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## Serving fishy realness: representations of gender equity on *RuPaul's Drag Race*

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### ABSTRACT

Critical theorists argue that a dialectical materialism exists between ideology and culture and the material conditions of society. The same can be said for the production of sexuality and gender on television. Representations of drag queens in mainstream media have appeared in Hollywood films such as *Victor/Victoria*, *Paris is Burning* and *The Birdcage*. This paper argues that the complexity and holistic representation of drag queens in television media is often as complicated as the lived realities of drag queens themselves. By analysing a popular reality television show, *RuPaul's Drag Race*, this paper will employ a rubric based on three stages to explore how gender is represented to the public. Each stage progresses from mocking drag queens and perpetuating negative stereotypes about genderqueer individuals, to more 'normalizing' depictions of said participants while still reinforcing heteronormative stereotypes, to ultimately portraying drag queens as holistic people on equal footing with their heterosexual counterparts. Implications and recommendations for further research are also presented at the conclusion of this paper.

Mainstream media representations of genderqueer people have been exposing the American public to drag queens since the advent of film and television. The concept of doing drag has been portrayed in American films such as *Some Like It Hot* (1959), *La Cage aux Folles* (film, 1973), *Victor/Victoria* (1982), *Paris is Burning* (1990), *The Adventures of Pricilla Queen of the Desert* (1994), *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar* (1995) and *The Birdcage* (1996). With the exception of *Paris is Burning*, a documentary film, every other film representation of doing drag involved men dressing in women's clothing, not actual drag queens. Arguably, with Hollywood and mainstream media dictating the medium of expression for drag performers, there has been very little 'accuracy' regarding the portrayal of drag queens. But what is drag? What does it mean to be a drag queen? Although there is no generally agreed upon definition of 'drag', an appropriate characterization of drag performers is individuals who publicly perform gender (Barnett and Johnson 2013, 678; Rupp, Taylor, and Shapiro 2010, 276) as well as blur the lines between masculine and feminine (Moore 2013, 17). Upon the creation of Logo TV, a television channel dedicated to a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) audience, in 2005 (Collins 2005), drag queens were given the opportunity to define the drag experience for themselves. One such opportunity is the wildly successful Logo TV show, *RuPaul's Drag Race* (*RPDR*). Currently in its eighth season, *RPDR* is a reality television show wherein drag queens from across the United States of America and Puerto Rico come to Los Angeles to compete for the title of America's Next Drag Superstar. Using a rubric appropriated

and modified from Seidman (2002) and Raley and Lucas (2006) that critically analyses representations of sexuality and gender expression, the authors have written another article critiquing NBC's *Will & Grace* (1997–2006). This paper, however aims to analyse *RPDR* to explore the production of gender and sexuality. The rubric used herein categorizes representations of drag queens into three non-linear stages: ridicule, heteronormative stereotyping and respect, each of which are discussed later. *RPDR* was chosen because of its success as a television show as well as its pervasiveness in American culture but also because of its unique position as a show about drag queens made by drag queens.

## Theoretical perspectives

### *Sexuality and identity*

Gender and sexuality in North American societies are often portrayed and understood as binaries: masculine and feminine, straight and gay (Taylor and Rupp 2006, 12; Valocchi 2005). As it is often society that defines the notions of gender and sexuality (Foucault 1997), the power of the individual to come into one's own behaviours, attitudes, gender presentations and sexualities is taken away. While most sociologists will agree that such labels are social constructs, they have consequences, in that they presume gender-specific roles such as the masculine male and the feminine female. By having the assumption that each person has only one specific gender and therefore one specific sexuality, these constructs are virtually set for the remainder of one's life and each person is by default heterosexual until proven otherwise (Valocchi 2005, 752).

According to Stein (2011) and Butler (2011), the problematic dispute on sexuality revolves around two limiting perspectives: essentialism and constructionism. These outmoded understandings of sexuality posit that people are either born with their sexuality or learn their sexuality through personal development, respectively (Butler 2011, 59; Stein 1992, 330, 2011). Incidentally, this constrains individuals in their performance of gender based on a society's definitions of gender (Butler 2011, 59). On the converse side, Foucault's (1978) original argument is that all sexuality, including heterosexuality, is chosen by individuals as sexuality and the performance thereof is socially constructed. This, too, proves problematic as arguing one's sexuality as a performance is restricted to the heteronormative confines of the social sphere and the dominant ideology (Butler 2011, 59). Rather, the performance of one's sexuality has more fluidity and can be assumed as any one gendered presentation of self (Butler 2011, 60). This is to say that the performance of drag, by breaking the taken for granted notions of gender, challenges the dominant ideology and the heteronormative binaries of the presentation of gender. Even as the notions of identity and sexual expression have changed over time and throughout cultures, the notion of queerness and what it means to be queer has also changed. Shneer and Aviv (2006) explain that 'the definition of queer representation has radically changed over time' (168). They discuss that queers and queerness in the media has had different implications for society dependent on the period in American history. They go on to say:

In the 1920s, queerness was about gender play; in the 1980s, it was about sexual identity. In the 1970s, television series began portraying male characters who were in love with other men. Lesbians on screen became popular in the 1980s and 1990s when the queer femme fatale (as played by the likes of Sharon Stone) caused a sensation. Many have marked the 1990s as the decade in which queerness in the media moved from the margins to the mainstream. In 1997, Ellen Degeneres's character 'came out', making her the first queer lead character in a television series. ... As Suzanna Danuta Walters shows, the new visibility of queerness has only occurred since the 1980s, fundamentally moving queers from the margins to the mainstream of American media. (Shneer and Aviv 2006, 168–169)

Sexual identity changes over time and culture, and is socially constructed; even what it means to be queer is fluid. Simultaneously, the performance of drag has changed in televisual media as well as in the lived reality of the drag community. The drag community has both affected the representation of genderqueerness in televisual culture and been affected by the heteronormative structure of media (cf. Macherey 1995, 48).

## *Ideology and cultural production*

The Marxist theory of ideology argues that ideology is related to the material condition of existence (Marx 1978, 164). As Marx famously states, the ruling ideas are those of the ruling class; television networks function within the greater ideological structure of heteronormativity and the content they produce is coded with the dominant ideology. But material conditions alone do not make up our entire existence. One important aforementioned condition is based in communication (cf. Habermas 2006) and the transference of knowledge via television. These conditions give rise to our ability to think and perform gender, often in relation to what we consume on televisual media. The performance of gender is simultaneously thought of as part of the collective, as subservient to the dominant ideology (Wolff 1993, 51). Previous films depicting drag utilized actors wearing feminine clothing and makeup (*Victor/Victoria*, *The Birdcage*) but failed to accurately capture the culture of the genderqueer community and what drag means to them. But not all individuals adhere to the dominant ideology; some members of the genderqueer community have established an alternative ideology, such as Logo TV, in which values, beliefs and social interactions are more congenial with the alternative group where it was portrayed (Williams 1991, 415). This creates a divide between ideological forms in which the dominant ideology of heterosexuality and heteronormativity becomes the norm and the overall accepted standard. Drag has previously been portrayed as a foil to heterosexuality; it has heretofore not been presented in and of itself. Thus, for mainstream television in North America, heteronormative content has been the only broadcasted content. However, the alternative ideology created by the genderqueer community challenges the dominant ideology and injects its own ideologies into mainstream society, often subversively (Wolff 1993, 54). Alternative ideological networks such as Logo TV push genderqueer norms into mainstream televisual media and create a new base of knowledge that helps to legitimize gender queerness and drag in a dominantly heteronormative society (Dhaenens, Van Bauwel, and Biltreyst 2008). As such, the fluidity of gender is reinforced in an alternative format to the heteronormative ideology.

Until the late twentieth century, drag queens in visual media have been portrayed as deviant members of society possessing mental and psychological illness or being emotionally and physically inferior to their heteronormative counterparts (Dean 2007, 364; Russo 1987). It was not until the 1980s and 1990s that North American visual media began to produce a more visibly diverse characterization of drag queens; despite this increased visibility, drag queens are still often reduced to their sexual components as opposed to being holistic characters (Dean 2007, 364). Walters (2001) corroborates this by stating that drag queens in mainstream television shows and films are often presented as foils for heteronormative characters. Moreover, drag queens are both woven into and smothered by the metanarrative of the television show or film or are 'commodified' as props to express the illusion of 'hipness' (Walters 2001, 154). In using drag queens, media studios are marketing to a wider audience, including LGBTQ viewers.

In more recent visual media depictions of drag queens, the concept of 'normal' is often coded with aspects of the heteronormative dominant ideology; this is to say the binary gender codes of masculine and feminine. Televisual representations of normalcy often convey multifaceted characteristics of life, those that reflect notions of respect (cf. Methods and Procedures). The construction of normalcy for drag queens is not happenstance or by accident; rather, this construction is meticulously planned by television and film studios (Wolff 1993, 51). As this paper does not explore how the public perceives this show, it is important to note that audiences may perceive this construction as indeed normal, but actually, it emerges through 'linguistic communication and social interaction' that deludes us into accepting dominant ideological portrayals of drag queens in traditional, heteronormative roles (Wolff 1993, 51). Similarly, Seidman (2002) posits that the production of drag queens in visual media is shifting from a character of flaws to a holistic, human representation. Contemporary depictions on television and in film characterize drag queens as sons, boyfriends, husbands, workers, artists and equals to their heterosexual counterparts (Seidman 2002). Interestingly, though, this shift towards 'normalcy' involves some maintenance of the heteronormative status quo. This is to say that though drag queens may be open with their sexuality, they must conform to dominant ideologies propagating 'marriage-like relationships, [defending] family values, [personifying] economic individualism, and [displaying] national pride' (Seidman 2002, 133).

## Methods and procedures

This paper employs a qualitative content analysis of the popular Logo TV show *RPDR*. Utilizing the theoretical perspectives of sexuality and identity and the production of ideology and culture, a rubric was created through which to analyse and critique the 99 episodes of the show's seven previously aired seasons. From Seidman's (2002) and Raley and Lucas (2006) rubrics analysing visual media, the authors created a modified rubric expressing three stages regarding the production and representation of gender and sexuality.<sup>1</sup> Stage one is characterized as Ridicule, stage two is termed Heteronormative Stereotyping, and stage three is classified as Respect. It should be noted that these three stages are not necessarily temporal in progression. Rather, these stages progress in their equitable representation of LGBTQ characters and individuals, in this case, drag queens. As will become apparent, all three stages appear throughout *RPDR*, in every season.

Using the three stages of Ridicule, Heteronormative Stereotyping, and Respect as a guide, the authors watched and coded episodes and selected quotations from all seven seasons of *RPDR*. Quotations and non-verbal cues highlighting homophobic jokes, slurs, and mockery were coded under the heading of 'ridicule'. Episodes and quotations introducing a sense of 'normalcy' for drag queens while still reinforcing negative stereotypes of homosexuality was coded under the heading of 'heteronormative stereotyping'. Finally, any positive and equalizing portrayals of drag queens as holistic individuals were coded under 'respect'. In the following section, the authors analyse and discuss these codes at length. For a detailed description of these three non-chronological stages, see Appendix 1.

## Analysis and discussion

In this essay, the authors analyse *RPDR* (2009–present), a popular television show broadcast in the United States. For this television show, we will utilize the theoretical concepts of ideology and cultural production to assess the portrayal of drag queens and how they have changed over the past seven years. Before the broadcast of this show, drag queens in visual media were primarily depicted as stereotypes (Raley and Lucas 2006). For audience viewers, these baseless stereotypes lead to misinformation and potentially harmful consequences such as homophobia.

Raley and Lucas combine Clark's (1969) and Berry's (1980) classifications of the stereotyping of minorities in television media and apply these theoretical concepts to LGBTQ people (Raley and Lucas 2006, 23). For our research, we employ a modified rubric for analysing these three stages. This paper critically explores the stages of ridicule, heteronormative stereotyping and respect. Ridicule refers to jokes at the characters' expense with negative stereotyping and characters acting as comedic relief (Raley and Lucas 2006, 24). The second stage of heteronormative stereotyping implies an increase in the positive depictions of drag queens while still enforcing ideologically dominant stereotypes (Seidman 2002, 133). The third and most progressive stage is respect. Television shows presenting drag queens in a variety of social roles, affectations of love equal to their heterosexual counterparts and raising a family embody the stage of respect (Raley and Lucas 2006, 24). Using these three stages, we shall analyse *RPDR* based on its portrayal of drag queens.

### *Covergirl don't cover boy: ridicule of gender diversity*

As a popular television show that provides drag queens a platform upon which to showcase their talents while educating the world to the nuances of drag, *RPDR* offers a unique insight into drag life and drag as an art form. In spite of holding such a position among television shows in the United States, *RPDR* should not be seen as a televisual beacon of progressive representations of gender diversity. *RPDR* began its broadcast to the American public in 2009 and continues to entertain its viewers, often at the expense of the drag performers on the show. In the first stage of our modified rubric, television shows that reinforce negative stereotyping of drag queens as well as binary expressions of gender and sexuality employ ridicule as a form of entertainment. In this subsection, it will become clear that *RPDR* is no different than many other shows that ridicule drag queens.

From the beginning of *RPDR*, the audience is presented with a formal position that *fishiness* is valued over *butchness* with regards to the presentation of gender among the drag queen contestants. In the drag community, *fishiness* refers to the presentation of hyper-femininity and a consistent portrayal of physiological femaleness. On *RPDR*, queens are expected to reinforce the valorization of *fishiness* as well as heteronormative binaries of gender and sexuality. During some of the show's mini-challenges, which appear at the beginning of nearly every episode, the queens are judged based on their ability to create hip padding,<sup>2</sup> to wear breastplates and to compete in wet t-shirt contests,<sup>3</sup> and to turn 'male' or 'masculine' objects into 'female' or 'feminine' ones.<sup>4</sup> In each of these mini-challenges as well as on the main stage during the main challenges, the queens are expected to present a feminized gender that is dichotomized with masculinity and maleness.

*RPDR* further employed notions of denigration of butch queens. This denigration would often take the form of a lack of acceptance among the contestants and early dismissal of queens whose art specialized in blurring the gender lines. Queens would be chastised for choosing a character or an outfit that would 'read as boy', which means not entirely hyper-feminine.<sup>5</sup> In the eighth episode of the third season, a queen named Alexis Mateo presented a runway look wherein she wore a US Marine Corps jacket in reverence of her ex-boyfriend. Despite the utmost respect Alexis had for the Marines and her former partner, two of the other queens, Manila Luzon and Yara Sofia, read, or insulted, Alexis for her 'manly' look. Manila stated: 'I mean, I just never wear men's clothing when I'm trying to portray a feminine [...] I'm like, "Really? Oh god, this is so big and manly!"'

In season four, one of the most controversial queens who specialized in genderqueer drag was Milan. On the main stage in episode five, Milan paid tribute to Janelle Monáe, a popular American R&B artist. Milan wore a tuxedo and hairstyle very similar to what Monáe wears but was read by the judges for looking too much like 'a boy'. The resident fashion judge, Santino Rice, stated: '... I like that you have so much reverence for Janelle Monáe but I see you as a man. The suit, the pants, even, the saddle shoes; they all read as boy'. The other resident judge, Michelle Visage, continued to read Milan by saying: 'Bottom line: it's still a drag queen competition and you're giving us drag king'.

In season six, another controversial queen, Milk, received a great deal of criticism from her fellow queens as well as the judging panel for consistently blurring the gender lines. A self-ascribed member of the gender-bending club-kid scene, Milk came to *RPDR* to show the world the complexity of the drag community around North America. In spite of her attempts to broaden the perspectives of the show and represent the diversity of the drag community, Milk's drag was repeatedly critiqued by participants on the show. In the Snatch Game episode of the sixth season, Milk's runway look featured RuPaul's pantsuit, a very clearly masculine attire; but instead of being accepted as a creative expression of her drag, Milk was derisively ridiculed as a 'Fuckin' big man<sup>6</sup>' by Gia Gunn.

With both these prominent examples from *RPDR*, it becomes clear that genderqueer drag queens and those who wish to portray anything more than a binary expression of heteronormative gender are not valued nor are they successful on the show. Queens who embody genderqueer drag personas regularly express their desire to 'stay true to themselves' and their aesthetics but are quickly sent home as they are reprimanded for not being able to diversify their looks. *RPDR* has yet to diversify its unspoken qualifications for success, which seems to be at odds with the increasingly diversified nature of the drag community. This appears to be at odds with the ideal characteristics RuPaul states are necessary for any queen who wishes to become America's next drag superstar: charisma, uniqueness, nerve and talent. Due to RuPaul's fame and popularity in mainstream media, the qualifications for success on *RPDR* are strictly within the confines of mirroring her hyperfeminine characteristics.

### ***Gentlemen, start your engines and may the best woman win: heteronormative stereotyping***

In what becomes very clear in seasons five and six, the drag community in the United States is as diverse as the country's population. As the series' only queen from San Francisco indicated during the season finale of season five: '... There are so many different types of drag in San Francisco. We have fairies; we have bearded ladies; we have glamor queens, pageant girls, the Ducal Court; we've got it all'. Over

the series' seven seasons, there have been many types of queens to come and compete on *RPDR* but very few come from beyond the typical pageant or comedy queen genre of drag. This may be due to the producers of *RPDR* not giving credit to the American public being able to comprehend anything but comedic or fishy pageant drag. Because of the heteronormative stance of the culture industry, a diverse representation of drag queens on *RPDR* might be less marketable. In this subsection, we explore the normalization of drag queens and their lifestyles while still perpetuating a heteronormativity that furthers the societal ideology at-large.

In *RPDR*, the audience is presented with numerous efforts to humanize the queens. The audience witnesses stories about the queens' childhoods, the various challenges the queens overcame with regards to growing up gay, as well as an intense effort to depoliticize the nature of same-sex relationships. In season two, Tyra Sanchez opens up about her life before competing on *RPDR*. She explains that: 'As a teenager, I made mistakes. I was out on the streets; I had a son on the way so it was, like, a little scary'. In the same episode, Jessica Wild discusses with RuPaul the basis of the week's main challenge: an autobiography. Jessica says: 'A kid, he always have [*sic*] dreams, daydreams, and at the end, all those dreams, he make [*sic*] come true'. Tatiana, a young queen in season two, explains that she started doing drag at 14 and came out in fifth grade while Pandora Boxx, an older queen, confessed that she attempted suicide when she was younger. For many of the queens on the series, drag provides an outlet through which they can more truly express themselves. Drag can even be interpreted as a means of survival; drag allows queens to appreciate who they are and an opportunity to grow as individuals. These insights into the lives of drag queens makes *RPDR* a powerful tool to disseminate a part of the lived reality many drag queens experience in contemporary American society. Furthermore, we stress that through televisual media, drag queens have been given an opportunity to be normalized in heteronormative American society.

*RPDR* further makes significant efforts to depoliticize the nature of same-sex relationships. With contemporary news media highlighting same-sex marriages in the political sphere, *RPDR* has provided audiences with a contrasting position wherein the normalization of the lives of drag queens undoubtedly includes queens being in committed, significant relationships. Some queens maintain relationships with other queens, for example Sahara Davenport from season two and Manila Luzon from season three or Sharon Needles from season four and Alaska Thunderfuck from season five. Others explain their significant, long-term relationships with men outside the drag community. Chad Michaels from season four shares with his fellow contestants, and the world, about his eight-year relationship with his partner; Willam, also from season four, explains: 'I got married in California when it was legal and then now, all of a sudden it's not. Prop 8 got my ass down hard so I love that I got to do a [Gay] Pride challenge ...' For the queens on *RPDR*, same-sex relationships are not about politics or sexualization; rather, being in a committed relationship means being offered equal rights and opportunities no matter one's sexual orientation or gender expression.

Despite the attempts to normalize and humanize the queens, *RPDR* continues to maintain heteronormative stereotyping. Heteronormative stereotyping refers to when a television show will offer glimpses into the humanity and normality of drag queens while continuing to uphold the normative conventions of society at-large. With very few exceptions, we see a constant oversimplification of sexual position<sup>7</sup> and gender expression. The show often highlights jokes and puns that satirize drag queens and the lived reality of drag while confusing drag as an expression of gender and transgender people as an expression of sexuality. Furthermore, *RPDR* relies upon conventional, heteronormative language when referring to the queens.

At the beginning of every episode in the first five seasons, the queens are introduced to the week's main challenge via a televisual message from RuPaul. The message is played on an intercom system belting: 'Ooooh girl, you've got She-Mail'. This play on words pokes fun at the complex and often misunderstood conception of drag and being a transgender person. Beyond this oversimplification of gender identity and expression, every season of *RPDR* since season two has had a mini-challenge wherein the queens are asked to read their competition. This mini-challenge is an homage to the 1990 film *Paris is Burning* and the queens take turns insulting each other. Notable reads include: '... And you, legendary

you think you are! Legendary? Looks like leg and [rubbing stomach] dairy';<sup>8</sup>... And old Carmen Carrera: honey, just go jump in the ocean; you won't drown, silicone floats';<sup>9</sup> Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the RuPaul Ball. Tonight, in the category of butch queen, Dita Ritz!<sup>10</sup> Roxxy Andrews: condragulations on the weight loss but you're still boxy, Mandrews!<sup>11</sup> The reading mini-challenges reinforce negative stereotypes and perceptions of plastic surgery, genderqueer queens and queens who do not conform to the weight or body conventions of the pageant drag community.

Perhaps the most notable reinforcement of heteronormative stereotypes on *RPDR* is the reliance upon conventional gender binaries when referencing the queens. Queer theorists argue that the difference between queer studies and gay and lesbian studies is the rejection of labelling and categorization (Valocchi 2005). *RPDR* fails to move past gay and lesbian conceptualizations of gender and sexuality, in that wordplay continues to fall along male/female, he/she lines. At the beginning of every episode, RuPaul introduces the challenge of the week and closes with the tagline: 'Gentlemen, start your engines and may the best woman win'. This tagline makes reference to the transition the contestants perform from, albeit feminine, men to hyper-feminine 'women'. Throughout the series, the queens are referred to as ladies, girls, and other conventional pronouns. Subtle verbal attacks on other queens are made when referring to them with masculine gender pronouns. During the fifth season's reading mini-challenge, Roxxy Andrews insults another queen by saying: 'Coco Montrese: for someone who calls himself a top, you sure do like being "on the bottom"'.<sup>12</sup>

*RPDR* makes significant efforts to provide humanizing insights into the lives of the drag queens competing for the crown. In fact, one of the qualifications that the judges look for is a sense of humanity and vulnerability. The queens express the trials and tribulations they have overcome in order to come to Los Angeles to compete for the title of America's next drag superstar. Many queens have explained the hardships they experienced being gay youth and how some parts of the United States are hostile to drag queens. These expressions of humanity and vulnerability are devalued when juxtaposed against the heteronormativity the show reinforces. The show and the contestants make jokes and use puns that satirize and delegitimize the lived reality of drag. Furthermore, heteronormative linguistic conventions such as traditionally gendered pronouns saturate the series' language. *RPDR* holds a great deal of responsibility to humanize drag queens for the American public but does little to challenge heteronormative conventions.

### ***If you can't love yourself, how in the hell you gonna love somebody else? Respect and gender equity***

Given the intense critique *RPDR* has received up to this point, one might assume that the show offers little with regards to respecting drag queens and their unique lived realities. On the contrary, the series offers many portrayals of drag queens as holistic people who are to be seen as equal<sup>13</sup> to their heterosexual and heteronormative counterparts by the show's producers: as relatable and realistic characters as opposed to caricatures. In this final subsection, we present examples and selected quotations that highlight the progressive and respectful depiction of drag queens that make *RPDR* a valuable television show for queens and the audience who loves them.

In every season of *RPDR*, there have been episodes and challenges revolving around the theme of gay pride, HIV/AIDS awareness and education, and education about historically significant gay- and drag-related issues. In each of the episodes that emphasize these themes, the queens provide personal narratives and experiences that better represent holistic characterizations of the queens as people. In season one, the queens participate in a main challenge wherein they must screen test for commercials advertising the MAC Cosmetics' VIVA Glam line. The VIVA Glam campaign is renowned for employing prominent female celebrities, including RuPaul herself, to be the faces of HIV/AIDS awareness. The campaign donates one hundred per cent of its proceeds to benefit people living with HIV/AIDS. Over the course of the episode, the queens relate to the campaign, discuss their experiences with HIV/AIDS and their loved ones living with HIV/AIDS. The season's winning queen delivered a moving speech during her screen test:

Hello there. My name is Bebe Zahara Benet and I stand in front of you as a spokesmodel for 'MAC VIVA Glam'. 'MAC VIVA Glam' gives a hundred per cent of these proceeds to benefit HIV/AIDS. I come from a far away place, a place where HIV/AIDS is very rampant. That place, my home, is called [Cameroon,] Africa. Let us all lend a helping hand. 'MAC VIVA Glam' is doing it. I am doing it. Can you do it?

Bebe Zahara Benet put a different face on the HIV/AIDS epidemic by humanizing Cameroonians living with HIV/AIDS as well as shedding a unique light onto drag queens of colour.

Other seasons take the opportunity to respectfully pay tribute to the generations of LGBTQ people and drag queens who have paved the way for today's drag youth. In season two, the queens were challenged to makeover mature men as their 'drag mommas'. As put by RuPaul, 'Now, we're lucky to live in a time where we can be more open and honest than ever before and we have these men and their generation to thank. Now it's your chance to show your gratitude by making them fabulous.'<sup>14</sup> The season four queens were assigned to decorate small boats based on the original colours of the gay pride flag. Before delegating the colours to the queens, RuPaul educates the queens to a

little *herstory* lesson. Back in 1969 at the Stonewall Riots, it was a *drag queen* [original emphasis] who had the charisma, uniqueness, nerve, and talent to dig her heels in and start a revolution ... and every year since, drag queens have been the shining stars of pride celebrations around the world.

When the queens are not providing their own individualized accounts of pride and self-respect, the show makes significant efforts to educate its audience to the history and importance of drag queens for the LGBTQ movement.

As well as acting as a beacon of drag pride, *RPDR* delivers gay- and drag-powerful messages to the queens and the audience at home. Moreover, beyond the linguistic messages of pride and empowerment, *RPDR* often links challenges to LGBTQ charities and foundations that benefit the LGBTQ community. In every episode, since season one, the closing statement that RuPaul states to the queens and the camera is: 'If you can't love yourself, how in the hell you gonna love somebody else? Can I get an amen?' This positive message summates the necessity for not only drag queens but also all members of the LGBTQ community to find the love and respect within themselves before they can truly love and respect another. Season five features an entire episode, wherein the queens are challenged to write and sing an inspirational anthem in the vein of 'We Are The World'. The song, entitled 'Can I Get An Amen?' is, according to Detox, 'about how drag can save people's lives and change the world'. Before the runway walk on the main stage, one of the season five queens, Jade Jolie, explains how she parted from her family on bad terms. RuPaul's closing statement speaks to Jade as she says: 'I'm much stronger and I love myself much more. You know, when [RuPaul] says you have to love yourself, you definitely do'.

As a means to not only influence the queens and the audience watching *RPDR*, the series attempts to act back upon society. In every season, *RPDR* publicizes and donates proceeds from mini-challenges and musical performances to various charities and foundations that benefit the LGBTQ community, at-risk youth and people living with HIV/AIDS. As previously mentioned, the season one queens worked to create advertisements that publicized MAC Cosmetics' VIVA Glam campaign. In season four, the queens were challenged to 'drag up' stuffed bears into more fabulous drag ones. The bears were then donated for auction to the Bear to Make A Difference Project, an extension of the Matthew Sheppard foundation. Other charities and foundations that *RPDR* donates funds and raises awareness for include the It Gets Better Project and the L.A. Gay & Lesbian Centre's Homeless Youth Services. By working closely with charities and foundations that benefit members of the LGBTQ community as well as people living with HIV/AIDS, *RPDR* works to raise awareness of issues affecting the community while acting back upon society.

## Conclusion

*RPDR* is an influential television show and has the power to act back upon society rather than simply being a product of the material conditions of society. The series influences not only drag culture but American society as a whole. *RPDR* is the most streamed show on the gay-friendly television network's website, LogoTV.com (*PR Newswire* 2009). At the same time, society has the ability to dialectically act back upon *RPDR* as has been witnessed over the course of the sixth season. Since season two, the

queens were introduced to the week's challenge with a recording of RuPaul saying, 'Ooooh girl, you've got She-Mail!' In the spring of 2014, the trans community reacted to this recording and argued that the term 'She-Mail', even as a play on words, was offensive to the trans community (Karlan 2014). Moreover, the fifth episode of the sixth season involved the queens identifying 'biological women' from 'psychological women' in a mini-challenge called 'Female or Shemale?' The mini-challenge coupled with the She-Mail announcement resulted in the trans community and trans allies arguing that the series should eliminate all uses of the terms (Karlan 2014). Starting with the ninth episode, *RPDR* no longer uses the terms that caused controversy.

As society progresses towards increased acceptance of various sexualities and genders, so too does visual media progress. As argued by Marx, society and the ideologies within said society act upon each other in a dialectical fashion (Marx 1978). Furthermore, despite the hegemonic nature of the dominant ideology, alternative ideologies will arise in order to accommodate diverse beliefs and thought systems (Williams 1991, 415). As such, major television networks will attempt to create alternative ideological platforms or entirely new networks. Some television networks that are seen as gay-friendly include NBC, the network that broadcast *Will & Grace* (1998–2006),<sup>15</sup> Bravo, a subsidiary of NBC, and Logo. Although these networks create shows that appeal to wider audiences and attempt to provide more equitable representations of LGBTQ individuals, we believe that our contribution shows that even superficially progressive and 'alternative' shows such as *RPDR* maintain aspects of the dominant heteronormative ideology. Our modified rubric has shown that over the course of the seven seasons, *RPDR* portrays drag queens in a wide range of lights, from intense ridicule and denigration to increased humanization despite heteronormative stereotyping to holistic and respectful representations. This is to say that the drag queens on *RPDR*, although often holistically represented, are performing gender in the confines of a televised network. What is more, efforts by individual participants to engage in aspects of queer activism or opportunities to break with heteronormativity are often met with ridicule and, more often, elimination from the competition.

This research is by no means exhaustive and there exists many further forms of examination by which one can analyse *RPDR*. This research does not attempt to explain the devolution of 'progress' over the course of the show's broadcast. This is to say that the first season, and to a lesser extent the second season, express fewer examples of ridicule and heteronormative stereotyping when compared with seasons three, four, five, six and seven. This may be due to the network wishing to spark controversy among the queens and for the viewers. It should not be forgotten that *RPDR* is a reality show and, as such, must deliver drama in order to maintain higher ratings. Furthermore, *RPDR* is a television show broadcast in the United States within the confines of the heteronormative structure of American televisual media. If Logo can broadcast more controversy among the queens, then they ideally would be able to gain more viewers. In spite of this research's limitations, the authors believe that this paper provides a unique perspective into the production of gender on a prominent and popular television show, *RPDR*.

## Notes

1. A modified rubric was chosen and is most appropriate for our study as ours is not a semiotic study of representations of genderqueerness (cf. Kress 2003, 35–36 or Heydon 2007).
2. Season 4, episode 2.
3. Season 4, episode 6.
4. Season 5, episode 5.
5. Season 6, episodes 2 and 5.
6. Season 6, episode 5.
7. Referring to 'top' or 'bottom', as in sexual position.
8. Season 2, episode 7.
9. Season 3, episode 7.
10. Season 4, episode 7.
11. Season 5, episode 7.
12. Season 5, episode 7.

13. This article is not the place to analyse the depiction of heterosexual and heteronormative counterparts; we hold this constant as an ideal type and an assumption that the dominant media typically portrays sexuality as binary and heterosexuality as taken for granted and normative.
14. Season 2, episode 8.
15. The authors wrote an article critically analyzing *Will & Grace's* representation of gay men using the same rubric as this paper.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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## Appendix 1

**Table 1.** Three stages of gender and sexuality representation on television.

Stage 1: ridicule	Stage 2: heteronormative stereotyping	Stage 3: respect
TV shows use mockery, homophobic slurs, and jokes at the characters' expense: perpetuate negative stereotypes (Raley and Lucas 2006, 24)	TV shows offer 'normalcy' for LGBTQ characters while perpetuating heteronormative stereotypes (Seidman 2002, 133)	TV shows portray queer characters as holistic characters equal to heterosexual counterparts on other shows (Raley and Lucas 2006,24)