“Shantay, You Stay”: RuPaul's Drag Race as Unconventional Reality Television

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**Introduction**

*RuPaul’s Drag Race* began in 2009 as a spin off of the smash hit *America’s Next Top Model*. The show, now in its 10th season, features 14 drag queens competing in mini challenges and a final runway. Every episode, the two least successful queens must compete in an epic lip-sync battle to fight for their lives in the competition. At the end of a season, a winner is crowned, and receives a one year supply of makeup from Anastasia Beverly Hills, 100,000 dollars, and the title of America’s next drag superstar. Past winners have gone on to have notable careers and gain a significant social media backing. What Julliard does for musicians, the *Drag Race* stage does for drag queens, making it the most prestigious place for a queen to show off their craft.

The network currently airing *Drag Race*, VH1, describes the show as “the fiercest competition on primetime”, and says that every episode gives fans “more fashion, lip-syncs and drag than ever before” (VH1, 2018). From its inception in 2009 until it's 8th season, *Drag Race* aired on Logo TV, owned by the same parent company, Viacom, as VH1. Pamela Post, Vice President at Logo TV, explained in an interview with *Bustle* that, “Coming off RuPaul’s Emmy win and a ratings record-breaking season of All Stars, the fandom around RuPaul’s Drag Race has only continued to swell as we head into season nine. Broadcasting the show on VH1 will allow more fans to experience the energy, heart, and talent these fierce queens bring to the stage every week” (Bradley, 2017, p.1). The recent move to a bigger network speaks volumes about the success of *Drag Race*.

In this textual analysis of *Rupaul's Drag Race*, I argue that the show is an unconventional reality TV program, because it not consistent with several defining characteristics of the genre. To begin, I will discuss the characteristics of reality TV with which *Drag Race* is compatible, asserting its status as a reality TV show. Then, I will discuss
the characteristics that set *Drag Race* apart from most other reality TV programming, highlighting its unconventionality. I will do so by assessing the ways in which *Drag Race* works against traditional neoliberal values, and by drawing attention to the portrayal of race, gender, and class on *Drag Race*.

I will be using male pronouns when referring to specific drag queens as well as RuPaul in this paper. The majority of queens, as well as RuPaul, use female pronouns when in drag but still identify as male. For the sake of clarity, I will use male pronouns when referring to the contestants, who all appear on the show both in and out of drag, and therefore use both pronouns on the show. One notable exception to this is a queen from season 9, Peppermint, who identifies as transgender. Peppermint will be referred to by female pronouns due to her gender identity.

**Drag Race as Traditional Reality TV**

**The Basics: Real People, No writers, Low Production Value**

According to authors Ouellette and Murray (2009), some defining characteristics of reality TV are that it features real people, has no writers, and has an extremely low production value. All of these things are true about *Drag Race*. Drag queens from around the world submit their audition tapes and are handpicked by RuPaul to compete on the show. Like most reality tv programs, *Drag Race* does not have any writers. Instead, editors work to pick out the most exciting “real” moments between the queens, and these make it on the air. As for production value, this quote reveals just how little production was willing to give to *Drag Race* in its first season. According to the paratext *Screenrant*, “The production value was so low that, in order to transform the appearance of things into something more glamorous, a substantial (and now laughable) ‘filter’ was applied over the footage… RuPaul
himself has poked fun at the show’s first year, and even refers to the entire season as ‘a pilot’ for the overall series” (Sim, 2018, p.1).

**Create, Succeed, Repeat**

Another characteristic of reality TV is that the style of a successful show can be repeated many times. For example, *Drag Race* is a traditional gamedoc, a style of reality TV popularized by *Survivor* in 2002 (Magder, 2009). Many gamedocs have seen huge success by copying the blueprint laid out by *Survivor*, and *Drag Race* is no exception. *Drag Race* fits the bill of a traditional gamedoc in that it features mini competitions where contestants can win prizes, and one person is kicked off of the show every week. Also, a major prize is awarded at the end of the show, which is consistent with the gamedoc style of reality TV. The fact that *Drag Race* is a spin off of *America’s Next Top Model* is also consistent with the workings of reality TV, where one type of show is recreated many times to maximize profit (Magder, 2009).

**Drag Race as “Unabashedly Commercial”**

Reality TV, as Ouellette and Murray put it, is “unabashedly commercial” (2009, p.3). This means that reality TV shamelessly seeks to deliver audiences in a buying mood through product placement. *Drag Race* approaches product placement in such an obvious way that it comes across as comical. For example, in season 9 episode 12, the top three queens are featured on RuPaul's podcast, and as a gift for their participation, RuPaul gives them each a Squatty Potty, which is a stool intended to be put under your feet while using the restroom. Not only is the product itself comical, but RuPaul’s less-than-subtle approach to incorporating it into the show leaves audience members wondering what exactly they just watched. The show, like many other reality TV programs, also seeks to engage the audience through participation tactics. *Drag Race* uses hashtags on various social media platforms to
gauge the popularity of the top three queens at the end of every season. It also asks America to vote for one queen to be Mrs. Congeniality every season, and the winner of this award receives 5,000 dollars.

**The Importance of the Political Economy**

Magder (2009) highlights the importance of the political economy in relation to reality TV. In order for a show to be successful, it must fit the expectations of the network on which it airs, and the rest of the world. This is because reality TV is, first and foremost, a business. A show that will not garner positive public attention will not get picked up by any major networks. For this reason, Drag Race was risky for Logo TV to air. It is no secret that the United States is still not an entirely safe space for the LGBTQ+ community. In 2009, when the show first aired, gay marriage was illegal, and would not be legalized in all states for another six years. The staff at Logo TV had to wonder if society was ready for a show like Drag Race.

Logo TV ultimately took the risk and aired Drag Race, and it paid off. The show fits enough of the characteristics of traditional reality TV, and society was advanced enough in their views of sexuality and gender identity that the show garnered positive attention from viewers. The fact that Drag Race recently moved to a bigger network (VH1) speaks not only to the success of the show, but the continued acceptance of all sexual orientations by society.

**Drag Race as Unconventional Reality TV**

*Neoliberalism: Consumption*

Many reality TV programs seek to create an ideal neoliberal citizen by promoting neoliberal values such as consumption, financial independence and employability (Ouellette, 2009). The ideal neoliberal citizen is straight, cis gendered, and married (Ouellette, 2009). None of these words accurately describe the contestants featured on Drag Race. Though
*Drag Race* endorses consumption by viewers through a kitschy type of product placement, it does not depict consumption as vital to success in the storylines present on the show. For example, Naysha Lopez, a queen featured on Season 8 who identifies as a “pageant queen”, repeatedly brags about the money he spends on drag. Naysha, displeased with the first runway challenge, says, “I don’t do drag on a dime. I brought so many extravagant gowns… I spent money” (Season 8, episode 1). Despite his large wallet, Naysha is the first eliminated. In the next episode the judges say to another contestant, “It’s not about money girl...I know you can turn a look” (Season 8, episode 2), further illustrating that the judges on *Drag Race* are more interested in promoting creativity than consumption.

**Neoliberalism: Shame**

Shame is often used on reality TV to control participants, and coerce them into conforming to neoliberal ideals. This is especially true of reality TV programs that feature male contestants according to Sender (2006). This is not true, however, of *Drag Race*, making it especially unique. Sender (2006) say that, “shame is feeling bad about who one is, with an attendant anxiety about rejection as a whole person… [reality TV] mobilizes shame not only to exhort participants to modify their behavior but to recalibrate their selves according to new rules of subjechthood” (p.143).

In instances where contestants might be shamed for being unconventional on other reality tv programs, contestants on *Drag Race* are, instead, celebrated for their difference. In fact, the queens are encouraged throughout the show to work with the skills that they have, and not to try to be like anyone else. For example, Bob the drag queen, who identifies as a “comedy queen”, is repeatedly praised for knowing what he is good at and working with it. As a result, he wins the 8th season. Similarly, Kim Chi, who cannot walk in heels or dance to save his life, is celebrated for his ability to do extravagant makeup and design incredible
outfits. He is also praised by the judges for trying his best to dance. Instead of using shame to mould contestants into ideal neoliberal citizens, *Drag Race* encourages difference, and praises contestants who are unapologetically themselves.

**Neoliberalism: Employment**

A key aim of neoliberalism is to create employable citizens (Ouellette, 2009). Employability is central to neoliberalism because citizens are supposed to be independant, and not rely on the state for financial support. This is not the aim of *Drag Race*. Being a drag queen cannot accurately be described as stable employment. Even for the most successful queens, it involves working inconsistent and undesirable hours, and going to incredible lengths, such as cinching your waist to 15 inches (Violet Chachki, season 7 winner, had a 15 inch corseted waist) for the sake of art. Many queens on the show describe the woes of late nights in a bar performing for a handful of people. Instead of encouraging employability through adhering to neoliberal values, *Drag Race* encourages creativity and explicitly gives contestants the opportunity to work in an unconventional type of employment. Although not stable employment, being a drag queen is fulfilling for these men, and competing on *Drag Race* is a defining moment in the career of many drag queens.

**The Construction of Identity**

Fox discusses how identity is formed on a reality tv program by not only the contestant themselves, but by production, and by viewers (2013). Fox illustrates this point by explaining how he was framed by production and the audience of *Big Brother* as a stereotypical gay man (2013). Reality tv programs have a tendency to stereotype contestants, because contestants need to be relatable in order to garner positive attention from audiences. For example, Fox, as the token gay man on *Big Brother*, would not be useful to production if he did not personify at least some characteristics associated with being gay, that audience
members could identify with. But Fox is not the only person who suffers the woes of being seriously underdeveloped as a reality tv persona. In examining the Race Wars season of Survivor, author Drew points out how contestants on reality often fall victim to stereotypes (Drew, 2011). Ozzy is described as Mowgli from The Jungle Book due to his race, and his ability to climb trees (Drew, 2011). Yule is talked about almost exclusively for his intellect due to his Asian American heritage, despite the fact that he is also an above average physical player (Drew, 2011).

In comparison, Drag Race allows for much more character development, and much less stereotyping, than many other reality TV programs. For example, season 8 queen, Chi Chi Devayne, is from the deep south. He speaks with a strong southern accent, and talks about eating strange animal parts on several occasions. He says, “I’m from the south. I eat everything. Opossum, rats, raccoons…” (Season 8, episode 1). In this scene, Chi Chi embodies a southern stereotype. However, Drag Race develops Chi Chi’s character further than this. Instead of the show framing Chi Chi exclusively as an unintelligent southern belle, which is quite common of reality TV (Kraszewski, 2009), they show him coming to terms with his own identity. It is also notable that the judges never ask Chi Chi to alter the way he speaks to sound more like standard american English, as this is common of southerners on reality TV (Hasinoff, 2008). Chi Chi says,”I never really realized how much I hated where I come from until I got here…” (Season 8, episode 9). Instead of the judges encouraging Chi Chi to change himself to be more consistent with neoliberal values in order to “be more employable” or “present more professionally”, they tell him to embrace his southern charm, and accept himself for who he is. RuPaul says, “Just be you. That's why I sent you a plane ticket” (Season 8, episode 7). Drag Race offers us a deep look into Chi Chi’s personal development instead of reducing him to a stereotype.
Race, Gender, and Class Analysis

The Portrayal of Race on Drag Race

*Drag Race* often features scenes where the contestants do their makeup in preparation for the final runway challenge while grappling with the complex nature of issues such as race, gender, and class. This makes *Drag Race* unique, because reality TV shows have a tendency of blaming these complex issues on individuals flaws of character (Kraszewski, 2009). In one scene from season 8, Bob the drag queen opens up about his experiences with what Kraszewski calls inferential racism (2009). Bob says, “Don’t even get me started on being ‘kind of cute for a black guy’” (episode 5). In this quote, Bob is diagnosing the fact that people sometimes make unintentionally racist comments, and even mistakenly think they are a compliment. In episode 7 of season 8, queen Kim Chi opens up about his struggles as a queen from South Korea, where there is almost no drag culture, and hostile attitudes toward drag exist. These kinds of open conversations about race and racism set *Drag Race* apart from most other reality TV programs.

The Portrayal of Gender on Drag Race

Due to the very nature of the show, the portrayal of gender on *Drag Race* differs greatly from most other reality TV programs. The premise of the show requires a certain amount of gender fluidity, since it features men wearing hyperfemamine attire as a form of self expression. Author Fox discusses the fact that often, one token gay character is featured on a reality TV show (2013). *Drag Race* flips this dynamic entirely. On every season, the vast majority of contestants identify as gay, and the show has also featured transgender contestants. The show’s contestants, although male, rarely display traditionally masculine acts on the show. Instead, they can be seen sewing, dancing, applying makeup, and walking the runway, usually in heels.
In season 9 episode 6, the queen Peppermint discusses her trans identity, and the cruelty she has faced because of her identity. Transgendered people are rarely featured on reality TV, so viewers scarcely hear about trans issues. This makes Peppermint’s appearance on Drag Race particularly poignant. It is worth noting that Rupaul has recently come under fire for making transphobic comments. Rupaul, in an interview with The Guardian, said, “You can identify as a woman and say you’re transitioning, but it changes once you start changing your body. It takes on a different thing; it changes the whole concept of what we’re doing” (Aitkenhead, 2018, p.1). He went on to compare transitioning and being on Drag Race to taking performance enhancing drugs and competing in the olympics (Aitkenhead, 2018). RuPaul has received a lot of backlash not only from fans, but from past queens as well. Drag Race certainly features a more progressive depiction of gender than is available on most other reality TV shows, however, clearly it is not entirely accepting of all gender identities.

The Portrayal of Class on Drag Race

The majority of reality tv programs feature wealthy people. A study done by two professors at Södertörn University in Sweden found that the upper-class are vastly over represented in this genre compared to others (Fredrik Stiernstedt & Peter Jakobsson, 2017). Think Keeping Up With the Kardashians, Botched, Say Yes to the Dress, or The Real Housewives of anywhere. What do all of these programs have in common? The participants are all upper-class. This is not to say that reality TV only features the upper-class. An entire sub-genre exists which focuses solely on assisting the middle and lower classes. Shows like Extreme Makeover: Home Edition, Style By Jury, and What Not to Wear fit into this category. Even in the shows that do feature middle and lower-class contestants, class issues, such as poverty, are rarely discussed.
*Drag Race*, however, does feature a storyline about the struggles of living in poverty or the lower-class. In episode 7 of season 8, queen Chi Chi DeVayne opens up about his struggles with growing up extremely poor, and attempting to break out of the cycle of poverty. In several instances throughout season 8 of *Drag Race*, Chi Chi expresses that he feels that he lacks not only economic capital, but cultural capital as well (McCoy & Scarborough, 2014). Chi Chi says, “where I come from, it’s damn hard to get out of the ghetto. I don’t want to be ghetto” (Season 8, episode 7). In this quote, Chi Chi is expressing his internalized desire to “fit in” with neoliberal ideals, which value the capital that he feels he lacks. Even given the explicit opportunity to tell Chi Chi something consistent with neoliberalism like “work hard and you’ll get there”, the judges refuse, and instead reiterate that Chi Chi is valuable even without money.

**Conclusion**

*Drag Race* is consistent with some characteristics of reality TV. For example, the program’s use of non actors and product placement is relatively typical. The show, however, rejects other defining aspects of the genre. For example, *Drag Race* does not seek to create ideal neoliberal citizens, and its portrayal of race, gender, and class is notably different than most other reality TV programs. It is for this reason that I conclude that *Drag Race* is indeed an example of unconventional reality TV. *Drag Race* is progressive in that it grapples with the complexity of race and class, and it features characters of all sexualities and gender identities. Reality TV lovers and critics alike can only have this to say about *Drag Race*’s progressive place in the genre of reality TV: Shantay, you stay.
References


