemony and power constructs in society. Scholars have also gone into depth about the specific types of femininity are valued based on racial qualities.

In her critique of the film, *Paris is Burning*, hooks (1992) suggests that performances of femininity by black men drag queens evoke the idea that whiteness is the "proper" way to perform femininity. She explains that the people of color and black drag queens "negate that there is beauty to be found in any form of blackness that is not an imitation of whiteness" (p. 149). Thus, scholarship specific to femininity is limited to how femininity can be hegemonic in contexts associated with whiteness and masculinity.

Although there is a lack of research regarding how femininity is defined, scholars have begun to explore how definitions of femininity, based on hegemonic ideas of gender, erase performative experiences of those who may not pass as woman in today's culture. Halberstam (1998) explores the experiences of gender presentation in male and female bathrooms. Halberstam goes on to draw from am experience of the character, and also a "butch" woman named Jess Goldberg from *Stone Butch Blues*. Halberstam details Jess's experiences when she attempted to use the bathroom in a public space. There were two women present in the bathroom. They ultimately rejected Jess in that space, not only by joking about calling security, but also questioning Jess's womanhood. Halberstam explains, "Her body imposes a limit on her attempts to function normally despite her variant gender presentation. Their casualness about calling security indicates that they know Jess is a woman but want to punish her for her inappropriate self-presentation" (pp. 22-23). This story suggests that although femininity is seen to be product of whiteness and hegemonic ideas of masculinity, researchers have also begun to explore how

womanhood and femininity are questioned based on gender presentation and performance. After

deconstructing research surrounding femininity, one must also look to scholarship that focuses

on drag queen performance.

Drag Queen Performance

Previous research has delved into the ways in which queer individuals attain agency and

control over their bodies through drag performance. Drag performance refers to individuals who

perform overexaggerated representations of gender for an audience. Horowitz (2013) engaged in

nine months of participant-observation at a gay bar patronized primarily by gay men who

identified as drag queens. She argued that the performance of gender, specifically in drag culture,

reveals a parallel conflict that divides and pits "real" performances of identity against "artificial"

performances of identity. Hobson (2013) argues, "Drag performance is just one site where we

see the dynamics of race, class, gender, and sexuality play out in both oppressive and resistant

ways" (p. 48). Butler (2011) also argues that drag performance can be used to subvert socially

constructed performances of gender (p. 125). While drag performance can subvert socially

constructed performances of gender, LeMaster (2015) argues that television shows about drag

queen competitions, such as *Drag U*, appear to be about drag queens who perform normative

characteristics of womanhood to please the audience, ultimately adhering to the gender binary.

Essentially, drag queen performance reveals a tension between drag as an act of subverting

heterosexual traditions of gender, and drag as a performance that reinforces the gender binary.

Seeing drag as an act of subversion assumes that drag overthrows standards of gender and

sexuality imposed onto performative bodies. However, seeing drag as a performance that

reinforces the gender binary assumes that aspects of drag performance may mirror normative

assumptions associated with gender. Seeing drag as a performance that reinforces the gender

binary suggests that drag reinforces the notion that being male and female are defined and based on strict classifications of sex and gender. To fully understand how these tensions have manifested and changed over time, it is essential to delve into the history of drag performance.

History of Drag Performance

In the 1500s, theatrical performances were known as Elizabethan playhouses. In these spaces, only men were allowed to perform on stage. The men who played roles, specifically women roles, were referred to as boys. This term was often used as a put down, referring to them as servants. Baker (1994) suggests that there was a deeper distaste of theatre that was based on hierarchical structures and prejudices of that time. He explains that although actors were given permission to wear "well-defined" clothing in theatrical circumstances, "boys or young men dressing as, and impersonating women flouted the biblical injunction expressed in deuteronomy: that woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on women's garments" (p. 34). This practice in the theatre was often only granted to young boys because women were typically not welcome to the stage. By the 18th century, however, women were taking up most of the women's roles. With women taking up the roles that were previously reserved for men, Baker suggests that the drag queen "had already lost her sacred function, now she had resigned her dramatic authority" (p. 105). Theatre had no need for men who needed to dress up and perform as women through "serious impersonation," men were only seen to perform in drag as a comedic diversion (p. 109).

In the late 19th century, organized male drag performances in America became documented. Chauncey (1994) explained that "gay men created cultural institutions that fostered a sense of collective identity" (p. 291). These institutions were known as drag balls. Drag balls consisted of gay men who dressed in women's clothes and danced together (p. 291). Drag balls

were based off Masquerade balls and were common in the 1880s and 1890s, specifically in New York City. Masquerade balls asked patrons to attend in disguise, "with a mask covering at least the upper third of the face" (p. 291). Masquerades were known for transgressive gender behaviors, with individuals of society deviating away from normative gender norms. During masquerade balls, participants would often take on aspects of femininity and masculinity that they did not perform outside of the balls. Although this is true, gay men were harassed at Masquerades because "their cross-dressing seemed less a masquerade than an expression of their genuine perversion of the workings of society and nature" (p. 293). Thus, Chauncey explains that gay began organizing their own drag events by the 1890s (p. 293).

Balls consisted mostly of individuals who deviated from gender norms as well as Latinx and African Americans. Balls were also centered in New York City. According to Monforte (2010), "Ball culture can be traced as far back as 1869 with the female impersonation extravaganzas held at the Hamilton Lodge Ball in Harlem, New York" (p. 28). Balls were suggested to be a space in which a variety of different genders, races, classes and sexual identities came together to express identities without fear of political and social persecution. Although this is true, Monforte explains, "Religious leaders like Adam Clayton Powell attempted to shut it down for its 'immorality,' while the local press openly lauded the 'gorgeous costumes' worn by the participants on their front pages" (p. 28). In the 1990s, the documentary, *Paris is Burning,* depicted how ball performers were placed into houses. Examples of these houses include, "Xtravaganza, Ninja, LaBeija, the Garavani and so on, and are organized as 'drag families' headed by a house mother. The House and Ball community is a system of 'houses' that participate in competitive drag balls" (Monforte, 2010, p. 28). The inclusivity of this space and the family-like structure was developed because of the discrimination of the LGBT community

during the late 1800s. Monforte goes on to explain that those who participated in balls and house culture "were rejected by their families, communities, and schools because of their sexual and/or gender expressions" (p. 29).

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, balls were still primarily the only spaces in which drag was prevalent, with the notable exception of Newton & Mead (2000) who point out that during World War II, in the 1930s-1940s, drag was employed in touring shows for troops. These performances often consisted of comedic cross-dressing routines and impersonation of female dancers and singers. (as cited in Druschel, 2013, para 21). The political image of the drag queen, however, was beginning to be more prominent during the Stonewall riots in the 1960s. Baker (1994) notes that in the 1960s there was "a lessening of the constraints imposed upon homosexuality" (p. 199). He also explains that there was a "rise in militancy in the United States … in 1969, focused on riots at Stonewall Inn in New York City which protested the harassment by the NYPD of the gay men and drag queens who frequented the bar" (p. 199). Subsequently, drag rebounded with new gay clubs after the protests (p. 199).

Baker (2004) asserted that post-Stonewall drag's appeal was less about how the drag queens looked and more about what the drag queens said: "In drag a gay man had permission to talk and sing about other men-about loving them, hating them and shagging them" (p. 238). Essentially, "drag was of inverting the effeminate stigma attached to being gay and wearing it as a badge of pride" (pp. 238-239). While Baker argues that some acts fell into ridiculing women in "an attempt to explain or justify their interest in men," a new type of drag emerged in the 1970s. Baker explains that a form of "radical drag" (pp. 238-239) was spawned. The founders and performers of radical drag, the Rad Fems, implemented "a more playful, almost androgynous, attitude to both clothing and gender" (p. 240). Baker quotes a Rad Fem who asserted that, "We

don't want to discard the male role just to take on the female one" (p. 240). Essentially, Baker explains that Radical Drag brought forth two options in drag. The drag queen could decide "to look like a woman, or to take the best from both worlds" (p. 240).

Not only is the early history of drag important to delve into, it is also important to explore drag in the 21st century. Taylor and Rupp (2004) engaged in interviews with the 801 Girls, drag queens who perform at a gay tourist destination in Miami. Although these performers come from different racial, ethnic, regional, and national backgrounds, Taylor and Rupp were interested in understanding what it means to be a drag queen in the 21st century. While drag performance has transformed from a form of entertainment to a space where those who are systematically disadvantaged can join a family-like unit, drag also appears to be a space in which individuals can perform multiple aspects of their gender and sexual identity. Considering the large strides in LGBQT rights, especially after the Stonewall riots, drag queens in the 21st century may be more likely to take on aspects of their off-stage identity into their on stage performances and vice versa.

Although the interviews mentioned above concluded that all of girls had different stories regarding how drag has shaped their identity, Taylor and Rupp (2004) explain that "the 801 Girls point to two kinds of personal identities linked to the performance of drag as a collective identity and strategy for undermining normative gender arrangements. For some, being a drag queen is about expressing a transgender identity" (p. 121). Specifically, they describe an interviewee who expressed her experiences being a transgender woman drag queen. The interview suggested that although her identity as a drag queen differs from being transgender, she expresses how drag has helped her in the process of discovering her identity. Drag helped the participant's process of discovering her own identity by being able to openly perform aspects of femininity on stage.

Another participant goes into detail about her femininity and says, "What I've always wanted was to be a woman." (pp. 121-122). Making the link to sexual identity, she adds, "I don't know if it is because I wanted to be a woman or because I was attracted to men that I preferred to be a woman . . . . Out of drag, I feel like I'm acting. In drag, I feel like myself" (pp. 121-122). Although many express that drag is used to attain a theatrical identity, Taylor and Rupp's participants conclude that their same-sex desire, which they experienced as young boys became a part of their drag queen identity. "Through their self-presentations and performances, they enact a collective identity that calls attention to the artificiality of gender and sexual binaries. In that sense, they are indeed gender revolutionaries" (p. 130). This ultimately suggests that drag can be a medium of subversion of hegemonic definitions of gender. They do this by showing that while they are performing on stage they are aware of the artificiality of their own presentations of gender, but they also deviate from the rigid lines that are often made in terms of gender presentation and sexuality. The participants supervision of traditional gender binaries through drag brings forth discussion surrounding drag as a medium of subversion.

Drag as a Medium of Subversion

Butler has argued that drag functions as a subversive practice that deviates away from gender as simply within the binaries of sex, desire and sexual orientation. Butler (2011) asserts that gender performativity is the repetition of social norms that "work, animate, and constrain the gendered subject, and which are also resources from which resistance, subversion, displacement are to be forged" (p. 23). Although Butler argues that everyday performances of gender are culturally and socially constructed, she also argues that drag performance is used to subvert socially constructed performances of gender. Butler explains, "Drag is subversive to the extent that it reflects on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and

disputes heterosexuality's claim on naturalness and originality" (p. 125). Butler essentially explains that performers are able to identify the specific tropes and cultural norms attached to a specific gender. In understanding these specific tropes, drag performers disrupt the notion that heterosexuality is natural by deviating from notions of heterosexuality.

Taylor and Rupp (2005), who identified as lesbians, introduced their sexual orientation to the drag queens they were interviewing. The drag queens would often invite them onto the stage and introduce them as "pussy lickers." In doing this, Taylor and Rupp determined that the drag queens ask others to wear their sexual orientation, or labels, as proudly as the drag queens bear the stigma of gay male femininity. The queens used vulgar expressions for sexual acts to categorize people in the same way others have categorized individuals into strict gender binaries. The drag queens in Taylor and Rupp's study do this by demanding the audience to be "open about sexuality because drag queens bear the stigma of gay male femininity" (p. 2133). Taylor and Rupp also pointed to gay male femininity as the act of taking on socially prescribed feminine attributes, while still identifying as male. Ultimately, drag performers challenge social scripts of gender and sexuality by forcing the audience to question and truly experience their own sexuality in the same way those who perform gay male femininity must.

In Halberstam's discussion on performative choices among butch/femme drag kings, Halberstam (1998) explains that drag kings employ subversive performative techniques by performing parodies of what it means to be masculine. This parody of masculinity is seen to resist hegemonic masculinity. Similarly, Hobson (2013) presents research behind the motivations of cisgender women who perform as drag queens, noting: "Feminine drag consists of a cisgender female woman adopting the stereotypical traits of femininity in order to critique and denaturalize the performance of femininity as tied to any specific body" (p. 39). Similarly, in their

intersectional performance ethnography of Latina drag queens, Moreman & McIntosh (2010) found the drag queens' performances conveyed messages associated with the complexity of identity. Specifically, Latina drag queens not only challenged norms associated with gender, they also challenged norms related to race. They also argued that the drag queens' performances "provide embodied representations of the intersectional complexities of social locations; thus offering insight into how these negotiations intricately work through the body and showing how these performances politically de-center hegemonic identity norms" (p. 130). Not only did the Latina drag queens subvert and transgress from standard definitions of womanhood, they also created a platform in which they could challenge hegemonic racial categories.

Specifically, Moreman & McIntosh (2010) recount an observation in their research when a Latina drag queen challenged hegemonic racial and gender identities. They describe the following performance:

> Straddling a chair, she stares into the audience's eyes. The song's words float over
> the crowd, ''From my body I could show you a place God knows . . . ' Ripping apart
> her shirt at the buttons, she flings it to the floor and boldly exposes her svelte figure.
> From her fragile facial structure to her thin composition, like the diva she
> performs, there is not a part of her body that does not appear feminine*except the
> outline of Alicia's penis in her panties. The song ends on the question, ''Do you
> really want to go?" (p. 126)

Moreman & McIntosh deconstruct this performance, asserting that in order for Latina drag queens to alter their masculine physiques, they must understand their own masculine Latino bodies. Hence, dress and movement choices are used to mask their male bodies and embody a sense of Latina femininity. These drag queens, in understanding and performing the normative

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scripts associated with brown femininity, in their brown male bodies, present the overlapping

nature and function of gender. Essentially, these drag queens understand normative scripts that

are often associated with being a Latina woman. In understanding these normative scripts of

gender and race, they end up taking on these scripts in a body that is not commonly known to be

female. This act challenges these scripts by suggesting that it is possible to perform Latina

femininity in a male body. This idea asserts that the performance of gender is not strictly

determined by genitalia. Drag can clearly be a medium of subversion. Drag also can be a

medium which perpetuates aspects of the gender binary.

Drag Performance and the Gender Binary

While drag can be employed as a medium of subversion, scholars have also argued that

drag performance may perpetuate the gender binary. Drag performances are often influenced by

the audience. This can be seen through off stage gender performances as well. Therefore, gender

performance is not only employed from perspectives of the self, but also employed from

perspectives of the audience. Simmons (2008) deconstructs their own experience with an

individual who assumed that they were gay based on their performance of gender. They then go

on to deconstruct their response through the following quotation:

> ''If you want, I'll make out with you right now.'' I am disgusted, as I have been
>
> countless times before, by my self-effacing move . . .Yet she responds promptly to my
>
> offer; she leans in as if to own my body in a single challenging gesture . . . As our lips
>
> touch, I am overwhelmed by memories of moments that stand as ''proof'' of my
>
> heterosexual desire. As our lips part, I realize that I have become a prostitute to the
>
> discursive practices of masculinity. A failure to language this ambiguity has consumed
>
> me once again. (p. 332)

Simmon's experience helps conclude that gender and sexuality can be policed and controlled by others. Spectators of a gender performance may influence how the gender binary is imposed onto the performer. Specifically, bodies that do not pass or perform as an identity that is expected of them may experience a tension associated with their own perceived performances of gender and others' expectations of their gender performance. Therefore, queer performances of gender may be forced to adhere to other's expectations of gender. Simmons goes on to demonstrate this idea:

> If desire is to be assessed as fluid, there must be allowance for all differently gendered bodies, to have access to this fluidity; therefore, construction of the fluidity of not only gender and sexuality, but the presentation of gender and sexuality warrants further analysis. (p. 334)

This performance of gender can be correlated to drag because there are instances in which drag performers attempt to be as "female" and "male" as possible through their performative choices. If there is a way to be as "female" and "male" as possible, there would be a concrete way to be "male" and "female."

LeMaster (2015) examined a drag performance television show entitled, *Drag U*. Specifically, they examined episodes in which drag queens performed femininity. LeMaster found that RuPaul, the host of *Drag U*, demanded that drag queens do anything possible to achieve what viewers of the show would deem as proper depiction of womanhood and femininity, which is ultimately dictated by how well the drag queens perform as biological women. LeMaster explains that the significance of referring to the contestants of *Drag U* as "biological" assumes that the contestants are not biologically female. "*Drag U* suggests that the contestants no longer want to perform gender inadequately and instead hope to assimilate into the binary gender structure that does not allow for sex and gender variation" (p. 175). In

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recognizing that the gay male drag queens do not identify as female, they must adhere to the gender binary to bring forth the illusion of being a biological woman for the sake of the audience.

LeMaster (2015) further explains that "drag must also be examined in broader terms and not just 'gay men dressed in women's clothes'" (p. 181). They conclude that *Drag U*, and other similar programming, silences individuals who embrace femininity and gender fluidity. In the case of *Drag U,* the drag queens perform normative characteristics of womanhood to please the audience. Therefore, if an audience also responds favorably to hegemonic performative acts, those who are performing a non-normative gender may feel constricted by socially constructed scripts of gender.

Hobson (2013) identifies as a white, queer, cisgender, femme and conducted an autoethnography of drag kings at a bar called El Cubano using an intersectional lens. During the performance, the drag kings and drag queens played the role of teacher and student in a sexualized roleplay. Hobson found that although the drag queens and drag kings were performing in a queer space, the performers who performed femininity were sexual objects and subjugated to male sexual aggression. The drag king, who was being observed, was characterized as youthful, but also very sexually manipulative. His whiteness also allowed him to treat the drag queens in sexualized ways on stage. For example, the roleplay included performance choices in which the drag king performer has an erection due to the drag queen who was performing as a teacher. Hobson explains, "She appears surprised by this outward expression of desire toward her, which borderlines upon harassment" (p. 46). Hobson goes on to deconstruct the king's performance of masculinity and how it embodies white masculinity. Hobson argues that the king is seen to be a young boy who is unable to control his sexual desires for his teacher. Hobson

explains, "The cisgender male body is not present to signify a totality of male privilege, but masculine privilege, as well as white privilege, is present in this performance" (p. 46). Although Hobson presents research that suggests that these performative techniques could be historically employed through irony, she explains that "Drag performances . . . are formed in the social and cultural systems of power in which they are made . . . Instead, white drag king performances walk a tense line between resistance and reification of norms" (p. 49). Hobson concludes that although performers are making their own choices in representing queerness and identity, they also are making choices that may reinforce and mirror hegemonic and normative ideals surrounding race, gender and sexuality. After examining drag performance, it is also significant to delve into research associated with gender as performance and identity.

Trans Identity Performance

Trans identity performance is crucial to deconstruct because trans identity performance challenges social and cultural scripts of gender and sex. Society has established strict gender categories. However, these gender categories, in being so rigidly enforced, diminish the authenticity of individuals who exist outside of these categories. Although transgender has been known to refer to an individual who does not identity with the sex they were assigned at birth, Enke (2012) suggests that transgender is not associated with named categories. Rather, transgender "names a politics stemming from a tri-fold awareness" (p. 4). First, gender binary norms are maintained through the violence of those who do not adhere to these norms. Second, Enke argues that the term transgender stems from the rejection of gender expectations that dictate what kind of gender to perform and what kind of body to attain. Finally, Enke sees transgender performance as gender variation as an asset to the creativity and diverse society.

In terms of biological essentialism, Wight (2011) responds to biological assumptions surrounding gender performance. When an individual's performance of gender does not align with cultural assumptions of their sex "there is a direct challenge to gender norms through their performance" (Wight, 2011, p. 74). Koyama (2001) deconstructs how feminist research has attempted to emphasize these cultural assumptions of sex and gender. Koyama explains that although second wave feminists brought forth the idea that gender is distinct from one's physiological sex, "it largely left unquestioned the belief that there was such a thing as true physical sex . . . leaving the naturalness of essential female and male sexes until recently" (p. 4). Stryker & Bettcher also go on to critique a letter that was written by Hanisch entitled, "Forbidden Discourse: The Silencing of Feminist Criticism of 'Gender.'" This letter was created by Hanisch, who expressed that she was justified in excluding trans women from participating in women-only feminist conferences. Hanisch (2013) explains "the very concept of gender . . . is an ideological smokescreen that masks the persistence of male supremacy and oppression of women by men" (as cited in Stryker & Bettcher, p. 6). Hanisch also goes on to argue that that the existence of trans bodies calls for unnatural interventions into feminist's fight against oppression associated with reproductive biology.

Due to discussions surrounding biological essentialism and nuances between sex and gender, a mainstream narrative about transgender bodies is that when transgender individuals seek out sexual reassignment surgery or attempt to alter the body to fit a desired gender performance, they reassert normative gender constructions surrounding the binary. Dean Spade (2006) points to Billings and Urban (1982) who argue that sexual reassignment surgery is opposed to gender equality because transgender individuals who seek out medical services have internalized notions of gender dichotomies and heterosexuality, specifically associated with

upholding narratives surrounding biology and behavior. While Spade argues that it does, to some extent, uphold traditional notions of gender dichotomies, transgender bodies have had to appeal to textbook definition of "transsexualism" to receive medical services. Spade argues that these textbook definitions and testimonies of "gender identity disorder" are limiting and based on gender dichotomies as well as it does not account for variance in gender behavior and performance. Spade elaborates on this idea and proposes an alternative mindset:

> What if the success of transition was not measured by (non-trans) normative perceptions of true femininity and masculinity in trans people? I imagine that, like me, some people have a multitude of goals when they seek gender-related body alteration, such as access to different sexual practices, ability to look different in clothing, enhancement of a self-understanding about one's gender that is not entirely reliant on public recognition, public disruption of female and male codes, or any number of other things. (p. 324)

In discussions surrounding body alteration, it is also important to account for the systematic governance that dictates body alterations. Ultimately, Spade seems to be disrupting critiques of the "born in the wrong body" narrative through accounting for systematic rhetoric that perpetuates gender normativity as well as the narrative's lack of understanding for the desires, wants, and experiences of transgender bodies.

Sandy Stone (2004) also outlines ways in which the medical field has dictated requirements for surgery. Stone details that these requirements were specifically associated with how well the individuals who were seeking surgery could perform a specific gender. Specifically, these requirements were associated with how closely male to females, or MTF's behaviors fit with stereotypical male accounts of what constitutes a woman. Ultimately, candidates ended up mirroring these narratives in order to obtain the procedures. Stone argues

that a different narrative must be produced because "The people who have no voice in this theorizing are the transsexuals themselves" (p. 229). The narrative that Stone calls for is one that does not assume that transgender individuals divide women, but rather, viewing the transgender experience as one that exists on an undiscovered gender spectrum. Stone explains, "I suggest constituting transsexuals not as a class or problematic 'third gender,' but rather as a genre—a set of embodied texts whose potential for productive disruption of structured sexualities and spectra of desire has yet to be explored" (p. 231). Thus, it is important to recognize the individual experiences and variance among transgender individuals rather than simply viewing them as active participants in reproducing normative gender dichotomies and structures. After detailing emerging narratives that may prove to be more inclusive of transgender bodies and experience, it is important to recognize the consequences of reproducing a narrative that assume transgender bodies are a detriment to progressive understandings of gender and sexuality.

While it is clear that there is an immense amount of discourse and rhetoric that upholds biological assumptions surrounding gender, these assumptions may ultimately be a representation of the existence and manifestation of anti-transgender scholarship and policies. Stryker & Bettcher (2016) explain, "Simply put, we understand there to be a relationship between anti-transgender scholarship and the concrete manifestation of anti-transgender politics" (p. 6). Specifically, Burkett (2015) critiqued the ways in which popular culture defines womanhood, arguing that the language transgender women use to define womanhood is inherently oppressive. Burkett argues:

> People who haven't lived their whole lives as women, whether Mrs. Jenner or Mrs.
> Summers, shouldn't get to define us. That's something men have been doing for much
> too long. And as much as I recognize and endorse the right of men to throw off the

mantle of maleness, they cannot stake their claim to dignity as transgender people by

trampling mine as woman. (para. 3).

 Burkett goes on to critique the language used by trans people to define themselves. She explains,

"I was born in the wrong body rhetoric favored by other trans people doesn't work any better and

is just offensive. It is reducing us to our collective breasts and vaginas." (para. 3). However,

Koyama (2001) deconstructs Burkett's rhetoric by arguing the following:

> If one's gender were an insignificant factor in society, the need for trans people to modify
>
> their bodies to fit into a dichotomy of genders may very well decrease . . . However, such
>
> reasoning should not be used to hold back trans people from making decisions regarding
>
> their bodies. Trans women are extremely vulnerable to violence, abuse and
>
> discrimination as they are, and should not be made to feel guilty for doing whatever it
>
> takes for them to feel safe and comfortable. (p. 6)

In critiquing trans people for their "born in the wrong body" rhetoric, it is important to recognize

that trans people still live in a culture that perpetuates biological constructions of gender.

Koyama (2003) challenges all female-identifying individuals to examine their

internalization of the heterosexist and patriarchal expectations of gender, as well as the

implications of these expectations. Koyama argues that it is not the feminist's responsibility to

rid herself of every resemblance to the patriarchal definition of femininity. While gender

dichotomies impact how femininity is performed, transfeminism argues that women should have

the right to make decisions about how they perform their femininity, even if these performances

adhere to normalized and patriarchal performances of femininity. Although this is true, critiques

like Burkett's suggest that "the born in the wrong body" rhetoric seems to assume that

transgender bodies are not real men or women. Transfeminism also calls for not dictating to others what to do with their bodies:

> Transfeminism holds that nobody shall be coerced into or out of personal decisions regarding her or his gender identity or expression to be a 'real' woman or a 'real' man. We also believe that nobody should be coerced into or out of these personal decisions to qualify as a "real' feminist." (Koyama, 2001, p. 2)

While some trans women may desire to attain aspects of what society would consider being a biological woman, principles of transfeminism also hold that individuals have the right to define their own gender through having the right to control what they do with their bodies. While the tension persists between cisgender women not wanting to be defined through biology versus trans women wanting to take on these embodied characteristics of womanhood, it's important to understand the differences in lived experiences between transgender women and cisgender women and thus, how this tension then becomes less about who is correct, and more about how each identity must manage cultural and biological assumptions of gender.

Stryker & Bettcher (2016) discuss whether it is sufficient to talk about sexual "difference" in the singular, between men and women, or whether instead feminism should call for an account of multiple "differences" of embodied personhood along many different but interrelated axes. This idea has led to debates surrounding the concept of women's spaces, such as women's bathrooms and all women's colleges. These spaces have led to arguments associated with trans women's supposed male privilege in society, and whether the presence of male privilege interferes with trans women's access to those spaces. Koyama (2003) argues that one cannot deny that a trans woman had or has male privilege depending on when, and how early they have transitioned. However, Koyama argues that "she experiences vast emotional, social,

financial disadvantages for being trans" (p. 4). Thus, she argues that we should be inclusive of trans women even if trans women have or do experience male privilege. Essentially, being a trans woman accompanies different disadvantages that cisgender women may not experience because of their cisgender privilege.

Weber (2016) argues that to deny transgender women's access to women's colleges is to perpetuate the message that trans women are not real women, "that women are defined primarily or exclusively by their genitals versus their social experiences—an especially insulting and contradictory line of reasoning in an educational environment committed to fostering strong female leadership in a larger sexist world" (Weber, 2016, p. 40). Koyama (2003) also argues that women's spaces, such as bathroom exclusion, goes back to the exclusion of black women in feminist movements during the 1970's:

> They assumed that their experience of sexism is universal to all women regardless of ethnicity, class, etc. Recent critiques of 1970's radical feminism point out how their convenient negligence of racism and classism in effect privileged themselves as white middle-class women. (p. 4)

While Koyama draws this comparison, it is important to also recognize that the violence and discrimination that trans women of color face is disproportionally higher than that of cisgender women who pass as what society would see as performatively feminine.

The trans community is still seen to be among the most discriminated groups in the United States. Bilbrey (2015) asserts that transgender people, undocumented people, people of color, and queer individuals face the most severe violence. Bilbrey shows that 72% of all hate violence homicide victims were transgender women and 67% were transgender women of color (p. 24). Rather than focusing on if transgender women are reducing cisgender women to their

"breasts and vaginas," as Burkett points out, Bilbrey argues that believing that trans people have similar struggles as cisgender people is harmful to the trans community because "the everyday struggles trans men and women face have been proven to be more violent, discriminatory, and frequent than those of their cisgender counterparts" (p. 32).

Bilbrey (2015) points out that media representations have played a large role in perpetuating the idea that transgender individuals predominately justify their identities through the "born in the wrong body" narrative. Rather, this narrative is an outcome of mass media favoring trans narratives of sexual reassignment surgery. Koyama (2003) argues that this rhetoric is a cliché promoted by mass media that perpetuate the notion that trans women are trapped in a man's body. As Koyama explains, "the attractiveness of such a strategy is clear, as the general population is more likely to become supportive of us if we convince them that we were born with a biological error over which we have no control over" (p. 5). Thus, concerns over this narrative from feminists and cisgender women seems to be a contradictory line of thinking, considering that this narrative is a product of forced narratives of trans individuals. The exclusion of trans women in women's spaces becomes less about whether transgender women are reducing women to their breast and vaginas, and more about defining trans women's identity based on how much they can pass as a biological woman. Although many scholars have argued that gender is socially constructed and femininity is constructed through masculinity, little research delves into the multilayered experiences of trans women and how their femininity is perceived and authenticated.

The wide scope of literature associated with this topic reveals the significance of this project. Throughout the research project, the review of literature guides the methodology and analysis of this project. The literature review specifically helped guide the methodology because

it provided comparisons of other research that has been conducted on this project and thus, guided me on how to provide unique and important findings surrounding this topic. After examining the existing literature surrounding gender as performance, drag queen performance, and trans identity performance, I conclude that there is a gap in the literature surrounding what it currently means to perform femininity in drag performance and in everyday performances of gender. There is also a gap in literature regarding how bodies construct unique understandings of the self in a world that perpetuates social and cultural understandings of gender. The next chapters presented in this project will attempt to fill these gaps.

In the next chapter, I will explain the methodological procedures used throughout this project. Specifically, I delve into the approach used throughout the methods, my positionality as a researcher, the details of the participants and recruitment process, procedures and data analysis, and how I utilize thematic analysis.

Chapter Three

Methodology

In this project, I examined gender and identity performances of transgender women and gay men who perform as drag queens. Specifically, I explored whether gay men drag queen's reasoning behind performing as a drag queen differs from transgender women drag queen's. This project also explored the ways in which transgender women drag queens disrupts what it means to perform femininity in drag. Furthermore, due to biological assumptions regarding what it means to perform femininity in drag, transgender women drag queens may disrupt biological definitions of womanhood and femininity.

The current study explored the following research questions. RQ1: What are the reasons why transgender women and gay men perform as drag queens? RQ2: How do transgender women drag queens disrupt what it means to perform femininity in drag? I used qualitative methods to deconstruct the performative reasoning behind female impersonation for cisgender gay men and transgender women and how their identity and femininity are shaped through drag. This chapter will delve into the rationale for utilizing qualitative methods, the position of the researcher, participants and recruitment, procedures and data analysis and finally, thematic analysis.

Qualitative Research and Critical Approach

I employed qualitative methods in this project because qualitative methods provides access to a shared understanding of the lived experiences of others. I also employed a premise associated with the critical approach because transgender bodies and those who break gender norms are systematically, socially, and politically marginalized. Thus, by understanding the lived experiences of those who are marginalized, those who may not understand these experiences

may come to appreciate the importance of advocating for LGBQT justice. Qualitative methods are "an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (Creswell, 2014, p. 4). In this project, I attempted to gain an understanding of the reasoning behind why transgender women and cisgender gay men perform as drag queens and how the participants make sense of their performances of gender.

Although I intended to employ qualitative methods, I also thought about the approach, or the philosophical worldview I utilized through qualitative methods. Creswell (2014) explains that philosophical worldviews are assumptions that researchers put forth in their scholarship. Creswell goes on to explain that a philosophical worldview is employed in research by developing "the research design that is related to this worldview, and the specific methods or procedures that translate the approach into practice" (p. 5). A specific theoretical approach that informed my research design is the critical approach. Lindlof and Taylor (2011) identify various critical premises of the critical approach. The premise I used to guide my research design was that "reason should be recovered as an empowering resource" (p. 53). They also go on to explain that "reasonable critical research serves groups by fostering their recognition of politics that shape their situations and by reshaping (as needed) the specific forms of identity, relationship, and community promoted by those politics" (p. 53). Hence, I planned my methodological procedures and research design by placing the value of the participants' reasoning behind why they perform as drag queens. Gaining a better understanding of this reasoning will help others understand the participants' situations, which may reshape preconceived constructions of gender and identity, ultimately serving as a resource that may empower others to understand how preconceived constructions of gender and identity may impact their lives.

While I employed qualitative methods, I was also interested in understanding how drag performances influence existing gender dichotomies. A greater understanding of drag performance can change and challenge assumptions surrounding drag performance and gender. Thus, In this project, I employed qualitative methods and this premise of the critical approach to not only understand the lived experiences of transgender women and cisgender gay men drag queens, but also to understand how their sense of reasoning challenges assumptions surrounding drag performance and gender. Not only was it important to approach this project through a specific worldview, it was also important to understand my positionality.

Positionality of the Researcher

In order for me to fully delve into this research, it is important for to elaborate on how I exercised my self-reflexivity as a researcher. In order to do this, I identified my positionality, what kind of critical self-reflexivity was called for in order for me to implement aspects of the critical approach, and how I built relationships and rapport with my participants. To begin, Naples (2003) explains that "feminist scholars argue for a self-reflexive approach to theorizing in order to foreground how relations of power may be shaping the production of knowledge in different contexts" (as cited in Hesse-Biber, p. 36). As someone who "passes," or is easily regarded to be a cisgender woman and performs traditional social roles of gender normativity, as well as what society views as female, I often see others through the lens of my own identity.

My identity may have proved as a barrier to an authentic understanding of the reasoning behind why trans women and cisgender gay men perform as drag queens. Since I do not identify as a gay man or a trans woman drag queen but rather as a pansexual, white, cisgender woman, I am aware that I may have interpreted the responses through the lens of my own experiences and focused more closely on specific aspects of the data. As a result, Hesse-Biber (2013) explain that

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the researcher is also a product of their own social structures and institutions (p. 145). I believe that it is important to emphasize that although my identity may have played a role in the analysis of the data, my analysis and the data will not completely mirror the experiences of all cisgender gay men and transgender women drag queens. I exercised caution when approaching my participants of color. I am a white woman and I recruited as many people of color as possible to incorporate diverse experiences. Throughout my data collection, I remained vigilant and cognizant of how relational dynamics between me and my participants may have shaped the responses and knowledge that I got out of the interviews. After examining how the varied intersections of identity may have proved to be a barrier throughout my research, and how I approached these power constructs, it's also important to delve into what kind of critical self-reflexivity I engaged in for in order for me to implement the critical approach as a philosophical worldview.

Lindlof and Taylor (2011) assert that one of the key features of a critical approach to research is to avoid becoming self-serving. They argue, "its developers must engage in continuous and rigorous reflection" (p. 54). Essentially, they argue that the researcher must be cognizant of the needs of individuals and groups. As someone who is white and cisgender, I was committed to gaining a deeper understanding of how drag queens, gay men and trans women have been, and are currently, marginalized and oppressed prior to the interview. I was also committed to discovering, through the interviews, how drag has challenged existing assumptions about drag performance and gender. In this project, I also took on the role of a feminist interviewer. To be a feminist interviewer, I was aware of my relationship with my respondents and was "careful to understand my personal and researcher standpoints and to understand what role(s) I play in the interview process in terms of my power and authority over the interview

situation" (Hesse-Biber, 2013, p. 135). Thus, in delving into how trans women, gay men and drag queens are marginalized in my review of literature, I was sensitive to the power dynamics that existed between myself and the participants as to "not further marginalize the participants as a result of inquiry" (p. 10).

I also established relationships and rapport with the participants. As a researcher who hopes to utilize feminist interviewing and a critical approach as a philosophical worldview, I believed it to be necessary to build relationships and rapport with the participants. Specifically, I viewed interviews as a cocreation of meaning. Specifically, I listened intently to what the respondents had to say and I was willing to drop any specific research agenda I had in order to follow the pace of the interview. Hesse-Biber (2013) asserts that "The interview and conversations with the researched will assume an agenda independent of that of the researcher, and researchers should be ready to work with these changes" (p. 147). I also engaged in mutual discourse. Hesse-Biber (2013) defines mutual discourse as instances in interviews where interviewers answer any questions that their participants have about them. I implemented mutual discourse in an attempt to create a space in which they could ask me questions and ultimately build rapport with the participants.

Participants and Recruitment

For this research project, I conducted interviews with 6 former and current drag queens. Participants who were recruited were individuals who perform drag currently or have in the past. Purposeful sampling of the respondents was utilized. Creswell (2014) defines purposeful sampling as selecting individuals who will most effectively help the researcher understand the problem or research question. Purposeful sampling was utilized because in order to understand the differences in reasoning behind why trans women and cisgender gay men perform as drag

queens, we must understand the experiences of both identities. Thus, half of the respondents were trans women who perform as drag queens and the other half were gay men who perform as drag queens. Before the interviews were conducted I asked participants to emphasize what pronouns they wish to go by. If they specified which pronouns they prefer, those were used to identify the participants. Those who did not have a preference, I used they/them pronouns to identify them. The location in which the participants resided in varied. Although this is true, all participants reside in the United States. Most participants live in the Midwest while one participant resides in the pacific coast. One participant also emphasized that their drag influence comes from being raised in the south even though they currently reside in the Midwest. The participant's experience doing drag varied as well. The experience that the participants had in performing drag ranged from one year to 17 years. Age range of the participants varied as well. The youngest participant was 22 years old and the oldest participant was 35 years old. While some participants emphasized that they perform drag because it is a hobby, some of the participants work full time as a drag queen and hold national drag titles in drag pageants and drag competitions.

I recruited participants through Facebook. I posted a recruitment letter that asked participants to e-mail me if they were interested in being interviewed. For this project, I specifically recruited gay men because I am interested in how being a gay man as opposed to a transgender woman may play a role in the findings. I was also interested in exploring existing power dynamics in drag. Specifically, these power dynamics relate to the biological restrictions, in some circumstances, expected of drag performers. When it comes to designating gay male and transgender women groups, choosing participants was based on how specific individuals identified themselves.

In order to implement a critical approach as a philosophical worldview in my recruitment, I was interested in understanding the vast array of values held by those in the drag community. Specifically, it was important that I, as the researcher, take into consideration the values of marginalized people whose voices have been dismissed. (Tarsilla, 2010, p. 104). While cisgender gay men drag queen's voice are often dismissed in society, there seems to be an exclusion of trans women in drag as well. Thus, understanding the differences in motivation for performing as drag queens ultimately brings forth a variety of values from individuals whose voices are dismissed. If someone identified as a transgender woman or a gay man, they were grouped as such throughout this project. A request for interview participation was be posted via the social networking site, Facebook.

Procedures/Data Analysis

I employed semi-structured interviews with a list of prepared questions (see appendix). Semi-structured interviews are interviews that have specific interviewing questions in mind, but the researcher is still allowed to deviate away from the pre-made questions. In a semi-structured interview, the researcher is not concerned with the order of the questions, but is cognizant that it is important to ask them in the interview. Essentially, the researcher has some control over the construction of the interview, but the researcher is open to asking new questions, on-the-fly, throughout the interview (Hesse-Biber, 2014). Each prepared question was also accompanied by a follow up question. However, in order for me to be inclusive in my adaptation of the critical approach to research, I tried to ensure that I was "interacting with member of those communities in a sustained and meaningful way" (Tarsilla, 2010, p. 112). Thus, I relinquished power to the respondents throughout the interviews. While a semi-structured interview was employed, I attempted to grant a degree of control to the respondents and allow for more fluidity throughout

the interview. I also made sure that I touched on the important ideas and concepts associated with the research questions.

The interviews were conducted via phone interviews and through google hangouts. Google hangouts included a webcam chat function. I asked the respondent's permission to record the interviews for both functions. The video interviews were recorded using a built-in recording device on my personal cellphone. The telephone interviews were recorded using a recording device on my personal cellphone as well. After the interviews were conducted, I transcribed the recording of the interview. The length of the transcripts varied from five pages to eight pages single spaces with times new roman font. The shortest interview was around 30 minutes, while the longest interview was an hour and a half.

Data analysis was then conducted through identifying data that related to the research questions. After the data that relates to the research questions were identified, themes were developed. As more interviews were conducted, themes shifted to mirror and match the analysis of the interviews that were already analyzed. Thus, I utilized thematic analysis to make sense of the data.

Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis refers to "a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organizes and describes your data set in (rich) detail" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). In using thematic analysis, the researcher is given more fluidity in the analysis process. Thematic analysis involves familiarizing oneself with the collected data, creating preliminary codes, finding common themes and reviewing and refining those themes, renaming the themes and then generating a final report (Braun & Clarke). Therefore, I transcribed the interviews. After the interviews were transcribed, I found specific quotations

from the transcripts that related to the research questions. Finally, I revisited those quotations and developed themes and patterns that emerged from those quotations. I analyzed each transcription using this process, themes changed based off different emerging patterns and similarities. Braun & Clarke (2006) explain that "A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set" (p. 82). They go on to assert that a theme is not "dependent on quantifiable measures, but rather on whether it captures something important in relation to the overall research question" (p. 82). Therefore, in chapter 4, I identified themes not only in relation to the research questions, but through patterns of thought produced by the participants.

I discovered patterns of though by detecting overlapping ideas and thoughts that were expressed from most of the participants. Ideas and thoughts were chosen by how closely they connected to the research questions as well as how often they came up throughout the interviews. These overlapping ideas and thoughts were developed into themes and further examined. The next chapter details and examines these themes and details the analysis of the interviews I conducted.

Chapter 4

Analysis

This chapter presents the analysis of the interview responses. To begin, I address themes that represented the responses that informed the research questions. I then created four overarching themes that emerged through my analysis of the transcripts. The themes that I discovered were first, that transgender women drag queens use drag performance to reaffirm and explore gender identity. The next theme is that gay men use drag to take on feminine identities through storytelling. The third theme I discovered was that drag performance aesthetics are used to establish intention and purposes for drag queens' performances of femininity. The fourth theme I discovered was that their drag persona is and is not a part of who they are off stage. Another theme I discovered was that when participants explain to others that they perform as drag queens, they receive questions about their gender identity. The final theme that I discovered was that the participants use drag to attain social and political visibility.

Transgender Women: Using Drag Performance to Unpack and Reaffirm Gender Identity

When I asked transgender women why they started doing drag, they emphasized the importance of unpacking their gender identity and then affirming their gender identity through drag. In terms of unpacking their gender identity, participants explained that they would use drag to address and raise questions surrounding conventional ideas and notions of gender. By addressing these ideas through drag, participants expressed that they are then able to understand their own identity. Specifically, the participants explained that they used drag to reaffirm their gender identity. Specifically, participants were able to access a space where they could express aspects of who they are without restriction, ultimately discovering varied performances of gender that mirror who they are and always have been. Eve, a queen who has been performing for about

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two years, identifies as a trans woman and gender queer. She performs live BDSM kink shows. While her drag is not what others would consider classical drag, she argues that she includes elements of drag in her performance. She specifically points out that her drag is used to unpack gender identity and norms and to raise questions associated with gender and identity. Eve explained that her motivation for performing as a drag queen started when she was attempting to address gender norms and stereotypes. Eve explains that while the label transgender woman most closely fits her experience, she also identifies as queer. She explains, "that is typically how I describe my identity because it is so fluid." She explained that when she began transitioning, she was attempting to explore where her identity fits in terms of gender stereotypes and norms. "I really began critically analyzing these stereotypes and norms and seeing what I liked and what I didn't like and how I wanted to express how I feel. To feel personally validated, affirmed, and good." During this journey, Eve pointed to the impact that the performance arts and LGBTQ community had on her understanding of gender: "The performers are very empowered to share their truths, very empowered to like, you know, ask questions about what we know as truth, uhm, in regard to gender." Being a part of a community who are interested in the same performance goals seemed to help Eve attain a sense of community and solidarity in using drag to unpack gender norms and how these tropes may or may not impact and influence her own identity. Eve also went on to explain that throughout the process of exploring performance spaces and venues, she started realizing that there were more spaces for her to unpack different aspects of gender:

> I found that there were some very interesting places I could explore through
> performativity for an audience because you're given a lot more freedom to like, wear a
> corset, or a tiara, or a fake mustache on a stage, or at a bar than you are at your 9-5 day
> job or even just walking down the street.

By having a space to play with different aspects of gender, Eve was able to unpack existing rhetoric surrounding gender. Through the process of unpacking gender expectations and norms that exist on a social and cultural level, Eve was able to understand the vast array of ways to perform gender. In doing this, Eve was able to discover ways to affirm her own gender identity.

 Kim is a full time showgirl and pageant queen. They have performed in 27 different states and has won several national titles. Drag performance is Kim's job and throughout the interview they opened up to me about how they keep up with marketing and being up to date in the performance and pageant world. Kim describes their successes in drag performance as a journey. They explained that their journey into professional drag performance helped them better understand their gender identity:

> The motivation and drive that I have over the years being able to perform and learning the history, you know, I'm learning who I am because that's how I ended up finding out who I was as a woman was through drag. That's when I discovered that I feel more comfortable as a woman.

Kim's journey and successes ultimately helped them affirm aspects of their identity because they were able to go through a process of learning how they felt most comfortable in terms of gender.

Although they were able to succeed in the drag world and affirm aspects of their gender identity, they suggested that it was a process of learning the history and getting immersed in drag performance. Specifically, Kim points to the fact that after they delved more into performance, they began dressing feminine more often. Kim stated, "I noticed myself dressing up more and going out to the club as a girl." Drag seemed to open up a space that encouraged them to perform femininity more off stage, ultimately helping them affirm their womanhood. They also explained that their motivation throughout the years to achieve great success in drag performance has

translated into their own successes as a person and as a woman. They explained, "It has given me so much motivation not just on stage but it has helped me so much in my personal life. Helping me become the strong independent woman that I am today." While Kim works as a professional showgirl full time, Annaleise is an individual who just started performing as a drag queen and primarily performs in a more relaxed environment on their college campus and has found a safe space to explore their gender identity.

Annaleise has recently began to unpack their own identity as a trans femme person through drag performance. Annaleise explained that they like the drag community because they won't be judged for unpacking their gender. Annaleise asserted, "I don't really know how to navigate this but here is a bunch of people who don't think I'm super weird." Annaleise also went on to explain that the drag community they are a part of is very supportive:

> It is a really supportive community around here. It's super nice and I have had some wonderful compliments and kinds of people saying standard stuff like oh my god I never would have guessed you look so different. You so good. It's wonderful and it's very affirming.

Annaleise stressed the importance of having a community and a space that is supportive of their gender performances. When I asked why they decided to do drag, they responded, "most obviously because of like gender identity things and like, dysphoria and it sort of felt like a safe way to like explore identity and try and like sort of solidify feelings." In order to do this, Annaleise explained that during their drag performances they are currently attempting to "get as far to the side of like feminine as possible." Annaleise explained that the reason they do drag is to both affirm and solidify their own perceived gender identity. Not only this, Annaleise also performs drag to explore their gender identity. In being someone who is perceived to be a

cisgender man off stage, Annaleise sees drag as a place where they can have a space to be different from their off stage identity. While there is a level of change that occurs for Annaleise when they step on the stage, Annaleise is able to use this change to affirm their perceived gender identity. When performing on stage as a drag queen, Annaleise is able to have a space where they can perform their gender identity without restriction. Their process of unpacking and affirming their own gender identity through drag is also seen through the way Annaleise describes the drag performances that they observe from the sidelines:

> So a lot of people in this area perform non-binary and do a lot of artistic stuff and stuff that I think is really cool. I'm so interested in it. I want to perform feminine but I would like to get to a point where I'm comfortable enough and happy enough with it. Like, I could do some of that more like artistic stuff but still have that feminine vibe to it because I think it's just also interesting.

Annaleise also emphasized that their drag performance's influence on their gender identity has been a process. Annaleise seemed to emphasize that before they can delve into other aspects of drag, they want to attain a sense of comfort with drag performance before they delve into other aspects of drag and gender. Although Annaleise does not fully identify with what they label as a non-binary queen, Annaleise seems to be utilizing drag performance to negotiate their understanding of their own gender identity. In using drag to become more comfortable with performing femininity, Annaleise is ultimately learning how to affirm their own identity.

During the interview process Annaleise was the only participant who was not vocal to others about performing as a queen. They also explain that their trans femme identity has yet to be presented to others outside of their own drag community. When I asked Annaleise how their gender identity plays a role in how others perceive their drag queen persona, Annaleise explained

"I think it's probably interesting because in day to day life I'm like super cis-presenting and like, super not out at all so I would be interested to know." Annaleise also went on to explain that when they are off stage they often feel envious of others who perform as femme and femme identifying.

> In everyday life I do a lot of just feeling jealous of other people who can. A lot of my dysphoria comes from seeing femme people just being great and femme and I'm like, "look at you!" Drag is a really nice place where I'm like, yay it is me!"

Annaleise seems to suggest that off stage they admire other femme individuals because they are performing femme. On stage, however, Annaleise can perform femme freely and in the same way as those they admire off stage can. I went on to ask what drag specifically meant to them. Annaleise explained "for me it's definitely just a lot of like, it's less artistic and playful for me and more like strictly playing with gender." Annaleise, in being a person who is yet to fully come out to others about their gender identity off stage, is able to perform the femininity they wish to through drag. While their identity on stage is not one that is blatantly performed off stage, Annaleise is able to access a space where they can perform aspects of their identity that they consistently think about and feel connected to in their everyday life.

While Jay explained to me that they live as a gay man, Jay also emphasized that they perform feminine off stage and identify more as genderqueer. This is especially interesting because Jay emphasized that they too use drag to unpack gender identity and norms associated with it. Some aspects of Jay's responses were comparable to the transgender women's responses. Jay is a queen who grew up in a small town. Jay recalled not having much exposure to drag earlier in their life. "Being from a small town…We didn't have any sort of exposure to drag or anything until we started doing shows and getting a little more popular." Jay did not have much

exposure to drag but they seemed to gain a connection to drag (with the help from friends) who

were also interested in drag performance.

> I was kind of with some friends…I remember homecoming time and they were doing lip-
>
> synch on campus between different student associations and stuff like that and we were
>
> like, we should put on a lip-sync show or drag show."

By working with other students and members of the LGBTQ community, Jay was able to access

and create a space where they could get involved in drag and the LGBTQ community.

Although Jay explained that they live as a gay man, Jay explained that they more closely

identify as gender queer and perform more feminine off stage. During this discussion, Jay also

explained that drag helped them escape from stereotypical gender boundaries and tropes. When I

asked about their gender identity and sexual orientation, Jay was very hesitant to ascribe to a

specific identity. Jay expanded on their identity, describing themselves to be much more gender

queer. When I asked Jay how they think drag has influenced the way they view their own gender

identity, Jay explained that they believe drag helped liberate them from strict gender binaries and

expectations:

> I mean, growing up I was like, I'm a boy, 100 percent male, and came out when I was 21.
>
> I'm gay, I'm a man, and this like, I am very specific and kind of gender roles. I'm gay and
>
> I like this type of guy."

Jay expanded on this journey, explaining that as they got older and more immersed into drag,

they began to perform more feminine off stage and ultimately began understanding that this

feminine side seemed more natural to who they were:

> I don't see myself really like male or female or certainly anything. I have noticed a lot
>
> more the older I get, when I go out, when I go public, when I go downtown more, it is

more of a feminine side . . . It is more natural for some reason to me than just to go out

plain. I'm so used to getting dressed up to go out that I still kind of do it in a way.

Jay seems to emphasize that by dressing up more often, it became more natural to who they are

perform feminine more often, especially when they go out. Jay emphasized that being feminine

is more natural for them. In being able to understand that being feminine is more natural to them,

they seemed to be able to understand this more through drag. This is because drag helped them

unpack stereotypical notions of gender, sexuality, and gender. Essentially, drag seems to have

ultimately helped Jay become more comfortable with performing and affirming their femininity

off stage and to have a closer connection to femininity in their everyday life. These responses

suggest that drag was not necessarily a reason why they identify the way they do, but rather, drag

is used to reaffirm and unpack gender identity.

Gay Men Drag Queens: Using Drag to Take on Feminine Identities Through Storytelling

When I asked the participants who live as gay men why they decided to do drag, the

participants emphasized not only a desire to put on a show and entertain, but also a desire to take

on a specific feminine identity that has already been established or is outside of their own.

Specifically, gay men participants emphasized that their drag queen persona and onstage

performances mirrored different popular women performers or feminine identities they have

identified in everyday life. The feminine identities were then translated into their drag

performances to project a specific narrative and experience to the audience.

Madson began doing drag through theatrical performance and this influence has played a

large role in Madson's reasoning for performing as a drag queen. They describe the performance

of drag as presenting a storyline. They explained, "you put some makeup on your face and you

came to the venue, that's effort. So, drag for me is performance. It is selling yourself or selling or

selling a storyline." Madson stresses that preparing for drag is highly focused on telling a story and in order for that to happen, drag queens must be able tell a story on stage by projecting a specific feminine identity that has already been established or one that is outside of their own identity. For example, after Madson went into detail about how drag for them is about performing a storyline and to entertain their audiences, Madson also turned to other women celebrities as an example of selling a story: "you could be doing a ballad from Celine Dion or some pop song from Ariana Grande. If there is an emotion and there's like a story that you are trying to tell me I am set, that works for me." When I asked Madson how drag has played a role in how they view femininity, Madson explained that drag helped them realize there are different types of women that one can perform and that many drag queens want to be perceived as a specific type:

> if you want to be some biker chick with like a neon pink Mohawk girl. Go for it. Because that is what you want to present yourself to the world and that's totally cool. If you are a super conservative girl who like wears cardigans and skirts and heels all day long. That's awesome too. However you want to present yourself that you are comfortable with that is the key point.

Madson suggested that there are many ways to perform femininity and whatever you feel comfortable in sharing to others is important.

Max also discussed the importance of stories and how they took on an outside feminine identity in order to relay a specific storyline. Max first pointed out that he could not process how to perform drag unless he could understand the point of his performances. He explained, "Song choice, makeup style, wig, outfit: I coordinated everything to try and put together a story that could connect me to the performance." Max comes from a small, Midwestern area and has great

respect for his country roots. This ultimately played a role in what type of story he wished to tell on stage. He went on to explain that performing this type of story in drag helped him gain a deeper understanding about different types of women he admires and feels connected to: "learning through drag about my connection to the classic beauties of Hollywood with full figures and big bodies, and these are the women, you know, 50's, 60's, loving country music, who were some of the earliest recognizable women in pop." These women, who inspired his drag performances, also helped him tell stories about his life. Specifically, he gave me an example of a song and performance that illustrated his relationship to his mother.

> For instance, one time I performed "*The Winner Takes it All"* from Mamma Mia! To me, it was a performance about my relationship with my mother. I grew up listening to ABBA because they were one of her favorite bands. Mamma Mia! came into theaters right when I graduated high school and my mom turned 40. We saw it together. The Winner Takes it All was our favorite number from the movie. So to me, doing it as a drag performance, it wasn't just about the song, it was also a statement about the relationships mothers have with gay sons, and how they often nurture femininity in someone who is constantly harassed to be more masculine.

Through drag, Max gained a deeper understanding of different feminine identities that resonated with where he came from and his relationship with his Mother. He also was able to tell and perform these stories to a broader audience. He was able to perform and entertain and present a story about his lived reality.

Jay also identifies with a queer identity and their responses were more likely to bleed into the responses regarding the affirmation of identity, Jay also explained that they live as a gay man. Jay explained that before they used drag to unpack and affirm their own gender identity,

they were heavily influenced by other feminine identities as well. Jay explained, "I had done Alicia Keys or Aretha Franklin or just different people but then it became me and then I tailored the character more towards how I felt (drag name) would be and who she would be." Jay went on to explain that they began using drag to affirm their own gender identity after modeling themselves after other feminine identities.

While transgender women and the individuals who identified as gender queer and femme seemed to use drag to reaffirm or explore gender identity, the gay men's responses emphasized the importance of using drag to take on feminine identities through storytelling. The difference between transgender and gay participants reasoning behind performing in drag and how they use drag suggests that avowed identity plays a large role in how one chooses to perform their gender. Not only this, the differences suggested that drag performance is used through a vast array of intentions. Thus, intention plays a role in the complex reasoning behind performing in drag.

Drag Performance and Aesthetics: Establishing Intention and Purpose for Performances of Femininity

During my interviews, participants emphasized that the process of developing a drag persona and a drag performance requires understanding a specific intention and purpose for their performance of femininity. This intention and purpose seemed to be developed through the aesthetic choices they made in their development of drag personas and drag performances. When asked to describe their own drag queen persona, each participant talked about the type of woman that their drag character is and how that specific character is created and established through the aesthetics of drag performance. In terms of creating intention and purpose, the participants suggested that they must make specific choices about who their character and persona is and

relay those choices to the audience. Without these choices, the participants seemed to suggest that their drag performances would lack purpose and intention.

Madson identifies as a gay man, got involved in drag through theatre, and views drag heavily through an entertainment and theatrical lens. When I asked Madson how their drag persona is different from who they are in everyday life, Madson explained that they are very different: "For me it's just a costume. It's just a pair of shoes. It's a wig." When I also asked how Madson would define drag, Madson went back to their conversation regarding aesthetics. "Drag to me is a performance. Like, you put on a show. Drag for me is also a look, an attitude, it's a personality." In order to put on a show through their drag performance, Madson focuses primarily on the personality of their character and what their drag persona looks like. Madson labeled their drag queen persona as a "girlfriend." They also went on to explain that their drag queen persona "is a lot sweeter and a lot more compassionate and friendly and sincere than I am as a guy . . . she is very compassionate. She's here for you. You can talk to her about anything, she is very much like a sincere individual." In terms of appearance, Madson explained that their character "is always in always in a dress that usually goes to the knee, very much covered up because I don't want to shave my chest. I am really lazy about that." Madson seemed to express that the aesthetic choices they make are highly contingent on the type of personality they want their persona to be perceived as on stage. Madson's desire to cover up their body hair also seems to be specifically associated with wanting to perform as a specific type of woman, one who does not shave their chest. Madson also brought up the ways in which other queens manage aesthetics as well.

Madson explained that the way a drag queen looks can play a huge role in how a queen sets up their drag performance and persona. Madson gave an example of drag queens who are male performers who do not shave their beards when they perform.

Drag, look-wise, can be the gamut. We have bearded queens. So it's male entertainers who don't want to shave their beards but who still go over the top with the eye makeup and the costumes and the hair. And so for me it's kind of the bearded ones are the best in my opinion for like, makeup-wise, because there is so much more to compensate for it.

This response suggests the idea that not only are drag aesthetics used intentionally and purposefully to perform a specific drag persona, but aesthetics are utilized in a way that embodies these intentions to the audience. In this case, Madson argues that since these queens are attempting to perform femininity and want to be perceived as women, they must make femininity stand out more than the queens' bearded faces. Essentially, when the audience is expecting one to perform as a woman, one must still intentionally make femininity more apparent to their audiences.

Max identifies and lives as a gay man and used to regularly perform drag in a small Midwestern town. He explained that when he first started to perform as a drag queen he thought that putting on certain aesthetic aspects of stereotypical images of femininity would allow him to perform a specific way. He explained, "I thought for some reason that if I put on heels and a wig I was automatically going to be able to do the choreography to *Love On Top* and that is absolutely not true." He stressed that putting on these specific aesthetic representations of femininity was not an authentic choice to him. Specifically, the wigs, outfits, and song choices did not seem to align with what he truly wanted in a drag persona. He seems to suggest that simply putting on specific aesthetic choices without thought, purpose, and intention would not

allow him to perform effectively and authentically. Max seems to point out that aesthetic choices in drag need to be purposeful in terms of how you want to be perceived.

Throughout the interview, Max also went into detail about his progression of how he became mindful of his drag performance choices. Max explained that when he first began performing as a drag queen he had a very complicated relationship with it. He specifically explained that he used to fall into discriminatory rhetoric surrounding marginalized bodies.

I realized that the point of drag isn't to make fun of vaginas and joke about how queens

who look overly feminine smell like fish. It's more to recognize all of the ways you can

do gender and femininity, when you can literally put femininity on and take it off.

In learning that there are many different ways one can put femininity on in drag, Max was able to discover which aesthetic choices work best for him and ultimately create performances that are more purposeful and meaningful to him. In drag, discovering many different ways one can put femininity on seems to be done by shifting aesthetic choices. Max also mentioned that his understanding of his own masculinity shifted day to day and manifested itself differently as well. "It is the same way every day identifying as a cis gay man, I look in the mirror and I look like Jake Dillinger today and I get out of the shower, and I feel and look gross and I'm like, oh I look like Danny Devito today." This response seems to demonstrate that his perceptions of how he saw himself were influenced by what he sees and perceives as masculine. He went on to explain that before drag he already understood how his masculinity can be changed. Drag performance made him realize the ways in which the performance of femininity can also change.

My masculinity changes so much that I never really had a good understanding of how

femininity changes so much. It gave me a much better understanding of, a much better

connection of that. You know, even if you identify as masculine only, or feminine only,

there is still a great amount of fluidity in that masculinity, in that femininity.

While living and performing as a cisgender gay man, he was able to understand the ways in

which definitions of masculinity did not completely embody his experience, ultimately

exemplifying that there are ways he can purposefully alter gender performance to make it more

meaningful for himself. Drag seemed to help him understand the same thing about femininity.

Being able to access a space in which he could take on different performances femininity

through aesthetics in the same way he did his masculinity off stage. In being purposeful about his

aesthetic and performance choices in drag, he was also able to see that there are many ways to

perform femininity. Max asserted that it does not matter if you identify as either masculine or

feminine because "There is still a great amount of fluidity in that masculinity, in that femininity.

The two of them are very connected because I never left my masculinity behind when I put on

drag I just added femininity to it." This suggests femininity and masculinity in drag performance,

in being both products of the cultural and social system in which we live, can also change based

on one's own perceptions, intentions, and aesthetic choices. The participants also noted that they

purposefully change aesthetic representations of femininity on stage for the audience.

When I asked Madson how drag affected how they perceived femininity, they explained,

"there are so many different kinds of women that you see all over the world that drag is nearly

the same in a sense of you have drag queens who want to perceive themselves a certain type of

way." In order to be perceived in a specific way, Madson goes into detail about the ways in

which they do not want to be perceived through aesthetics. "No one wants to see a drag queen in

like, a cute little maxi dress trying to twirl around. You want to see the hairography, and you

want to see the boots and the leg." While Madson clearly sets up the notion that these aesthetic

presentations of femininity are not something an audience would appreciate in a performance, Eve argues that often times an audience may be impacted from a performance differently than the intention of the performer. When I asked Eve what they think of common critiques of drag, specifically in terms of upholding the binary of what a woman is, Eve explained, "the audience comes in mind with a certain set of expectations of what they want in an experience." In order to elaborate on this idea, Eve used an example of Burlesque. They explained that Burlesque falls into a dichotomy:

> It typically falls into two camps. As oppressive, catering to the male gaze, exploiting sexuality, or they view it as liberating and body positive and centered on women. Uhm, and I think that it is a both/and situation. It's a situation where the performer has a specific intention, and those matter to the performer and the performance venue, but also the audience comes with their own intentions and their own understanding of what they are seeing.

Eve emphasizes that sometimes a performer's intention may not penetrate the audience's own understanding of gender. This idea seems to suggest that everyone has a different understanding of how gender is being performed and what that performance means. This helps demonstrate that although aesthetics are used to establish intention and purpose, sometimes an audience may have a very different perception of what is being performed on stage.

As mentioned earlier, Kim works as a professional pageant drag queen and travels all around the United States to perform. Although they did not expand on a specific drag persona that they personally have, they explained that they are always prepared to shift their drag persona based off of the type of audience they believe that will have. They explain, "I'm pretty diverse in my style. You know I do a lot of pop, a lot of hip-hop, a lot of country . . . I am very versatile in

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my persona." In order to be versatile in their drag performance, they seem to take on different aspects of femininity. They go on to assert, "So you know you want to adapt to your style versus if I was going to work at a country western bar I would do more country. You know those types of things." The varied components that go into a drag performance such as songs, dance, and makeup seem to show that femininity can be altered, controlled, and even perceived completely differently from another. In order for these aesthetic and performance choices to be altered, however, one must have a sense of purpose in approaching these performance choices.

My Drag Queen Persona: My Persona Is and Is Not Who I Am Off Stage

During the interviews, participants all explained that their drag persona and performances did and did not mirror aspects of who they are in everyday life. Not all aspects of these identities that they brought to the stage were specifically gender related. For many of the participants, lived experience played a role in how they perform drag and how that identity played out in everyday life. The participants also expressed distance from their drag personas, suggesting that there is a tension between being similar to and different from their drag persona at the same time.

Max explained that when he first started doing drag, he was attempting to perform an identity that he had no connection to. After performing more often, Max explained that his drag persona was much more directly tied to his everyday life. Max explained that his connection to being from the Midwest and his relationship with his mother influenced his drag persona.

It expanded my perception of what it means to be a queen, what it means to just be an awesome, badass, powerful, this gender woman, a mother, you know, a Midwest woman. And it totally reminds me of my mom, growing up in the trailer park and whatnot. That's why I love it and why my drag performance with it was so important to me.

This response suggests that while his drag persona is not specifically associated with how he identifies himself, his drag persona still gives him a deeper connection to his mother and Midwestern roots. He explained that in order for him to perform his identity, he would choose specific songs that relay a storyline that mirrors his identity. He explained, "there is this 60's movie called The Harper Valley PTA and it's all about a lower middle-class family and how the other parents in the town think she is garbage because she is poor." He stressed that these songs seemed more genuine to his identity and it made him a better performer: "Like, I don't look genuine, I don't feel genuine doing the bedazzled Britney Spears and Gaga routines." For Max, being genuine on stage meant that he was being true to his everyday experiences and life. Max was also specific about the ways in which performing on drag helped him contextualize femininity in his own life:

> It really gave me this connection to understand that you don't have to be a certain way to be effeminate, and you can be a poor farm wife and be effeminate, and listen to country music and be effeminate. Like, men who live in (hometown) and cook dinner every night on the farm and listen to Tammy Wynette and they can still be effeminate. They are living their lives exactly what they want.

Although Max was able to use drag performance to understand the ways in which he can be effeminate in his everyday life, he also pointed to ways in which he feels restricted to perform femininity in his life. When I asked him how his drag persona and performance has impacted his gender identity, Max began to discuss his conflict regarding wanting to perform femininity off stage. He begins by explaining that he personally feels comfortable being effeminate and masculine: "I am comfortable in a skirt and makeup but I'm not any more or less comfortable in shoes and shorts and you know, flip flops and cargo shorts, and I appreciate the safeness that

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those clothing on this body gives me." He went on to explain that he does not feel comfortable taking on femininity in spaces such as his job and hometown. He explained, "I wish I could do more with this body. Unfortunately I just don't think it's really feasible for me in this town right now." While Max emphasizes that his drag persona is heavily related to his identity, he also explains that he feels unable to perform that off stage.

In contrast, Madson views drag performance as more of a hobby and as a source of entertainment. During the interview, when I asked Madson how their drag persona mirrors aspects of who they are off stage, Madson focused on the different ways their emotions influence their song choices. They explain, "Drag is therapy . . . it is a way [to] express yourself and to get your emotions out. Like, if I am feeling really sad today or I got dumped or something happened, there's a song for everything." Being able to change the song and performance choices allows Madson to perform and control varied aspects of their lived experiences and the emotions that derive from those lived experiences. When I asked Madson to tell me more about their drag persona they stressed that their drag persona is strictly aesthetic. When I asked if their process of developing their drag persona was more based off a look, they expanded on the process of developing their persona: "Yes completely . . . So it was always very much like as skimpy as 8 pairs of dancers tights can get like. It was very much like it was always a little like a leotard when I first started." Madson also stressed that their drag persona is starkly different from who they are when they are performing in drag. They detailed this difference:

> If I'm backstage, I am going to have my legs, not my legs open like, in a sexual manner
>
> by any means. Like I am going to be relaxed, I am going to be sitting like myself, I will
>
> have a bra and panties on. When I am on stage the characters on and the characters doing

what it is supposed to be doing. But backstage is just Madson hanging out catching up with friends.

This response reveals a tension between being similar to their drag persona and also different at the same time. This is because while Madson identifies their drag person through aesthetics, they still explain that they are Madson off stage even when they are dressed as their drag persona. Madson's responses also revealed this tension through the way Madson talked about club goers and their interactions with them. When I asked Madson how their off-stage identity mirrors aspects of who they are when they are performing in drag, Madson explained that their personality is different than Madson when they are hanging around a bar venue. Madson explained, "(drag name) is a lot sweeter and a lot more uhm, compassionate and friendly and sincere than I am as a guy, as a guy I am very much a no nonsense." Although Madson points out that the personalities of their off stage identity and on stage persona are different, Madson points out that when people come and talk to them while they are in drag and just hanging around a venue not performing individuals come up to talk to them. Madson explained, "I know it's all about me because I'm in drag right now but let's talk about you because frankly you went out of your way to come talk to me and I am just a dude in a wig." Madson set up that becoming their drag persona is based off of aesthetics. Madson is also aware and cognizant of their off stage identity even when they are dressed as their drag persona.

As discussed earlier, Kim is very heavily involved in the pageantry community and takes their profession very seriously. This seems to have a lot to do with how much success they have had all around the United States. They also explain that they are very versatile in their drag and that they are very good at basing their performances off of the community and people they are performing for. "There's different crowds that go to different clubs. When I perform and I'm

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going to different venues I try to make sure that I adapt my music to the style of audience that's attending." Although they explain that they can perform many different types and styles of drag, Kim also stressed that their on stage identity closely mirrors their off stage identity. When asked if there are aspects of Kim's off-stage identity that mirrors their onstage identity, Kim asserted that their femininity is very similar:

> Honestly I'm the same way when it comes to my style. Like, I always like to dress nice. I always put on makeup, put on my lashes. I always look my best. I mean there are like my comfy days when I'm not going out. But I would say as far as the style of femininity it's always the same you know? I like being the girly girl.

Kim stresses the comfort they feel in their specific style. Thus, in being comfortable with their style and everyday performance of gender, Kim takes these performances of gender to the stage, specifically in terms of aesthetic. By identifying as a girly girl on stage and off of the stage, Kim clearly brings forth aspects of their personal and everyday identity to their drag persona as well as well as off stage. When I asked Kim how their drag persona impacts their identity, Kim explained that drag has nothing to do with who you are or how you identify. Kim explained, "So you're doing drag. It has nothing to do with me saying who I am as a person. They're here to see you and the drag personas that you present." Kim's responses embody this tension because Kim states that there are similarities between who they are when they are not performing on stage and who they are when they are in drag, even if it is just aesthetically. They also they argue that drag has nothing to do with how you identify. Although both responses seem to be saying something different, Kim is still labeling their drag queen persona and their identity when they are not performing in drag as "girly girls" associating a specific type of femininity to both their persona and their identity when they are not performing in drag.

You do drag? What are you? Drag Performance and Assumptions Regarding Gender

Identity

During the interviews, most of the participants emphasized that when they would tell others that they do drag, or others would see them in drag, people would make assumptions about their gender identity. The queens also seemed to fall into specific assumptions and stereotypes about drag queens by mirroring what is commonly associated with being a drag queen. The assumptions that seemed to be made regarding their identity and choice to be a drag queen suggest that society has a very narrow vision of who performs as a drag queen. These assumptions were also associated with having a narrow vision of specific gender identities and sexualities.

When I asked Max to tell me more about his drag persona and how it has progressed over time, Max explained that he was attempting to perform an identity that mirrored a stereotypical image of gay men.

> I always wanted to be like this, you know, this New York City pop diva queen twink gay
> boy and that was never who I was. Uhm, you know, that is a very narrow vision of what
> it means to be a white cis gay male but I think that is what a lot of people try and force
> themselves into early on when they don't realize that there is more out there.

Max points to specific tropes associated with cisgender gay men. These tropes of cisgender gay men, in being pre-determined by society, ultimately influenced the way Max originally attempted to perform drag. The pre-determined nature of these tropes proved to influence Max's performances. Specifically, he felt as though performing numbers that mirror a "pop diva twink gay" would make him a better performer for the audience as well. This quotation also shows that when Max first began performing as a drag queen, Max internalized societal assumptions about

cisgender gay men. In order for this internalization to occur, it seems as if many can be influenced by society's specific assumptions surrounding what kind of gender identity and sexual orientation drag queens have. When I also asked Max how other perceive his choice to be drag queen, he explained that if he would show up to work with makeup from the night before when he was performing in drag, he would automatically be labeled as gay.

> Uhm, people that I knew might have had a problem with it. When you show up to work the next morning and you still have leftover eyeliner on and smell like perfume and they're like, what is going on and I'm yeah, I was at a drag show and they are like, did you hook up with a lot of guys there? I am like, people of other genders hook up with people and lot of people I know would be all like, oh you're going to be one of those gays.

Although Max does identify as a gay man, not only is it just automatically assumed that he is gay for performing drag, but he would also be labeled as a specific type of gay person. He went on to be specific about what being "one of those gays" means. Max explained, "There were those people who were like, oh, you're gonna be one of those gays. You're gonna be over the top and dramatic." Not only does Max believe that others would ask questions about his sexual orientation, but they would also attach a specific trope about gay men who perform as drag queens. This also shows that the audiences of drag may believe that all drag queens are gay, dramatic, and over-the-top ultimately conflating sexual orientation and gender with being a drag queen.

Max internalized societal assumptions about cisgender gay men and also believes other would impose those societal assumptions about gay men and drag queens onto him if he were to tell others he performs as a drag queen. Eve also highlighted some assumptions that others

prescribed to their gender identity when Eve was off stage and in drag. Eve specifically pointed to an example of this:

In non-LGBTQ spaces I am often mostly perceived as a cis woman, so I think that there is sort of an interesting erasure process so regardless of whether you are perceiving me as a gay man performing as drag queen, or as a cis woman performing in high femininity.

Eve, in identifying as a trans woman, emphasized that aspects of her self-prescribed identity are erased by non-LGBTQ individuals. This erasure process shows that Eve's identity and performance of gender is inconsistent with the way others perceive Eve's identity and performance. This response also seems to suggest that some audiences of drag have a narrow vision of the vast array of gender identities that drag queens and those who engage in gender performance have.

Madson identifies as a gay man and when I asked Madson how others perceive their choice to be a drag queen, Madson explained that they experience a common misconception about their gender identity when they tell others they do drag. Specifically, Madson explained that a common assumption from others is that they use drag to transition:

The common misconception since the beginning of time is that you use drag as a gateway to transition. When I first I was like, "I'm going to do drag, it's going to be great," I had a couple of friends who were like, oh my god you are not transitioning right? And I was like, no!

Madson exemplifies the ways in which others make assumptions about drag performers' gender identity.

When I asked Jay how others perceive their choice to be a drag queen, Jay explained that there was little resistance from others when they decided to be a drag queen. Jay discussed that it

was nerve-racking only because they knew others would begin to ask questions about their identity: "It was a little scary for me because that also meant that eventually I had to figure out my own identity that I was kind of struggling with at the time. I knew that was going to come into question." Jay goes on to explain why they believe that others played a role in Jay having to figure out their own identity. "Everyone, you know, wants to put you in these little boxes . . . The reason they want you to say that what you are is so that they can pin you down. It makes them more comfortable." Forcing Jay to ascribe to a label after becoming a drag queen reveals the ways in which others will make assumptions about drag queens' identities. Specifically, these individuals came to the conclusion that if Jay is a drag queen, then Jay must have some sort of queer identity, or one that has not been disclosed to others, ultimately forcing Jay to ascribe to, and conform quickly to a predetermined gender identity.

When I asked Annaleise how they believe other people perceive their choice to be a drag queen, Annaleise brought up how they currently perform off stage. Annaleise goes on to explain that if they were to be more open about being a drag queen, they believe others would be confused as to why they are specifically performing in drag. "I mean the question was like, how do I think. And I think people probably, I'm sure there are probably some people who feel a little weird about it about because they like are like, why is this dude in drag?" Annaleise's personal identification is incompatible with how others perceive Annaleise's identity to be. By assuming Annaleise identifies as a "dude," they are ultimately erasing their gender identity in the process. Annaleise also expressed that if they were to be open about their drag queen performances, people would think it is confusing that they are choosing to perform as a drag queen. This represents that spectators of Annaleise's performances of gender and identity off stage may end up asking questions and making assumptions about Annaleise's identity if they were to be more

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open about being a drag queen. These responses also suggest that those who may not be an active part of the drag community may believe that drag queens only perform in a specific way in terms of gender. Thus, these responses detail that there are narrow assumptions surrounding what type of identities perform as drag queens.

Using Drag to Attain Social and Political Visibility

During the interviews, participants went into depth about how they are able to attain social and political visibility through drag. While some individuals utilized drag to make their political beliefs and statements more visible, some participants expressed that they use drag to make social and political beliefs about gender more visible. In order to be visible, the participants suggested that drag helps them reach a larger audience when attempting to express social and political issues and norms. Specifically, throughout the interview, Jay emphasized that their drag is a political tool. When asked how others perceive their choice to be a drag queen, Jay points out that they have faced few barriers when it comes to telling others or having others know about them being a drag queen.

Jay explains that the people who are close to Jay really understand and know them. They are aware that Jay, on or off stage, will stand up for their beliefs and choices. Jay specifically describes themselves as a political person on and off the stage. Jay explained, "I am Jay, I'm going to say something, if I am (drag name), I'm definitely going to say something and it is going to be a call to action." Not only does Jay have a passion for activism in their everyday life, Jay also points to the way their drag persona assists in their activism. This reveals that drag is another way Jay can advocate for their beliefs because people pay attention to them while they are performing in drag. Jay explained that when they were in drag, people were more likely to listen to what they were saying. Specifically, Jay used this visibility and their drag persona to

protest the Bush administration. They explained, "Being able to use that as the catalyst to get our message across, equality and gay rights and women's rights and trans rights. For some reason it becomes a bigger like, uhm, people pay more attention." Jay's quotation demonstrates that drag provided them with a greater sense of visibility. This visibility ultimately assisted them in the performance of a political message that otherwise would have been difficult for Jay to vocalize without drag.

In contrast to Jay, Eve seems to use drag to bring forth deep discussions and questions surrounding gender, femininity, power, and how these all intersect. Not only does she do this through her drag performances, but Eve also establishes visibility for the non-submissive woman by deconstructing these aspects of identity. As mentioned before, Eve's drag style is called a performance domina, or dominate. Dominas perform live BDSM kink shows. When I also asked her if there was anything she would like me to know about her gender identity, she also expressed that she self-identifies as a dominate outside of her drag persona as well. She then went on to expand on her own journey into drag and how that influenced her intentions and social stances on stage.

Eve explains that when she first started performing, "there was a distinct coming to the table and doing what people expect, and then finally feeling the agency of being able to do what you want." Eve goes on to explain that her desire to subvert notions of the submissive woman is mirrored in her performances. "For me, it's about having associations of what a beautiful woman looks like, but she has a whip." Eve mentioned earlier in the interview that the reason why she began performing in drag was that she was being more cognizant of gender expectations perpetuated in society and tropes associated with what it means to be feminine. She explained, "I began critically analyzing these stereotypes and norms." Through the process of making sense of

her own personal gender identity, her drag performances make others critically analyze these stereotypes in as well. She goes on to expand on these tropes associated with femininity:

> I hangout in high femininity quite a bit…it isn't for the purpose of satire…when we think about high femininity we typically associate it with being kind of like, demure, and sort of soft and what I as a domina do is invert that and challenge that notion to show strength and confidence.

In identifying as a dominate in her off stage identity as well, Eve seems to be making herself visible through performance as well as other women who do not identify as demure and soft more visible as well. This ultimately challenges existing tropes associated with what it means to be a woman in modern society. She explained, "As I continued to grow more confident in myself as a performer . . . it is about what I want to do, about the places I wanted to go and the experiences I wanna have, and the scenes I want to create." In order to make high femininity visible, she also gives those who access high femininity power. This ultimately subverts notions associated with femininity. She explains, "my work really calls into question desire: why do we desire what we desire? And I specifically queer the high femininity of submissive and show high femininity in absolute power." In making others question their desires and what they desire in femininity, Eve abolishes monolithic representations of performances of high femininity.

Max continually emphasized on stage performance as a source of relaying a vast array of political and social messages. Max specifically referred to other queens in this discussion and all of the different ways queens do drag. He explained, "So the performer has this thing, like everything they do is intentional. Often times they will try to perform anti-capitalism in their performance." When I asked him to expand on how others perform anti-capitalism in their performances, Max asserted that there was a culture in drag surrounding stealing makeup. He

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explained that a tradition in his drag community was stealing cosmetics for their performances. "Uhm, I stole some of them from Walmart because fuck Walmart and fuck capitalism." He also went on to explain that since performing as a drag queen can be very expensive he said that queens making their own costumes is an act of anti-capitalism: "yeah, anti-capitalism was definitely a theme. I think one way it was embodied was through stealing makeup and the DIY culture surrounding costumes" Not only did Max point to different cultural ways the drag community resists capitalism, he also explained that he performed a song that focused on sexual assault and advocacy, which he seemed to suggest brought forth visibility surrounding not only sexual assault, but labeling women as irrational and crazy:

> I performed to a remix of Monster by GaGa, which to me is a song that's pretty obviously about GaGa warning another woman about a rapist she encountered on the subway. The catch was, the song was remixed with Monster by NeYo, which is basically him using the word "monster" to describe a woman that gives him good sex and rebuffs his emotional attachment. So basically he villainies her for being a sexual person. So then for me the outfit and the remix was about me embodying the idea of the stereotypically "crazy" woman who is delegitimized by men who call her irrational when she talks about things like rape.

By performing a song and understanding the message and intention behind the song and performances choices, Max was able to make women's issues visible through drag performance.

This chapter was the analysis portion of my research project. I have attempted to understand the vast array of experiences of gay men and transgender women drag queens. In the next chapter, I will further examine the analysis that I have detailed here. In the next chapter, I will specifically delve into the implications and limitations of this research. After detailing the

implications and limitations of this research, I will then illustrate the ways in which this research

can further inspire future research.

Chapter 5

Discussion

Gender performativity is complex, colorful, and always manifests itself differently in varied contexts. Thus, gender performance and identity are bigger than this project. I hope others can utilize the findings to raise more discussion about gender performativity and its complexities. After delving into a brief introduction to this project, I reviewed literature associated with my project and the methodological approach. In chapter 4, I detailed an analysis of my findings. The analysis of my findings was comprised of themes that developed from the participants responses. In this chapter, I will discuss the implications of this project, the limitations, and how this project could spark future research. I then detail a conclusion, revisiting my own questions in the introduction regarding gender performance, identity, and drag performance.

Implications

The analysis I presented in chapter 4 brings forth implications regarding research surrounding gender performance, drag performance, and identity. Specifically, the experiences that my participants delved into and shared with me suggest that there is a relationship between gender performativity in drag performance and gender performance in everyday life. There were three main implications that arose from the experiences shared with me. To begin, the participant's responses suggested that within a culture that perpetuates specific social and cultural expectations regarding gender, there is also space for a unique understanding of the self. Next, the responses also suggested that gender shifts locations based on context, and finally, that femininity is used as a medium rather than the purpose of gender expression.

Who Am I?: The Search for the Self in a World with Predetermined Understandings and Expectations of Gender

When delving into discussions surrounding gender performance, we must note how social and cultural expectations of gender influence gender performance. Specifically, Judith Butler has laid the foundation for our understanding of this idea. Butler (1990) explains, "the body appears as a passive medium on which cultural meanings are inscribed or as the instrument through which an appropriative and interpretive will determines a cultural meaning for itself" (p. 8). In a world that continually influences our understanding of gender expression and performance, the participants seemed to use drag as a means of searching for a unique understanding of the self. While the participants emphasized that social influence regarding gender certainly played a role in how their gender was performed on and off stage, they also suggested that they were able to work within these social influences, ultimately discovering which aspects of these social inscriptions they could make meaning out of.

Performance choices implemented in drag are to some extent still products of predetermined social and cultural understandings of gender. The way these individuals search for a unique performance of gender ultimately revealed that working within these understandings of gender also manifests a sense of purpose specific to the performer.

Thus, while Butler's discussion surrounding how the body is prescribed meaning through social and cultural influence is consistent with my findings, my participants explained that they are able to work within these cultural influences. This was seen in the responses through the ways each participant thoroughly explained the meaning behind their performance choices. Not only was there meaning to their performance choices, each participant created a unique purpose behind their drag persona that varied for each participant.

The fact that each participant created their own unique meaning on a performative platform reveals that we must attempt to break the notion that gender performance is only a

product of meaning that is culturally inscribed onto our bodies. As Butler notes, it is certainly important to note the way social and cultural notions of gender impacts our understanding of gender and gender performance. Although this is true, we must also understand that each individual puts their own thoughts, experience, emotions, and stories into their performances of gender. Drag performance is an exemplary example of this, as drag performers discover unique presentations of themselves through creatively incorporating, modifying, and challenging cultural and social expectations of gender.

Establishing meaning and purpose in our performances of gender only further proves the fluid and diverse nature of gender and gender performance. Our gender identities should not be reduced to the culture in which we live. Instead, this project reveals that predetermined understandings of gender are only one aspect of our own creation of meaning and purpose that is behind our gender performances. While we do not completely escape cultural and social understandings of gender, we must recognize that bodies work within these binaries of gender to find a unique sense of self. Thus, this project suggests that we have more agency in deciding how we want to perform our gender than past research has suggested. This is not to suggest that our identities are simply a choice but rather, our bodies are our own and are given purpose and meaning through our own thoughts, experience, emotions, and stories.

Gender and Location: The Shifting Gender Performance in Context and the Erasure of Avowed Identity

This research also suggested that the performance of gender shifts based on context. The participants' responses seem to suggest that gender shifts based off of context due in part because of the way others impose their own perception of gender onto others. When I asked the participants to explain how their on-stage identity is similar to, and different from who they are

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offstage, the participants emphasized that they are both similar and different. While this contradiction seems complex, the nature of the gender performance can still be affected by the culture in which the performer is situated and the people and environment they are surrounded by. Since gender performance shifts based on context and location, it is clear that we cannot generalize a single gender performance. We must understand that our own perceived notion of gender performance may not completely be consistent with the performers' intentions, wants, and desires. Specifically, because we all have specific and unique meaning behind out performances of gender and identity, we cannot place our own expectations and understandings of gender onto others. Essentially, just because you observe a specific gender performance through your own understandings of gender identity does not mean that understanding is consistent with the performers' own understanding of their identity and performance of gender.

In accepting the claim that gender performance shifts based on context and location, we must also accept the argument that others' cultural perceptions of gender may influence this shift and play a role in how we see and perceive others' gender performances. After the participants delved into how their onstage identity is both similar to and different from their offstage identity, participants expanded on how others perceived their identity off stage versus on stage. Participants explained that they are cognizant of specific expectations from the audience when they are on stage and performing in drag. In some circumstances, these expectations affected and influenced their performance choices. When the participants were in drag and just hanging around a venue, participants suggested that they would shift their presentations of their personas. In some situations, some explained that they would only shift these presentations when approached from people they did not know. Finally, the participants also suggested that they were treated differently from others when they were in drag, performing as their drag persona,

versus when they were living their day-to-day life. The way others' influenced the participant's understanding and performance of gender also revealed an erasure of the participant's self-avowed identity. Many suggested that their own understanding of their gender is often overlooked because of others' individual understanding of gender.

The way in which others' cultural perceptions of gender influence gender performances also may influence how others wish to perform their gender. In a culture that treats us differently based on how we choose to perform gender identity sparks a discussion surrounding gaining a better understanding of how our social a cultural environment influences how we perform gender. Specifically, all of the participants suggested that they hold specific meaning and purpose for their performances of gender. Thus, when deconstructing gender performances and attempting to critique these performances, not only should we be cognizant to the fact that society, to some extent, dictates our choices, but we must note that just because we see a specific gender performance manifesting itself, that performance does not mean that that is the only aspect of their identity and gender. Critiques surrounding gender performance often come with pre-determined understandings of gender because of the culture in which we live. Thus, understanding that our own perceived notion of gender performance may not completely be consistent with the performers' intentions, wants, and desires. Not only is understanding this erasure important, but it is also important to not impose our own understanding of gender onto others. Rather, we must be actively engaged in understanding others' intentions, wants, and desires. In imposing our own understanding of gender onto others, we may ultimately be erasing their own avowed identity, making it difficult for others to attain a sense of agency in their own identification of gender performance.

Femininity is Not the End Goal: Femininity as a Medium of Gender Expression and Avowed Identity

To begin, this research illustrated that drag performance for the participants is not about disrupting what it means to perform femininity, but rather, participants suggested that drag performance is used to play with constructions of femininity in order to reach varied personal goals. These varied personal goals seemed to specifically be associated with creating an avenue of performance that searches for a unique understanding and performance of the self. The participants' responses also suggested that the performance of femininity is not an end goal of drag performance. Rather, in many instances, femininity is used as medium of the performance of identity. Most of the participants suggested that being on stage and performing a feminine identity often comes from their own experiences with femininity off stage. Specifically, many participants emphasized that they get their inspiration for their personas from a vast array of established feminine identities, relationships, and lived experiences. These feminine identities, relationships, and lived experiences were ultimately a part of their established identities. Drag performance then helped them discover the way these mediums influenced their gender and identity.

Specifically, transgender women and femme identifying individuals used drag to unpack and affirm gender identity and gay men ultimately used drag to take on feminine identities through storytelling. In terms of using drag to unpack and affirm gender identity, the participants' responses suggested that they use femininity as medium of gender expression and identity through the process of exploring spaces and venues where they can discover new dimensions of the self. All of the participants who touched on how they use drag to affirm their own gender identity stressed that taking on varied performances of femininity ultimately helped

them affirm an avowed identity that had always been there. They also discussed that drag was a space where they could try new performances of identity that may have been more difficult to perform off stage. In being able to access a space where they could play with various expressions of femininity, the participants were able to perform new dimensions of the self through using femininity as a medium to discovering their own identity.

The participants who used drag to take on feminine identities through storytelling also exemplified that femininity was used a medium of gender expression and avowed identity. This was seen through the way in which the participants turned to connections and relationships with others to better understand how those individuals played a role in their identity. Some participants also went on to explain that femininity was accessed to explore their emotions. They all suggested that their drag personas and performances became more authentic when they connected to their lived realities and experiences with femininity. While the gay men participants' reasoning for doing drag was different than transgender women's reasoning for doing drag, they both played with different identifications of femininity in order to discover aspects of their gender expression and avowed identities.

While the participants used drag performance to access a feminine identity through storytelling and to affirm and unpack gender identity, no one emphasized that they wanted to be a woman through drag. Even for the participants who are women, these individuals also suggested that the femininity they performed on stage was not entirely the same as how they define their femininity off stage. While some hoped to use drag to better connect with their own femininity or gender identity, the end goal was not to achieve femininity. Instead, the participants seemed to use femininity as a medium to access and articulate their lived experience.

The fact that the participants used femininity as a medium for their lived experiences instead of femininity being the end goal reveals a relationship between gender performativity in drag performance and gender performance in everyday life. Specifically, this shows that everyone has access to femininity through lived experiences. The fact that femininity was used as a medium to express everyday experience shows that gender expression is not particularly about achieving a specific, or perfect identity but rather, finding aspects of femininity that make individuals attain a better sense of their gender expression and avowed identity. Everyone has lived experiences that have been influenced by various performances of femininity. Thus, femininity is a medium of performance that is influenced by our own lived experiences. Ultimately, this suggests that femininity is not static, perfect or complete performance. Rather, the fluidity of femininity is seen through the vast array of ways femininity can be and is performed. The fluidity of femininity, and the way others can utilize femininity as medium of gender expression and avowed identity, reveal that we need to break the notion that there is universal definition of femininity. If femininity is less about achievement, and more about accessing aspects of the self, the performance of femininity can be seen to be a medium through which others can make sense of their identity.

Limitations

This project also came with limitations that are important to address. The limitations of this project include the subjectivity of qualitative research, the recruitment of participants, and finally, the lack of diversity and attention to multiple identities and how they intersect with gender performance. To begin, since qualitative interviewing is inherently subjective, it is important to take specific limitations in consideration when reviewing the findings in this project. Specifically, while I did my best to understand my positionality as a scholar and engage

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in reflexivity throughout the interviewing process, I still interpreted the responses through my own lens of experience. Thus, it is possible that I could have misinterpreted some of the responses throughout the project. While I employed semi-structured interviews in order to allow for more fluidity during the interviews, there were times I had to cut discussions short in order to address the research questions. I also attempted to be sensitive to power dynamics that existed between myself. In order to do this, I attempted to establish rapport and relationships with the participants. A limitation regarding rapport was that I did not engage in follow-up interviews. During the project, there were some participants I wish I had followed up with in order to build a better relationship with. There were also interviews that were shorter than expected. A limitation I believe that was prevalent was that I did not ask more follow-up questions throughout. Another way I attempted to build rapport with my participants was by employing mutual discourse. Hesse-Biber (2013) defines mutual discourse as instances in interviews where interviewers answer any questions that their participants have about them. While I engaged in mutual discourse throughout the interviews, there were times I felt that the mutual discourse I was attempting to employ took away from the participants' experiences. This is because they did not entirely relate to the discussions that were being had. In terms of my positionality, I could have taken into consideration the multiple variables that play a role in developing rapport and relationships in interviewing.

Another limitation in this project is related to the recruitment process. I am not drag performer. Hence, I was unaware that drag differs so much in different areas. This project did not pay adequate attention to the fact that many drag performers perform very differently based on the location and the drag culture in which they are situated. This project would have benefited from taking geographical area into account in my analysis. Specifically, I did not interview

participants who live in similar locations. Identity cannot be generalized. However, interviewing queens from similar areas may have provided more consistency and depth in the responses. This project would have also benefited from a larger interview pool. While I believe it was sufficient to interview six participants, interviewing more would have brought forth more consistency and repetition in my responses, ultimately creating a space in which I could have drawn from a richer data pool.

Finally, I believe it is important to emphasize the lack of diversity among my participant sample. Only two participants were people of color. I also failed to adequately ask them how race plays a role in their reasoning behind why they perform as drag queens and how race plays a role in their experiences in drag. While class discussions were brought up by one participant, I did not ask other participants how their identities have been influenced by class. In doing this, I failed to acknowledge how their varying identity positions intersect with their gender performances. The limitations of this study are due in part to the time constraints and resources available in gathering participants. Although this is true, more questions could have been asked about the participant's intersecting identities.

Future Research

After conducting an analysis for this project, there are two main avenues of future research. The first avenue of future research is rooted in how the participants emphasized the importance of unpacking the self through drag performance. Future research should revisit how queer identities manage a culture in which gender expectations are culturally and socially prescribed onto the body. While the gendered body cannot escape from social and cultural expectations and understandings of gender, bodies still desire a space of self-discovery and a unique understanding of the self, and it is important to examine how queer bodies attain their

own self-prescribed gender identity. While drag certainly seems to be a space where this is done and achieved, perhaps there are more spaces in which queer bodies create more gender and sexual subjectivities than the ones that are already legitimized in our culture. Essentially, more research should acknowledge the experiences of those who access specific spaces where queer bodies feel they can attain a sense of agency in gaining a unique understanding of their gender identity.

Another avenue of future research is understanding and recognizing the experiences of the vast array of bodies that engage in drag performance. While this project began delving into transgender experiences in drag, there are still a wide array of bodies and identities that engage in drag performance. Considering that endless gender identities exist, along with the fact that there are different types of drag, the future of drag research in keeping different identities and different types of drag in mind will produce rich and expanding findings.

Many participants emphasized the echo chambers that often exist in drag culture. They specifically point to rhetoric that is produced by white, cisgender gay men and the hit television show, *RuPaul's Drag Race.* For one transgender participant, she felt as if she had to do a significant amount of educating other cisgender, gay male queens because of these specific echo chambers. Thus, engaging in the experiences of drag performers with a wide array of gender identities may help break preconceived notions regarding what drag is and does for society, gender performance, and the performers.

The possibility for future research surrounding understanding and recognizing the experiences of the vast array of bodies that engage in drag performance is also seen through the ways others perceive the participants' choice to be a drag queen. Many participants suggested that regardless of their perceived identity, when they would tell people they do drag, or when

others would see them in drag, individuals would assume that they would have to identify a specific way because they are drag queens. Researching the vast array of identities that engage in drag performance may bring forth a wider view regarding who drag queens are and the importance of their own individual identities.

Conclusion

After the immense amount of time spent to complete this project, looking back at my introduction has been an interesting experience. Specifically, the question I posed in the introduction caught my attention: how much of my performance of femininity is constructed through the gender binary and how much of my performance of femininity transgresses this binary? I have come to realize that this tension manifests itself in drag due to the fact that gender is much more artificial than I had originally thought. Based on this new understanding, I would now rearticulate this question: how do we create a sense of purpose for our performances of gender in a world that consistently encourages us to conform to a predetermined identity? In my own experiences, I have often attempted to make sense of my own femininity within this binary. I often ask myself how I can be queer when I often perform stereotypical depictions of what it means to be a woman.

This project has opened me up to a vast array of possibilities in regard to gender performance. For a very long time, I struggled to truly affirm my own performances of gender as well as my gender identity. In understanding the artificial nature of gender, however, I feel liberated. This liberation stems from understanding that whatever way I choose to perform my gender is my own. While it is a product of the cultural and social constructions of gender in which I live, so is the nature of these cultural and social constructions. Specifically, I feel that I am more able to attain a sense of agency in my understanding of my own gender identity because

of the unique nature of my own lived experiences. I am not just a product of the gender binary because I have my own individual stories, emotions, and experiences that I integrate into my own performances of femininity. After gaining this understanding, to some extent, I am still worried about the way I perform my gender identity. Being a teacher and an educator makes me consistently worry about how others will perceive me. Will men and other academics take me seriously? Although I realize that I still have restrictions when it comes to performing specific aspects of my gender identity, my internal understandings of my performance of gender and its uniqueness is validating. I now realize that my choices are not just a product of patriarchy. Even though I cannot control how others perceive my performances of gender, my own internal recognition that what I am doing is purposeful and meaningful to who I am, makes me more likely to have agency in how I decide to perform my femininity.

I am immensely grateful for the participants who were willing to be involved in this project. I hope their responses will inspire other queer individuals struggling with their own gender identity and performances of gender to do what they desire with their performances of gender and in turn, allow others to do the same. When reflecting on my own struggles with affirming my own performances of gender, I specifically discuss how others play a role in how we choose to perform and think about our gender performances. While I hope this research encourages queer individuals to understand that there is purpose to their performances of gender, I also hope that we will dis-identify from our own understandings of gender performance before critiquing others' performance of gender. Specifically, everyone has their own meaning and purpose for their gender performance. These understandings are not always compatible with others' understanding and performance of gender. No one person is the gatekeeper of gender, and not contextualizing one's own experience may lead to the idea that specific bodies must act

and perform a specific way. Ultimately, essentializing specific performances of gender perpetuates the same binaries that scholars have been attempting to deconstruct. Thus, this project calls for more internal reflexivity of the self and our gender performance. Not only does this idea help liberate ourselves from the notion that our bodies are simply a product of the social and cultural environment in which we live, but it also demands that we attempt to contextualize our own experiences before expecting other bodies to adhere to our own definition of gender. Gender performance is a process of understanding one's own identity and everyone should have access to the fluidity of gender, performance, and identity.

Appendix

Interview Guide

Cisgender Gay Men Participants

1) How old are you?

2) What is your ethnicity?

3) Are you a cisgender gay man, or a transgender woman. Is there anything else you would like me to know regarding your gender identity, sexual orientation or preferred pronouns?

4) Why did you decide to do drag

5) How has your motivation for performing in drag changed over time?

6) How would you define drag, or in your opinion, what constitutes drag performance?

7) What influenced you to develop your specific drag queen persona?
   A. What are the steps you take in order to develop your drag queen persona?
   B. How has your drag queen persona changed over time?

8) How is your off-stage identity different from who you are when you are performing in drag?
   A. How does your off-stage identity mirror aspects of who you are when you are performing in drag?

9) How has drag affected how you perceive femininity?
   A. How do think drag has influenced the way you view your gender identity?

10) How do you think others perceive your choice to be a drag queen?
   A. Why do you think they perceive your choices this way?

Transgender Women Participants

1) How old are you?

2) What is your ethnicity?

3) Are you a cisgender gay man, or a transgender woman. Is there anything else you would like me to know regarding your gender identity, sexual orientation or preferred pronouns?

4) Why did you decide to do drag and how has your motivation for performing in drag changed over time?

5) How would you define drag, or in your opinion, what constitutes drag performance?

6) What influenced you to develop your specific drag queen persona?
    A. What are the steps you take in order to develop your drag queen persona?
    B. How has your drag queen persona changed over time?

7) How is your femininity in your daily life different from, or similar to, your femininity on stage?

8) How do you think your gender identity impacts your drag persona?
    A. How do people in the drag community respond to your trans identity differently than in your daily life?

9) How do think others perceive your drag queen persona?
    A. How does your gender identity play a role in how others perceive your drag queen persona?

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