The Ru-volution will be Televised: Unveiling the Commercialization of Drag in RuPaul's Drag Race through Bourdieu's Theory of Practice

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Title: The Ru-volution will be Televised: Unveiling the Commercialization of Drag in RuPaul's Drag Race through Bourdieu's Theory of Practice

This dissertation explores the commodification of drag by exploring the reality competition series *RuPaul's Drag Race*. Using Bourdieu's Theory of Practice, the show draws its data from the first fourteen seasons of the show, as well as the first season seasons of *RuPaul's Drag: All Stars*, and the show's behind-the-scenes series *Untucked*, as case studies to examine the impact of the show's major sponsors. As a third case study, this project also focuses on RuPaul's Drag Con, the show's official drag convention. In using these case studies, I argue that the although initially the show's sponsors had a major impact in how drag was performed within the show, these corporate demands of drag became embedded within the program and became self-regulating. Such, the show's popularity and the sponsor's impact ultimately changed the field of drag and made it more palatable for a mainstream audience and advertisers. Further, since *Drag Race* is seen as the apex of what drag is, the show becomes a gatekeeper for those who wish to make a career out of the artform, thereby demanding people conform to the show's limited interpretation of drag.

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CHAPTER 1: START YOUR ENGINES- INTRODUCTION TO *RUPAUL'S DRAG RACE* AND MY PROJECT

Say yes to drag
Yes ma'am to drag
It slays,
It pays.
Kennedy Davenport, "Drag Up Your Life," 2018

As part of the promotion for the seventh season of the reality competition series *RuPaul's Drag Race: All Stars*, the contestants had a whirlwind week in New York City. This season was different from all other seasons because only former winners would be competing for the crown and 200,000 dollars. On Monday May 9, 2022, the queens were joined by CEO and Executive Director of the Trevor Project—an LGBTQ+ suicide prevention nonprofit—Amit Paley as they began their press tour, starting by lighting up the Empire State Building. The next day, May 10, the queens rang the opening bell at NASDAQ, as seen in Figure 1. Shea Couleé, a contestant on the new season and winner of *RuPaul's Drag Race: All Stars* season 5, states opened the day by giving a speech about the new season:



Figure 1: The Queens of RuPaul's Drag Race: All Stars 7 at Nasdaq (Haus Monsoon, 2022).

> I want to thank NASDAQ for helping *RuPaul's Drag Race: All Stars* celebrate our upcoming season seven premier starting May 20 exclusively on Paramount Plus. This

season is going to be iconic as it features a cast of all winners and together we represent over a decade of what scholars will one day call the drag revolution (NASDAQ, 2022). Shea's speech exemplifies two things. First, the speech shows how these queens are being used to market not only the show, but also the streaming platform that is exclusively airing the new season. But secondly, it speaks to me, as the scholar who is writing this dissertation about this very "drag revolution."

The following day, the queens revealed, or ru-vealed might be more appropriate given RuPaul's affinity for puns with his name, window displays at Saks Fifth Avenue inspired by each drag queen. Each display had a quote that matched the queen. For example, Shea's window, Figure 2, read, "she didn't come to play, she came to slay" (Nolfi, 2022). Each of the eight former winners stood in their displays for while press took pictures of them. The promotional tour ended in Los Angeles, with a panel at RuPaul's Drag Con, the official convention of *RuPaul's Drag Race*.



Figure 2: Shea Couleé's window at Saks Fifth Avenue (Nolfi, 2022).

RuPaul's Drag Race's reiteration of drag is at odds with its history. While no one knows who the first drag queen was, or really where the term drag originates from, drag has been practiced for several hundred years. However, the very presence of drag queens at the New York Stock exchange is quite a fitting metaphor for our contemporary understanding of drag. The

Stock Exchange is a place where securities are bought and sold. Media operates in a similar fashion. Both require financial capital to operate, both are influenced by supply and demand consumption patterns, and both have cultural impacts that can influence public perception and shape societal values. It is therefore fitting that drag queens rang the opening bell at the Stock Exchange, as they are also a commodity, thanks in large part to the show that they promoting: *RuPaul's Drag Race*.

The press tour shows how far the reality competition show has come, but to an extent reflects the life of the host and namesake of the show, RuPaul. The first lines spoken on the pilot episode reflect fictitious a rag to riches narrative: "I, RuPaul, was a born a poor Black child in the Brewster Housing Projects of San Diego California. But baby. 'You better work'" (Charles, 2009). What follows is then a highlight reel of RuPaul's career, from walking runways to being a model for MAC's Viva Glam Campaign. Inextricably intertwined within both the *All Stars* 7 promotional tour and the first moments of the first season of *Drag Race* are the importance of economic success and prosperity. The show is dedicated to the commercial success of drag. If anything, the *All Stars* 7 promotional tour shows how the show's producers have successfully made drag into a commodity that can be branded, bought, and traded.

But what is that history? This project seeks to explore the economic history of *RuPaul's Drag Race* to better understand not only the show, but also how the artform of drag itself has shifted in response to the cultural phenomenon grounding my reading in Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice. This project has three distinct goals. These goals are cumulative and build off of each other. The first goal is to engage both academic work and popular criticism of RPDR. A lot of the work done by critics and fans of the show can deepen our understanding of the competition series and can be on par with academic work. As such, I hope this project functions as a bridge

between the two spheres. The second goal is to establish a history of the show, created by joining disparate interviews with RuPaul, producers, judges, and contestants, which are akin to oral histories of the show. Treating these interviews as oral histories not only enriches our understanding of the show, but also provides us with rich texts to examine and evaluate. The final goal is to provide an understanding of how these commercial elements have changed the trajectory of drag. While drag has always been commodified, the show is unique in that it relies heavily on corporate sponsorship to even exist. As such, the show's mainstream success forever changed the relationship between drag and market ideologies. Further, by exploring these economic interests, I also contribute to the literature by showcasing how *RuPaul's Drag Race* has changed very field of drag to be more in line with market interests.

The project itself comes from not only my intellectual curiosity, but also from my deep love and appreciation for the show. Even though I was born and raised in Los Angeles, it was *RuPaul's Drag Race* that introduced me to drag and to a broader queer community. Seeing the show at first was phantasmagorical. Not only because of the terrible Vaseline filter that the first season used, but because it was my first time exposed to drag queens. It was bizarre and fantastic. As the seasons continued, I stayed with the show, and it showed me new realities that elaborated on queer life. Ultimately, this project is my love letter and thank you to the show. Thus, in a selfish manner, this project also explores my own complicated relationship with the show, as I have been an adamant fan from the beginning and have witnessed the show become the cultural juggernaut it is now.

Reading is What? Fundamental: Review of Literature

To quote Sasha Velour, winner of the ninth season of the show, "there's a lot of pretty girls, but a queen better know shit" (CLAT, 2017). As such, this is the area of the dissertation

where I prove that I do, in fact, know shit. What follows is a review of the relevant literature, both academic and non-academic, as it relates to the topic at hand. I view this project laying at the intersections of different field of studies, namely queer television studies, drag, and *RuPaul's Drag Race*. Gray and Lotz (2011) note that there are many avenues of research in television studies, one of them being contextual program analysis. This approach situates a television show, in this case *RuPaul's Drag Race*, placing the show within context of its environment. Gray and Lotz regard a show as a player in a system, alongside other shows, industries, and audiences. As such, each of these players affect each other.

One of the grounding texts for the understanding of my project is Larry Gross' (2001) *Up from Invisibility.* Gross' book notes the limitations of representation, and acknowledges that queer representation, up to the time of his writing, rarely embraced nuanced queer characters. Rather, shows relied heavily on stereotypes. Through case studies, Gross questions the power of visibility when queer identity is contrived and unable to honor the complex realities of queer individuals.

Another one of my grounding texts is Ron Becker's (2006) *Gay Tv and Straight America*. This book examines the representation of queer individuals on American television and how they helped shaped cultural attitudes towards homosexuality. Here Becker draws two distinct worlds, a queer America and a straight America. As such, many queer characters on early 1990s television were representations of what Becker deems straight panic, "what happens when heterosexual men and women, still insecure about the boundary between gay and straight, confront an increasingly accepted homosexuality" (2006, p. 23). For Becker, the increasing acceptance of homosexuality decentered straightness as the only acceptable sexuality, and therefore questioned if heterosexuality was in fact morally superior. Therefore, television's role

in queer representation became more important. Openly queer programming, like *Will and Grace* and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, helped humanize queer people in straight America's eyes. At the same time though, these shows both challenged and reassures stereotypes, particularly of gay men (Papacharissi & Fernback, 2008).

Julia Himberg (2017) notes the importance of television's impact on queer acceptance when she quotes Joe Biden's comment about sitcom *Will and Grace*'s impact on LGBT acceptance. Himberg views this as a wider trend, noting the proliferation of industry articles that make similar claims. Her research, however, complicates the traditional narratives that television's portrayal of queer characters as apolitical by interviewing industry workers, in the process showing how their belief systems impact the images we see of the queer community. In many ways, my work echoes Himberg's argument, noting the impact of those in the production of *RuPaul's Drag Race* has on drag. I do, however, position that the show has become apolitical precisely because of these producers.

What follows, then, is my review of literature. I start off with a brief history of drag prior to the show's premier in 2009, then move to discuss the cultural context of the show. After setting up the show, I discuss how drag has been traditionally been understood within an academic perspective. I then move on to discuss Bourdieu's theory of cultural production, which grounds my research and analysis of the show.

History of Drag Prior to *RPDR*

Several scholars have pointed out that a major turning point for drag was Jennie Livingston's 1990 documentary *Paris is Burning* (Collins, 2017). This documentary chronicles New York's ball culture through one-on-one interviews with many participants of the underground scene, particularly focuses on the experiences of Black and Latine gay and

transgender communities. Ball culture is of particular importance to *RuPaul's Drag Race*, as many of the terms that appear throughout the show come from the documentary, such as reading, realness, and throwing shade, to name a few. Even further, one of the head judges of the show Michelle Visage participated in ballroom. While the documentary does portray some drag, it would be unfair for me to call this a documentary about drag queens since it is predominately about the experiences of the Black and Brown ballroom community. Drag is not central in the narrative of the documentary, as the people in drag do not discuss drag, but rather their experiences in ballroom.

However, I contest that the 1968 documentary *The Queen* (Simon, 1968) would be a better example of early drag culture. This documentary features Flawless Sabrina organizing the 1967 Miss All-America Camp Beauty Contest, coincidentally the last drag pageant she hosted. The film was well received and won an award at the Cannes Film Festival. This film provided an insight into the drag scene at that time, also highlighting racial discrimination within the drag scene. The film is also important as it highlights a scene between Flawless Sabrina and contestant Crystal Labeija, who noted that the pageant was rigged in favor of a White queen. Flawless Sabrina, for her part, gained some popular recognition as she promoted the documentary on national television talk shows in drag (Balzer, 2005).

While drag pageants still occur, most drag queens perform at bars. Queens get on stage—no matter how small or big—host the show and perform lip sync numbers. Within the context of the United States, drag shows range from one-woman shows to full shows with multiple queens. For example, the YouTube page for Micky's in West Hollywood shows what an average drag show looks like. Generally, a lineup of queens performs with one of the queens performing as the host. She makes sure to fire up the audience for the performances to come, but also makes sure to tell the audience to get drinks at the bar. The performing queen is then introduced. As the queen comes out, she lip syncs to a prerecorded track, generally pop music. She then either dances or saunters around stage, collecting tips from the audience as she moves across the room. A performance length depends on the song or mix they are performing. When the number ends, the queen then goes around collecting any last tips and then departs from the stage. Some queens, depending on the region, also have one woman shows, where they have a mix of songs and personal dialogue. Of course, drag is not a monolith so not every drag queen performs the same way.



Figure 3: Los Angeles drag queen Mija at Precinct in Downtown Los Angeles (Urban, 2023).

However, most drag shows are transactional in nature. Even in my most broad description, I have discussed how usually during a queens' show, she collects tips from the audience, but they also have a booking fee. This fee ranges from queen to queen, but according to two Seattle queens, there is a flat fee of about 30-60 dollars (Chapman, 2018). This booking

fee, of course, changes where the market and the popularity of the queen. Further, the queens also promote their own shows on social media, drawing more people to the bar. The imperative for having more people at the bars is twofold. First, it allows more people to tip the queen. Secondly, it means the bar itself gets more patrons. The queens also do more work for the bar, as they promote any bar specials. For example, the last drag show I went to, the queens kept referring to the bar specials, enticing us to go get drinks. And to quote former *RPDR* contestant Alaska Thunderfuck, "the more you drink, the prettier we look" (Thunderfuck, 2015). There is a thus a financially symbiotic relationship between the bar and the drag queens.

Thus, drag traditionally has been very much temporally and spatially bound to the stage. The title drag queen usually meant a gay man who dressed in women's clothing and performed in gay bars. In this narrow definition, drag queens are unique persons who "make no pretense about not being male" (Barrett, 1998, p.140). This definition makes a distinction between a person's sexual identity and the location of their performance. Drag has traditionally been performed on stages across the world for a long time. Our contemporary understanding of drag comes from Newton's (1972) study, which identifies drag, or what she calls female impersonators, as "professional performers" (p.4). Yet Newton narrowly defines drag. Her definition of drag ignores the ranges of performances, such as androgyny or genderfuck—an aesthetic that consists of a mixture of masculine and feminine characteristics—or tranimals, which use surrealism and emphasis on the male body by not shaving or tucking—rearranging the penis and testicles back to appear smooth and flat—to draw attention to the clash of genders. Regardless of what style drag queens presented, they were paid to entertain audiences in clubs, be their straight or gay. At worst, the performers were an oddity for tourists to gaze upon, at best they were celebrated for their glamour and wit.

However, these performances are intrinsically tied to commodities. Queens have to provide their own tools, such as makeup, wigs, outfits, and the like. Further, they also have to have the means to provide the song or mix to the DJ at the bar they are working at. For example, Cookie Couture, a Seattle based performer, estimates that a general drag outfit may cost about $300 (Chapman, 2018). Bar managers and promoters pay the queens to perform, be with either a small stipend or drink tickets. Such, prior to *RuPaul's Drag Race*, drag was a passion project. As BenDeLaCreme noted in an interview, "now, people see drag as a path to fame and fortune. They get into it for those reasons. Whereas when you got into it before *Drag Race* took off, you had to love drag so much that you did it in spite of the fact that you would never be rich and never be famous" (Montell and Medina-Maté, 2022). Drag, in of itself, was not a successful, profitable career. That is, not until the reality television show took off.

Cultural Context for the show

The story of *RuPaul's Drag Race* starts prior to the show's premier in 2009. The namesake of the show, RuPaul, full name RuPaul Andre Charles, was a staple in the New York nightlight scene. While RuPaul dabbled in other forms of drag, namely Club Kid and Gender Fuck, he would eventually fall upon the hyper-feminine supermodel aesthetic, which he named the Glamazon—a portmanteau of glamor and Amazon. RuPaul would see their first commercial success with his single "Supermodel of the World" (1993). The following year, he became the first drag queen to land a major cosmetic advertising campaign with MAC Cosmetics. He

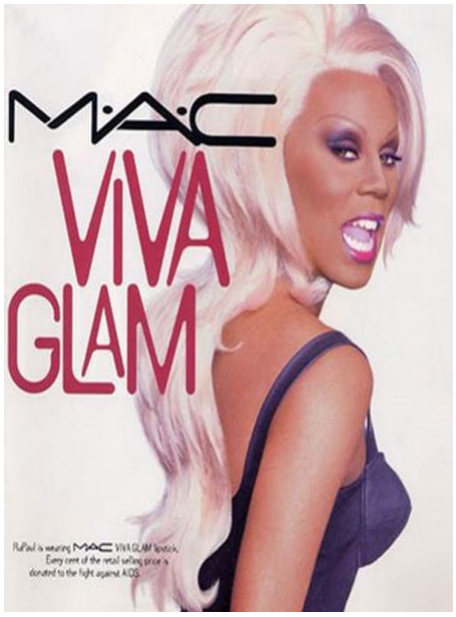


Figure 4: RuPaul's 1994 Viva Glam Campaign (Tyilo, 2019).

appeared, both in and out of drag, in several films, including Spike Lee's *Crooklyn* (1994), *To Wong Foo* (1995), and *But I'm a Cheerleader* (1999) to name a few. In 1996, he also had his own VH1 talk show, appropriately named *The RuPaul Show*, with his co-host Michelle Visage, who is also now a judge in the competition series.

RuPaul used their successful commercial success as a drag queen to position herself as a drag authority (Edgar, 2011). Even after the *RuPaul Show* ended, the zeitgeist still viewed RuPaul as the predominant authority on drag. His authority on drag included being featured as a guest judge on a drag-centered challenge of *Project Runway* in 2008. As such, RuPaul, and the Glamazon—a portmanteau of glamorous and Amazon—aesthetic she embodies, became a drag staple in popular culture, and her drag is seen as the defining trait of drag in the mainstream. While other queens were working in the industry, such as Coco Peru, they did not receive the same media attention that RuPaul did.

According to RuPaul, he had been offered the chance to do reality television shows before, but he did not want to do anything "meanspirited." It is unclear what RuPaul means by "meanspirited," but there seems to be a fear that the artform would be mocked or degraded. But once Randy Barbato of World of Wonder Production reassured RuPaul that the show would be a celebration of the artform of drag, RuPaul agreed. World of Wonder, WOW, ended up co-financing the first season themselves (Johnson, 2022). RuPaul, along with Barbato and Fenton Bailey, pitched the show to five different networks, who each declined. However, Logo TV was "ready to greenlight it in the pitch" (Delaney, 2018). Logo TV, also referred to as Logo, is a subsidiary company owned by Paramount Media. The network launched in 2005 with direct intention to market to the LGBT community. They claim that " Logo has blazed a trail as the first commercial cable network made for the LGBTQ+ community, with a diverse collection of

content aimed at celebrating queer culture through scripted television, online exclusives and more" (About, 2022). The channel was often available through cable service bundles. Unlike other queer cable networks, Logo primarily relied on advertising revenue. As such, the network promised investors access to an "educated, affluent audience" (Chavez and Place, 2013, p.159). That said, the network's main appeal to queer audiences was the fact that Logo could display broader representations of queerness, rather than the sanitized versions available on broadcast television (Aslinger, 2009).

Thus, a show that celebrated an intrinsically queer artform hosted by a famous Black gay man made sense for the network. The original premise, according to former contestants, was very different than the *Drag Race* we have today. The queens would compete, but they would also have their best friend or assistant in the werkroom, the show's name for the workroom (Thunderfuck 5000 and Belli, 2018). However, that concept was scrapped and instead we got the format we have today. The show was very much meant to be a parody of *America's Next Top Model* and *Project Runway*. In fact, *Drag Race* hired people who had previously been on both shows, Mathu Anderson and Santino Rice. Anderson was a makeup artist on *Top Model* before becoming Ru's makeup artist, while Rice, a judge on *Drag Race*, was a contestant on *Project Runway*. Further, the third season's winner, Raja, was also a makeup artist on the show, and appears in drag in one episode. Coincidentally, eventually *America's Next Top Model* would feature former *Drag Race* contestants on the show.

In the first season casting call, RuPaul makes direct connections between the reality television shows:

> Hey Tyra [Banks], step back girl. The queen has returned. And you can tell Heidi [Klum], 'clear the runway.' Ms. RuPaul is back to pump some realness into reality. I'm searching

> for America's fiercest drag queen. You have go to be an American idol, a top model, and a fashion designer all rolled into one. And you definitely have to be smarter than a fifth grader" (Proudvision TV, 2015).

By calling directly on all these shows, RuPaul situates *Drag Race* within the narrative of the 2008-2009 reality television landscape. It calls attention to the two reigning influences of *Drag Race*: *America's Next Top Model* and *Project Runway*. At the same time, RuPaul is able to position himself as the Super Model of the World by bringing up Tyra Banks and Heidi Klum. In terms of representation for Logo, *Drag Race* would situate queerness as central to the show in a way that no other reality television show at the time was doing. It would be a reality television show about queer people, featuring a queer artform, for a queer audience.

The show has created its own RuPaul Television Universe. There are the first eight seasons and two spin offs, *All-Stars* season one and two, and *Drag U*, all which aired on Logo. *Drag U* had a different format than the competition show. In *Drag U*, three cis-women would travel to the shores of Lake Titicaca—a soundstage somewhere in Los Angeles—and enroll in Drag University, the namesake of the show, to be given drag transformations by former contestants, called professors, who taught the women to channel their inner divas. The women would be graded and the one that got the best grade, won. After 3 seasons, however, *Drag U* would eventually be canceled. In 2017, *RuPaul's Drag Race* would move on to VH1, where it airs today. *All-Stars*, on the other hand, would move the sixth season of the show and stream exclusively on the streaming platform Paramount+. That said, the regular series can also be streamed on the same platform. The international franchises, including Canada, UK, and Spain, to name a few, can be accessed in the United States through WOW Presents Plus, the streaming

platform for the production company World of Wonder. The platform costs $3.99 a month, and provides access to the entire inventory of WOW's catalogue, except *RuPaul's Drag Race*.

Series Name	Networks
RuPaul's Drag Race	Logo TV (Seasons 1-8) VH1 (Seasons 9-14) MTV (Seasons 15-Present)
Under the Hood	Logo.com (Season 1)
RuPaul's Drag Race: Untucked	Logo TV (Seasons 2-6) YouTube (Seasons 7-8) VH1 (Seasons 9-14)
Drag U	Logo TV (Seasons 1-3)
RuPaul's Secret Celebrity Drag Race	VH1 (Seasons 1-2)
RuPaul's Drag Race: All Stars	Logo TV (Seasons 1-2) VH1 (Seasons 3-5) Paramount + (6- Present)
RuPaul's Drag Race: All Stars: Untucked	Logo TV (Season 1) VH1 (Season 2) Paramount+ (3- Present)
Drag Race: Vegas Revue	VH1 (Season 1)

Figure 5: A list of some of the entries in the RuPaul Televisual Universe and the networks they aired on.

Although *RuPaul's Drag Race* shows a range of drag through the stylistic differences of the contestants (Pagnoni Berns, 2014), ultimately, drag—in *RuPaul's Drag Race*—is RuPaul. In an interview for the first season of the show, RuPaul states, "What we're looking for is someone who can really follow in my footsteps; Someone who can be hired by a company to represent their product, someone who can put together a sentence on television and present themselves in the most incredible way" (Kohsldorf, 2014, p.67). This is reiterated in the show's claim that they are looking for "America's next drag superstar," the implication being that RuPaul was the first. Drag, therefore, becomes commodifiable: "RuPaul, and the producers of the show, know that her gender representation as a queen is what sells her products and her music; a stylized drag performance becomes articulated as talent and a claim to fame" (Kohlsdorf, 2014, p.70). This is

supported in the show. Although the judges provide input, RuPaul ultimately decides who wins and is eliminated. He decides who has self-appointed traits: Charisma, Uniqueness, Nerve, and Talent. The winner, at least in those early seasons, was the most like RuPaul, while those eliminated are the least.

The Gender Trouble of it All

Scholars, working primarily within a critical tradition, have explored the multiple ways in which drag performance can both expand and limit notions of gender identity (Butler, 1990; Litwiller). Drag has been characterized as a way in which performers can push against normative gender binaries through the deviance of body presentation and behavior (Litwiller, 2020). At times, drag performances can be political, provocative, and transgressive. Performers can take on a range of possible identities, including AFAB (assigned female at birth), genderfuck, Kings, genderqueer, and performances that have multiple meanings for the artist and audiences. At its most political, drag can be a potential site of intentional political activism and resistance. Even RuPaul has claimed that "drag is a big f-you to male dominated culture" (Aitkenhead, 2018). It is the relationship between the artist and the audience that becomes instrumental. Historically, drag performance was very much temporally and spatially bound. Performed in gay circuits and nightclubs (Hodes and Sandoval, 2018), the performance was a sort of "theater in the round," in which performers and an audience of insiders could engage in implicit and explicit critiques of an intolerant society outside of heteronormative, public space.

However, just because drag can be political, does not mean it always is. Butler later notes how "drag is a site of a certain ambivalence, one which reflects the more general situation of being implicated in the regimes of power by which one is constituted and, hence, of being implicated in the very regimes of power that one opposes" (Butler, 1993, p. 125). While drag has

the potential of being political, it is not always political, especially in a post-*Drag Race* world. The show's success moved the underground artform to a commodity that can grant a drag queen access to a broader social media following and broader commercial appeal. No longer intended for an audience of insiders, drag had to be transformed into something less threatening.

However, *Drag Race* is not the first attempt at commercializing drag. While there have been movies that feature drag in the past, for example Divine in John Water's oeuvre, it was not until the late 20th century that we saw films centering drag. Such is the case with the string of 90s movies that featured drag, such as the Australian movie *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994), which took in over 18 million dollars in revenue. The next year, the aforementioned *Too Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar* (1995), which included mainstream actors such as Patrick Swayze, Wesley Snipes, and John Leguizamo, sat as the number one movie for two weeks, generating $47.8 million worldwide (Corp, 2021). Although the former might be more political in the messaging surrounding queer communities and HIV/AIDS, the latter movie was far more successful and defanged the artform for a broader audience.

That said, just because one is a fan of *Drag Race*, does not mean one is a fan of drag. Thanks in part to the show, there is a distinction between drag as the artform and drag as seen on television. Drag, as it relates to *Drag Race,* is still relatively under-discussed within academia. Usually, when discussions of drag occur, they occupy the space of political art. This can be an issue, as not all drag artists take up drag for political reasons. To assume so takes away an artists' agency. Further, by automatically politicizing all drag, it also minimized art that is purposeful political. Generally, we see this politicizing in drag's relationship to gender. While there are broader pieces of literature on drag as it pertains to gender performance and resistance (Butler,

1993; Kahn et al., 2012), this paper focuses specifically on drag as articulated by *RuPaul's Drag Race*. I specifically want to draw attention to the fact that I will not cite Butler in this project beyond these couple of citations because as she notes in *Bodies that Matter* (2004) there is an overreliance on drag as the prime example of gender performativity for the subversion of gender norms. But as she notes, "there is no relationship between drag and subversion" (Butler, 2004, p.125). This project does not focus on gender performance or the subversion of gender norms, but rather on the commodification of an underground art form. This project instead explores the shifts in drag as more social, economic, and technological changes occur.

Matters of Representation

Given its worldwide popularity, there has been a growing literature on *RuPaul's Drag Race* and its impact on both drag and popular culture. A primary critique of *RuPaul's Drag Race* is that it promotes normative female performances as its ideal (Marcel, 2014; Norris, 2014; Norris, 2014; Darnell and Tabatabai, 2017). The arguments these authors make are similar: the show relies heavily on gender binaries and, as a result, the show loses its subversive potential. For example, Edgar (2011) found that *RuPaul's Drag Race* hinges upon the participants deploying heteronormative notions of femininity in their performances. Edgar further argues that such depictions impede the progress of drag culture by limiting the kinds of identities possible. Similarly, Hodges and Sandoval (2018) argue that the show reinforces social hierarchies, but also continues to shape them. As the other's notes, "the act of subversion cannot be intelligible without reference to them" (p.149). Therefore, to these authors, the show cannot exist outside of the gender binary.

The show is notable for its diverse casting, particularly when it comes to queers of colors. Historically, both queer and straight media have promoted the gay community—if one exists—as

middle-class and White (Han, 2009). Yet the show has long highlighted queers of colors, as well as queens from other disenfranchised backgrounds—such as from rural areas or lower-class. The show seemingly celebrates diverse backgrounds. For example, of the fourteen winners of the competition, eight of them are BIPOC. Because of the diverse casting, authors have explored the show's racial dynamics. Strings and Bui (2014) find that even though the show destabilizes the constructions of gender, it still affirms race. Several authors have likewise picked up on the racial dynamics of the show (Jenkins, 2017; Marcel, 2014; Zhang, 2016). Of particular interest to scholars seems to be the construction of the Puerto Rican queen. Early in the show's running, there was usually a singular contestant identified as the Puerto Rican queen, such as Jessica Wild in season 2, Yara Sofia in season 3, and Kenya Michaels in season 4, to name a few. To the authors who have written about this phenomenon, it is unique that they are identified as Puerto Rican queens and not Latine. This train of thought is carried through by McIntyre and Riggs (2014) and their analysis of how the show constructs a Puerto Rican queen. They note that there is a consistent emphasis on their English speaking capabilities and their knowledge of English-speaking United States popular culture. To the authors, the show still otherizes the Puerto Rican contestants.

My research takes a different approach from the existing research. Yudelman (2017) identifies that most of the existing scholarship on the show is from a reflective approach. That is to say, scholars examine how the show reflects reality. She goes on to note, "by phrasing and rephrasing evaluative questions, such as whether *RPDR* frames economic, racial, and geopolitical differences as 'selling points' or 'stumbling blocks,' many critics concern themselves with the show's relationship to the lived reality of drag, or what is termed the 'realness' of drag" (p.17). She identifies a point that I agree with and center in my discussion about the show: RPDR

is not interested in representing the real, lived realities of queens, but rather is a changing force that "both produces and is produced by the real" (p.19). That is to say, the show is not a cultural mirror, as that would indicate the show is stagnant and has no power. The show has changed how drag is performed, and what is deemed as successful drag, both within and outside the show.

Commercial Logic

Queer media historians often locate queer media in the periphery of culture industry (Aslinger, 2009). *Drag Race* is unique because it has successfully penetrated the mainstream. That said, there is little research that focuses on the commodification of drag, despite the fact, that as many drag queens note, their main jobs at bars is to sell alcohol. One of the traits that help distinguish *RuPaul's Drag Race* from other kinds of drag performances is the explicit integration of commercial products. As Hodes and Sandoval (2018) note that many of the challenges in the show are based on product placement and RuPaul's own image is one of the products on sale. Further, RuPaul himself notes that many of the challenges are based in his own career, which includes being a spokesperson as he himself was the face for LA Eyeworks and MAC Viva Glam Campaign. However, the show itself also presents a rare economic opportunity for hopeful contestants. Being a Ru-Girl also has the added benefit of a wider audience and a higher potential for commercial work. Many queens attempt to get into the show to raise their exposure and therefore their booking fee, as was the case with season four contestant Magnolia Crawford.

Because commercial logic is embedded within the DNA of the show, it is important to understand how that logic is reflected and refracted. Drag performances, at least within the context of the United States, have always had an economic element. Generally at drag shows, the drag performers get paid in some form for their presence: either a small fee or drink tickets. At the show, the audience tips the performing queen. Further, these shows would occur in However,

the mainstream success of the show complicates the consumer base. Even though the show started off as a show aimed at predominately gay men through Logo's distribution, the switch to VH1 drew wider appeal for *Drag Race* and has brought in a more diverse audience. If statistics for the official *RuPaul's Drag Race* drag convention Drag Con is an indication of the contemporary audience, then about 60% of the audience identifies as female and 60% identifies as heterosexual. Therefore, a reading of the commercialization of drag based in queer market logic would be half the story.

In their ethnographic research, Visconti (2008) identifies three ways in which a heterosexual mainstream essentializes gay minorities: naming, phrasing, and normative powers. Naming generally happens when the dominant group, in this case heterosexuals, impose labels onto a minority, gays. Phrasing, a step that occurs after naming, establishes symbolic boundaries and stereotypes that help heterosexual audiences easily identify gayness. As the author notes of an effeminate gay man, "such easily recognizable and cartoonified homosexuality protects heterosexuals, since it makes symbolic boundaries easily detectable and almost impersonable" (p.128). Finally, normative power is the implementation of formal or informal heterosexual cultural meanings onto the queer subgroup. This can result in either peer pressure to blend in or done through legislation or rules.

In some ways, drag is a simple identifier of this essentialization. When used in advertising, drag queens can present a visual cues of a company's queer acceptance, or at least valuing queer diversity and inclusion (Frankel and Ha, 2020). As such, queer consumers respond positively to the explicit imagery, while heterosexual consumers had a neutral response (Tuten, 2005). However, as the proliferation of drag grows, so too does the meaning of these images. Knowing the drag queen in a certain advertising can lead to feelings of being part of the

LGBTQ+ community, even if an individual is not queer. Being able to identify or being a fan of the queen in an advertisement can lead to feelings of inclusion or belonging in the LGBTQ+ community (Frankel and Ha, 2020).

The show itself is a brand. Campana and Duffy (2021) question how consumers of *RPDR* create and circulate a cultural brand. They explore how the cultural brand of *Drag Race* is created, scaled up, and mainstreamed. Ultimately, the authors view the show as an LGBT cultural brand with multiple authors: producers, networks, consumer/ audience, drag queen, judges, and RuPaul. Jenkins' (2017) intersectional feminist approach notes how the show values hegemonic gender stereotypes despite the progressive veneer. Likewise, Collins (2017) notes that the show provides a narrow view of drag, dismissing issues of wealth inequality, as was the case with season eight contestant Chi Chi DeVayne. Yet, Collins notes that despite the fact that show highlights personal growth, there is surprisingly little discussion about the economic lives of drag performers. The show's brand of drag, as mentioned previously, is eleganza, based off of the aesthetics of fashion models and runways. To replicate this preferred aesthetic costs money. Rachel Miller (2021) acknowledges that, thanks in part to the show, drag has become prohibitively expensive. Thus, because the show platforms expensive looking drag—taking the artform away from the DIY roots—and establishing it as part of its brand, audiences expect expensive drag from all performers. As revered drag queen and country singer Dolly Parton once said, "it takes a lot of money to look this cheap."

Yet, as Collins further addresses, these expectations are incongruous with the lived reality of drag queens. Anecdotal evidence suggests that most drag performers work for free or for tips until they are an established figure with a reputation. A drag queen therefore needs to do a lot of unpaid labor to manage their own social media and promote events at which they perform, on top

of designing their outfits and maintaining the materials to do their makeup. Charlene, a New York drag queen, told the New York Times, "there's this dance you do on Instagram and way you network yourself" (Oliver, 2018). While payment does depend on the market, in New York, bars could pay a drag queen anywhere from $50 to $250 (Oliver, 2018). While it is difficult to find booking fees after a contestant has been on *Drag Race*, there does seem to be anecdotal evidence that suggests some queens' booking fee is between 2-3 thousand dollars. There are also queens who also no longer perform in bars, instead choosing to perform in theaters, like Jinkx Monsoon, who is set to perform in Carnegie Hall in 2025.

Theory

Central to this project is the argument that *RPDR* is itself a regulating force in the commodification of *Drag Race*. By being the stepping stone that performers need to reach a wider audience, and therefore commercial success, the show functions as a gatekeeper of drag. While there are other drag competition series, such as *Dragula* or *Camp Wannakiki*, neither of these competitions have the mass popularity of *RuPaul's Drag Race*. Further, neither of these shows air on television, and instead must be sought on streaming services. *Camp Wannakiki*, for example, is on YouTube. *Dragula* has changed where it airs, from Amazon to the horror streaming site, Shudder. So, for a casual fan, *RuPaul's Drag Race* is significantly easier to access. To understand drag through *RPDR*, we must understand the power the show yields as a cultural juggernaut.

The central theory I will use throughout this project is Bourdieu's general theory of practice, which focuses on various aspects of cultural production. In this theory, Bourdieu believes we must examine not only the artwork itself—in this case, drag—but also the wider fields of power and class relations. Drag, as articulated through *Drag Race*, has changed how

some, if not most, new artists perform drag. As the show is now in the 14th season, there are contestants that were inspired to start drag because of the show. The charismatic art of creation, therefore, is not centralized in the person doing drag, but their formulation of what drag is on the show. That means the genius of the artist is not the person, but their adaption of what the show says is successful. Central to Bourdieu's field of cultural production are three ideas: field, habitus, and capital.

The first of the three concepts is "field." Bourdieu defines a field as the specific social context or a semi-autonomous space with its own laws and logic. In this space, fields are hierarchical, so one's position in the field determines their chances of success (Bourdieu, 1993). For this project, I focus on drag as the field of cultural production, one that has both symbolic and economic functions. Traditionally, drag was confined to just bars, with a traditional pecking order. Bar managers and promoters venerated older, more experienced queens, while the younger ones had to work their way up (Newton, 1972). The performances themselves vary, but that was consistent within the field. However, the introduction of *Drag Race* shifted these structures, where an ingenue could surpass a veteran queen, as was the case in the fourth season, when Sharon Needles won the crown over established professional Chad Michaels.

Within the field, the subjects compete for capital. Here, capital is not only economic but can also be cultural or symbolic. Forms of capital are specific to each field. However, symbolic or cultural capital, like economic capital, is unequally distributed amongst the agents in the field. It is the distribution of various forms of capital that determines the positions and relationships between the agents. To revisit the previous example, Chad Michaels is a veteran queen throughout Southern California, well known for her Cher impersonation. She entered the competition with social capital among the other competitors, with the contestants already

knowing who she was, and it bled into the judging. Ultimately, however, she did not win. Instead, the fan-favorite contestant won because Sharon Needles had more social capital amongst the fans. Where we perhaps see the most impact that capital has on the show itself is in *All-Stars*, where former contestants come back to compete for the title of All-Star. Fan favorites carry more social capital. This bares importance in the game because, unlike the regular series where RuPaul eliminates contestants, here the winning queen decides who goes home. Hence queens are less likely to send a fan favorite home because of any potential backlash.

Bourdieu lays out his logic for how his general theory of practice reveals links between macrostructures and the professional routines and practices within the television industry in his essay "On Television" (1996). According to Bourdieu, a field of cultural production is occupied with the production of cultural or symbolic goods. Further, like other forms of cultural production, they are considered a "two-faced reality," meaning that they are both a commodity and a symbolic object (1993). Thus, two forms of capital are particularly relevant within fields of cultural production: economic and cultural capital. The former generally refers to material wealth, while the latter includes knowledge, skills, and other cultural acquisitions. According to Bourdieu, fields are organized around the opposition between economic and cultural capital, but to succeed within the field, competitors must possess relatively high volumes of at least one form of capital.

Within the field, some agents are more capable than others. Agents have, to varying degrees, an embodied, natural feel for the game, what Bourdieu calls habitus. He defines habitus as a set of dispositions that incline social agents to act and react in certain ways. The agent's dispositions produce practices, perceptions, and attitudes that are regular without being consciously coordinated or governed by any rule (Bourdieu, 1993). Furthermore, the practices

particular to a given field favor some agents over others and it is the congruency between one's habitus and the field they occupy that determines their ability to compete. The show as habitus is showcased with the competition's standards. The show creates a world that demands that contestants know how to perform, write music, sew clothes, do their own makeup, and so forth. The show's demands on the contestants then become expected of all queens, be they on the show or not. The "feel of the game," as it were, is transplanted outside of the show, as hopeful contestants then prepare to be on the show by learning such traits. As such, the show actively shapes the subjects: both the contestants competing on the program and also the watchers at home. This means that the *Drag Race*'s audience expects all drag queens, regardless if they have been on the show or not, to perform at that caliber. The show sets their expectations for what successful drag looks like.

The show provides the dispositions for many of the viewers of *Drag Race*. Habitus is the site of incorporated history that reflects the dispositions and habits of a certain group. Habitus comprises of thoughts, beliefs, interests, and the like that have the potential to influence actions and construct social worlds. In the case of *Drag Race*, it becomes the site that teaches audiences, be they familiar or unfamiliar with drag, references, and slang used in drag spaces. A clear reference to this would be how early in the show's history, they would highlight specific words and define them, like "garage doors", and then reinforced them through their social media presence. There have been plenty of scholars who have examined linguistics (Mann, 2011; Simmons, 2014; Goldmark, 2015), but no study has yet shown how these linguistic trends are commercialized. Further, there are trends that the show has popularized that have not been examined by a broader academic audience, such as makeup trends (baking or contouring, for example) that have extended far beyond the initial drag scene.

What makes the theory of practice a unique theory for analyzing the show is that RuPaul does not uphold the model set by the competition. RuPaul cannot sew. RuPaul does not do their own makeup or hair. And to some critics, RuPaul can neither sing nor act. Yet RuPaul is held as the zenith of drag mostly because he was able to market drag to a mass audience. The global success of *RuPaul's Drag Race* may be seen as the culmination of a long, ongoing effort by RuPaul to convert drag into an object for public consumption. In *All-Stars 2*, RuPaul tells the contestants, "I'm a marketing genius! I marketed subversive drag to a 100 million [people] in the world" (Charles, 2017). Thus, his real claim to fame is establishing drag as an industry.

So, What's the Tea, Christine?

I have organized my research questions with the literature I have read in mind. However, I also bring in some questions that I have as a longtime fan of the show. While the questions might be broken down into smaller subsections, my main research question regards the commodification of drag. I see the following questions as helping answer the central question.

- Q1:How do economic influences shape the way that drag is performed on RPDR?
    - Who are the key players in policing how drag is performed?
    - How does marketplace logic influence the performer's ability to succeed?
    - Q1A: How have the changes in media affected the field of drag?
        - How has drag shifted as it moved from one channel to another (Logo to VH1)?
- Q2: How does the show's growing audience impact drag?
    - How do we see this changing audience reflected in the queen's popularity?
    - What are the economic consequences?

While there are several anthologies and free-standing essays, there is nary a single academic monograph about the show itself. Part of the goal of this project is to merge both my academic skills along with my knowledge as a fan of the show into one source. Further, I would like to cement several of the ideas that exist about the show outside of academia into an academic text.

Method

Using *RuPaul's Drag Race* as a case study, I examine how marketplace logic transforms how not only the performance of drag but also the relationship between performer and audience. Using Bourdieu's concept as my analytical framework, I am looking for how the show defines and polices the field of drag, the role of sponsors in cultivating drag, and how the habitus of each performer allows them to succeed. Noor (2008) acknowledges that case studies as a method are useful for understanding the complex real-life activities where multiple forms of evidence are used (p.1602). Yin (2003) notes that case studies are also a preferred method when the researcher believes that contextual evidence applies to the research design. Stake (2005) also points out that cases studied need to be situated within their historical background, if not also their cultural, economic, and political (p.449). Case studies rely on "multiple sources of evidence, with data needed to converge in a triangulating fashion" (Yin, 2003, p.14). Yin, therefore, sees case studies as an all-encompassing method that allows for multiple tools for data analysis to be used under a singular umbrella.

It is important to focus on the primary show itself as part of this project since part of my goal is to have substantial input into the literature regarding the show. As stated, the show premiers on Logo TV in 2009, but it now airs on VH1. *All-Stars* originally also aired on Logo, but moved over to VH1for seasons three through five. The show then switched to the streaming platform Paramount Plus, which aired the six and seven seasons of the show at the time of

writing. The show is a competition reality series, modeled after *Project Runway* and *America's Next Top Model*. One goal is to provide literature that traces the different eras of the show, from its origins on a deluxe cable channel to VH1, and to the now imperial phase where the show operates on other worldwide channels. However, this project will focus on the US seasons, the *All-Stars*, and *Untucked*. The specific data I will draw on will focus on advertisers who make themselves present on the show. Since I will watch these via the show's official streaming platform Paramount Plus, I only have access to advertisers who are identified in the show. I accessed seasons seven and eight of *Untucked* on YouTube, as those two seasons aired on the official World of Wonder YouTube page.

This means that the corpus of study is rather large. In total, I am examining 191 episodes of the main franchise, 154 episodes of *Untucked*, and 65 episodes of *All Stars*. While I (re)watched 410 hours of the show, I examined particular trends in advertisers, noting advertisers who repeatedly work with the show, as well as unique one-off sponsors. I have only selected brands within the show who sponsor a segment, be that a mini-challenge, maxi-challenge, runway, *Untucked*, or other major part of the show. While there are smaller companies who support the show, they generally give out prizes, but are not involved in the show itself. For example, companies like Fierce Drag Jewels—who provide the crown and scepter for the winning queen—do not have a presence beyond their name at the top of the episode.

This case study would not only explore the show, but would also rely on other ephemera, such as promotional materials and published interviews with RuPaul and contestants. To find these materials, I focused on my own personal knowledge of interviews the queens had given. Again, as a fan of the show, I am aware of the multiple podcasts and interview shows that feature Ru-girls. Podcasts include *Race Chasers* and *EW's Binge* to name a couple. However, I

supplemented these with the queens' social media accounts, as well as fan archives. For example, I was able to find some queens' media package on YouTube, while some fans posted older materials on Tumblr and Reddit. Some material—particularly those that relate to Logo Television—I was able to find by using the Internet Archive, also called the Wayback Machine.

A note about my positionality. As a long-time fan of the show, my observations are colored by my own biases. I have consumed criticism of the show from fans and academics alike. Since I have been consuming the show since 2009, I am deeply emmeshed in conversations surrounding the show. While these observations do color how I watch the show, I have tried to center my reading of the show for this project within my literature review. I guide my interpretations through not only the project's central theory, but also through my guiding questions. While watching the show I identified the major players in the field, namely the queens, the producers, and the sponsors, but do keep space for other possible players. I made sure to note how the different types of capital operate within the show, and particularly pay attention to how economic capital—namely the sponsors—use their influence to change the habitus of drag.

The final case study selected is a participant observation of RuPaul's Drag Con, a convention put on by World of Wonder. I view this case study as an extension of drag's growing field and therefore a necessity in understanding the commodification of drag. Further, Drag Con provides a new field where a queen's cultural capital on the show translates to economic capital off the show. Because this event functions as a way to get fans to meet and interact with former contestants of the show, this seemed like a fitting third case study. Drag Con started in 2015 but has been postponed for the last two years because of the worldwide pandemic. This convention so far has about 150 former contestants that are scheduled to appear. Further, at the last

convention in 2019, there were nearly 400 vendors present. The three-day event should prove beneficial in displaying how the queens themselves are used as an attraction for vendors. Because there will be both a mixture of fans and vendors, I want to analyze how vendors use drag queens (be they on the show or not) to draw potential customers to their table. The convention also features panels that discuss events on the show, including the international seasons. Further, as there are meet and greets with contestants, I can gauge which queens have more fans, which relates to social capital. As this will be my first time at the convention, I will be present throughout the three days observing and recording what I see. As with the other case studies, the material will be supplemented with news articles about the event, as well as other public information.

For this part of my chapter, I spent two day at the convention: Friday and Sunday. Both days I was there I spent roughly the entire day at the convention, except of course when I left to grab lunch. The observations in this chapter are based not only in the research I had done beforehand, such as looking at promotional materials, history, and whatever information was available on the website, but also based on what I witness as I walked around. Again, as I was a fan of the show, I did engage in meeting with specific queens that I was a fan of. Yet, I was also cognizant of the fact that I was there not only as a fan, but also as a researcher. Such, I also attempted, when fiscally possible, to meet with other queens who I was not that familiar with. As such, I talked to a variety of queens and also other fans alike.

My research is a compilation of different case studies that lead me to some generalizable conclusions. The case studies I have selected are the fourteen seasons of *RuPaul's Drag Race* and the *seven seasons of All-Stars* (21 seasons total), and RuPaul's Drag Con, the official drag convention in Los Angeles. My first case study examines the first season. Since this was the very

first show of its kind, I deem the first season of *RuPaul's Drag Race* as particularly important in cultivating a relationship between advertisers and sponsors. Therefore, doing a deep dive of the first season allows me to explore how these connections manifested, and how they spread throughout the series. The third chapter, builds off of the second chapter, but focuses on the two major types of sponsors for the series: alcohol and makeup. From here on out, each chapter focuses less on seasons as a whole, but rather on the types of sponsors. Thus, chapter three focuses on the role of Absolut Vodka, a major sponsor of the earlier seasons of the show. This chapter also focuses on the makeup sponsors and their roles throughout the series. Chapter four continues the examination of sponsors, but focuses on the show's unique ability to market queer and queer friendly brands to queer consumers. This chapter focuses on queer-owned businesses, to cat litter, to *Hello Kitty* and beyond. These tend to be smaller sponsorships, usually bound to singular episodes. Chapter five, moves us from the show to Drag Con. This chapter is a participant observation, as I describe first the history of the event and then what I experienced and observed at Drag Con 2021. I close out my project by brining all my collective data in conversation with Bourdieu's theory, and discuss how the show—along with the help of producers and advertisers—changed drag.

CHAPTER 2: U BETTA WERK-CASE STUDY 1: *RUPAUL'S DRAG RACE* SEASON 1, THE DEBUT SEASON

It came to me like a fever dream. I don't know how I heard about it, but I somehow did. It could have been on MySpace or Tumblr, but somehow, I heard about *RuPaul's Drag Race*. I remember watching the series on LOGO's website, being annoyed by the number of ads I had to sit through to get to the good stuff, which, considering this project, is rather ironic in the Alanis Morrisette definition of the word. The quality of the show wasn't great, probably 480 resolution at best. However, the show was the first time I could see drag queens beyond shows like *Maury* or *Dog Eat Dog,* which usually used the queens to trick straight men. This was the first time I could see drag as an art form. I wasn't able to go see drag queens in person and, in fact, I had never been to a drag show. But now the drag queens were coming to me, in the comfort of my bedroom, for free.

This chapter explores the first season of *RuPaul's Drag Race* as a product sold in the media marketplace. Since it is the first season, it is critical to explore how the show established itself. Not only is it the pilot season, but it also establishes the new field in which drag queens must operate in. Further, the first season also establishes the relationship between the corporate sponsors, the contestants, the producers of the show, and the distributor. These are the major stakeholders in the new field. By outlining these manifestations in the first season, we can better understand how the relationships grow over the course of the series.

This chapter first explores LOGO Television, the network where the show first aired, and the field *Drag Race* entered and ultimately the first consumer to pick up the show in hopes that it delivered the target audience. Then I move on to examining how the show cast the first contestants and the limitations that the process provided. Since this was the first season of the

show, it couldn't rely on word of mouth. I then move to discuss the first season itself, looking at the first season as the foundation from which the show is built. Here, I particularly focus on patterns we will see throughout the rest of the fifteen seasons, such as the reliance on character tropes, judging, and challenges. In this section, I also examine how the show's two big sponsors directly affected the show. I explore all these issues to begin identifying the key players within the business of *Drag Race* and how they express their influence over the show. Their influence therefore impacts how drag is initially shaped throughout the first season of the show. However, I argue that these influences are not at odds with what the producers of the show are looking for. Because the show is on the search for the next RuPaul, they are not looking to crown contestants who are too transgressive. Rather, the producers of the show also want someone who is fairly conservative in their drag aesthetics and persona.

Logo TV

LOGO Television, called Logo from here on out, originally replaced a previous VH1 channel, VH1 MegaHits. MegaHits was originally part of VH1's digital suite package, meaning that it was only available through digital cable and not through satellite. The channel was completely automated and only played music videos. However, due to low viewership and subscribers, the channel was discontinued. Viacom, the parent company of VH1, had been discussing a gay-themed network based on the interest gained by popular shows like *Will and Grace*, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, and *Queer as Folk* (MTV to Launch, 2004). As such, Viacom was attempting to monopolize on viewers of these shows.

There was also a financial incentive for Viacom to establish a gay-themed network. As noted in an article by CNN, "the high amount of disposable income controlled by gay consumers has long remained an attractive target for advertisers" (MTV to launch, 2004). Per the same

article, the buying power of queer consumers was estimated at about $500 billion a year, higher than the Hispanic consumers. Further, Logo's press release notes that market research estimates 15 million gay and lesbian adults, becoming a key target for Fortune 500 companies. MTV network chairman and CEO Tom Freston noted that their gay programming would "blue-chip advertisers hungry for an audience segment that overindexes on disposable income" (Logo wont be the only, 2004). Logo, as a gay-themed network, therefore, would allow advertisers to directly target queer consumers.

Logo was positioned, therefore, as an efficient tool for marketers. Griffin (2016) notes Logo was seen positioning itself as resolving a marketplace shortfall, hoping that advertisers would be drawn to the network because of limited options for courting gay and lesbian consumers. Logo would allow for different advertising methods to help brands reach this under tapped consumer market. The press release notes their starting marketing strategy:

> LOGO will offer advertising and sponsorship opportunities beyond the traditional 30 second commercial spot. Key advertisers will be able to integrate their marketing messages into LOGO's programming in unique ways, including product placement, editorial segments within programs involving their brand, online integration, development of contests and sweepstakes as well as take advantage of off-channel marketing opportunities. (MTV Networks to Launch, 2004)

Hence, advertisers on Logo could make longer commercials, as well as take advantage of different modes of interacting with the audience. We will see some of these methods used by Absolut Vodka throughout the early seasons of *RuPaul's Drag Race*.

Logo launched June 30, 2005. It was the first advertiser supported television channel marketed towards the LGBTQ+ community, although it was specifically targeted towards gay

men. There were other competitors in the queer-targeted channel market: Here!, backed by Regent Entertainment, and independently owned Q Television were. The latter was the first queer digital channel, but was limited to certain markets, such as New York, Boston, and San Francisco. Here!, on the other hand, was a video on demand channel. Logo was available to 10 million U.S. homes when it first launched (Collins, 2005). Logo not only differentiated itself by being available to a mass audience through the connections with Viacom, but also because the network relied heavily on advertiser support (Aslinger, 2009). Further, as part of Viacom's push for digital distribution, the network also had multiple streams of distribution, including mobile telephones. Aslinger notes that "Logo's pursuit of new distribution paths works to bypass gatekeepers in the cable and satellite industries and how heterosexism, homophobia, and bandwidth concerns make it difficult for media outlets such as Logo to achieve fully national distribution" (110, 2009). Thus, with both mobile and digital access, more people could access Logo television.

However, there were some issues when it came to their target audience. While the president at the time said that they decided their audience was "very broad, so our target is from 18 to 54 or basically anybody who wants to watch" (Hernandez, 2005). Yet, Aslinger notes that Logo executives still followed antiquated ideas about who the gay consumer was, namely as affluent, white, and brand loyal. Further complicating their desire for a broader queer audience was Logo's partnership with The Advocate, a mainstay in LGBT news and politics. Katherine Sender (2001, 2004) notes that The Advocate's shifting editorial and corporate leadership moved the magazine to cater toward white, affluent, urban, cis-gay men. Thus, the relationship between Logo and The Advocate complicated the intended audience for Logo.

Advertising for Logo was still tense. When Logo aired in 2005, there were only three main advertisers when the network launched: Orbitz, Paramount, and Subaru. These three advertisers had long courted queer audiences and readily supported Logo's mission. However, after the first year, the president claimed they had over 50 advertisers, including "significant brands" General Motors, American Express, and Anheuser-Busch (Lisotta, 2006). There were, however, some concessions that had to be made to appease advertisers. Executives made attempts to deemphasize sexuality within Logo's programing, going so far as to censoring and cutting scenes from their non-original programming like *Queer As Folk* (Aslinger, 2009). Aslinger notes that Tom Freston, the then chairman and chief executive of MTV Networks, said that Logo was not a channel about sex and sexuality: "This is not a network about sex and sexuality. There will be talk shows and documentaries. A lot fare here straight people will find interesting" (Yin, 2004). The network was not only positioning itself to make content for queer audiences, but also that would draw in queer-friendly, heterosexual audiences.

Cultural and Political Context

The 2008/2009 political and cultural atmosphere did show the strength of the queer consumer and show some promise for queer-friendly heterosexual audiences. NBC had smash hits with two different, queer-led shows: *Will and Grace* and *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*. Even though the show aired the series finale in 2006, popular television shows like *Will and Grace* had shown that audiences were accepting of queer characters. Further, the show garnered 83 Primetime Emmy nominations throughout its eight season, original run, showing that the industry was also accepting of these queer narratives on television. Likewise, the popular daytime talk show *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* won the Outstanding Talk Show during the Daytime Emmy Awards in 2006, 2007, 2008, and 2009. While scholars such as Dow (2001) and

Avila-Saavedra (2009) and do debate the social and cultural impact of these shows, it is worthwhile to note that in 2012 then Vice-President Joe Biden cited that Will and Grace was a factor in his support of marriage equality (Nakamura, 2017). These two shows were evidence that straight audiences would engage with and watch queer shows and could even sway political influence.

Further, 2008/20099 held a special queer energy in the air. In 2008, queer-cultural icon Lady Gaga first hit the airwaves with her first hit single "Just Dance," and the follow-up single "Love Game" was released in 2009. Likewise, another queer icon was released to the public in 2009. Grindr, a free location-based social networking and dating application for gay and bisexual men, launched in 2009 as Apple iOS mobile application.

There were of, course, some political issues at large. In 2008, President Obama had won the presidency and became the first Black president of the United States. During his victory speech, Obama even positively mentioned gay Americans. While it was in passing, it was the first time a president-elect mentioned queer Americans in their victory speech (Obama, 2008). However, the same night that Obama was declared the winner, California voters passed Proposition Eight, called Prop 8, that banned same-sex marriage within the state. Proponents of same-sex marriage protested throughout the state. As observed in an article in *The Los Angeles Times*, "the battle [over Prop 8] was closely watched across the nation because California is considered a harbinger of cultural change" (Garrison, Dimassa, Paddock, 2008). Therefore, Prop 8 held more than just political weight, it also was a cultural moment that highlighted how Americans felt about gay rights.

Before *RuPaul's Drag Race*, drag was largely looked down upon, both in the queer community and in popular media. Queer people held ambivalent feelings toward drag, if not

outright dislike (Hilderbrand, 2023). As Newton (1972) states, “professional drag queens are, therefore, professional homosexuals; they represent the stigma of the gay world” (p.3). The shamefulness of drag is seen even later in the century: Michelle Visage—one of the head judges on the show—notes that drag was stigmatized by her friends in the ballroom scene: “I’d say, let’s go to a drag show, and people within the community were like, ‘Ew, girl, no, we’re not going to a drag show’” (Canfield, 2021). Further, in popular media, drag was usually seen as a punchline or a joke. For example, the most popular example of drag in popular culture would be Bugs Bunny, who would frequently get in drag to attempt to escape from Elmer Fudd. We see this type of drag as escape motif repeated in Disney’s *Lion King* (1994), when Timon—the protagonist’s adoptive parent—dons drag and dances the hula to create a distraction for Simba. These are usually one off moments though and are meant to be comical.

Likewise, shows morning talk shows like Maury or the Ricki Lake Show would feature drag queens in comedic ways. In Maury, drag queens and transgender women would be paraded out to the audience, who then had to identify the “real” woman amongst the group. In a 1999 episode called “She’s a Man, Baby, Yeah,” the show’s namesake Maury Povich paraded several drag queens, trans women—a distinction the show does not make—, and cis women on stage in varying stages of dress, including nightgowns and swimsuits, to test the audience’s ability to identify the “man or woman.” As the show progresses, he garners the audience’s opinion, to which they respond “it is a man, look at their muscles” or “it is a woman,” for example (tpmum, 2023). The performers on stage are denied personhood and instead are reduced to an “it.” Either way, the show positions drag as something to be gawked at by a seemingly heteronormative audience.

Ricki Lake's inclusion of drag queens within her talk show is particularly interesting as she costarred with legendary drag performer Divine in John Water's *Hairspray* (1988). would feature RuPaul in 1996 in a proto-*Drag Race* style competition, in which several queens performed for the audience who then in turn got to select a winner. Lake also featured queens in a 1997 episode called "Get a Grip Doll. You're too Fat to be a Drag Queen." In this episode, several queens are brought on stage and confronted by their friends for being too fat to be a drag queen. The plus-sized queens then defend themselves. As Darienne Lake—an eventual contestant on *Drag Race*—told the talk show audience, "why have a small, little dream when you can have a big one?" Ricki Lake's inclusion of drag queens within her talk show seems much nicer than Maury's, although both use drag as a comedic punching bag.

These inclusions of drag within larger popular media, are limited. They presented the final product to the audiences. That is to say, we only ever saw the drag queen, but never the person behind the mask. The media environment was use to punching down at drag queens. *Drag Race*, on the other hand, would work as a celebration of the artform. As RuPaul states, "if we did this show, it would have to be with a reverence and a love for these creative, courageous souls who did drag" (Fernandez, 2023, p. 21). This is perhaps, why in many ways the show struggled to find a network. It was too novel an idea. Brian Graden who was running MTV and Logo greenlit the show, and the rest is herstory. The show had a home on Logo TV.

Prior to *RuPaul's Drag Race*, there was not much original programing at Logo. Originally, the network only have 25 percent original content programming, with the other 75 percent filled out by show from other sources (Yin, 2004). The most popular original program on Logo before *Drag Race* was *Noah's Arc* a dramedy about four Black gay men living in Los Angeles. Yet, despite the popularity of the scripted series, the show only lasted two seasons. It

seems that most of the original programming on Logo featured either documentary and reality series, such as *Open Bar*, a reality television show that traced the opening of a gay bar in West Hollywood, and the docuseries TransGeneration, which followed four college aged trans people during their academic year. A majority of the programming, however, heavily relied on syndicated series to pad out its programming, airing shows popular among queer audiences, such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Daria, and Xena: Warrior Princess* to name a few. It is in this field that *RuPaul's Drag Race* enters the programming on Logo.

Casting

As scholars of reality television have pointed out, there is a lot of free labor done on the part of the contestants. Scholars such as Hearn (2010) and Johansen (2017) note the genre's use of immaterial labor, defined as "new forms of labor that go beyond traditional factories and workplaces and stretch into all spheres of life and are not easily recognized as 'work'" (Johansen, 2017, p.199). Further, reality television participants are usually viewed as cheap labor. Contestants might get a small per diem that cover any loss of wages, but generally participants are underpaid. However, most of the research done on this type of immaterial labor is only done within the context of a given reality show, but rarely examines contestants' free labor during pre-production. As we see in *Drag Race*'s case, the casting process demands a lot of free work from contestants, even before they get on the show.

Casting for the first season was done by Doron Ofir Productions/ Popular Productions. While not immediately named in the credits, the listed casting directors all worked for the Doron Ofir Productions. In a season 1 casting call, RuPaul directs hopeful contestants to go to RuPaulsDragRace.com for more information. Looking at the season one casting call shows a completely different version of the show. In the 2008 casting call, the show calls for "World of

Wonder, LOGO and Doron Ofir Casting are seeking fabulous, talented and gorgeous drag queens and their best friend / stylist / sidekick from across the Nation who are at least 21 years old to compete in the ultimate first ever televised reality drag competition" (Popular Productions, 2008). The premise of this version of the show was that the queen would work together with her partner to attempt to win the competition. When reading through the application, it specifies that the "[partner] MUST be able to help you in the creation of your alter ego" (Popular Productions, 2008). Aside from this major change, the questions asked in the application are standard: name, age, hometown, phone number, etc.. There are colloquialisms spread throughout such as "Birthdate: don't go lying gurl, because we will check!" and "Current Occupation… your REAL job that pays your rent" (2008). These are casually thrown around probably to add an authentic feel to the application.

Further, the show provides two other ways to get the casting directors' attention. One way was to drop by their open casting calls in San Diego, Minneapolis, Dallas, and New York. Even though not listed as a potential city, Los Angeles was also heavily scouted. Former contestants Alaska Thunderfuck 5000 and Willam state that they were both scouted, but the former did not apply, while the latter did terribly in the interview. Willam notes that while we wanted to apply, they wanted her to submit an audition tape. Ongina, another season one contestant, stated in an interview that she was scouted at a Los Angeles club and "harassed" by a producer for two weeks to submit a 10 minute audition tape (Nolfi and Senderholm, 2020; Thunderfuck 5000 and Willam, 2018b). She submitted the tape the day applications were due. According to her, she didn't have time to edit it, so she just submitted a two hour tape with random footage of herself, including footage of her eating a hot dog.

The implication in both Willam's and Ongina's statements is that the casting managers were looking for edited tapes. That means that hopeful applicants would have had to have a method of filming themselves. Likewise, since casting managers were looking for edited tapes, many of the queens would have required either having video-editing skills, or hiring an editor. These are all out-of-pocket payments that the queens are making in hopes of getting on the show. This places a financial burden on queens even prior to getting on the show.

These financial burdens are exasperated when the outcomes are unknown. Since *Drag Race* had never aired, anyone applying was taking a chance on the unknown. As such, drag staples in the Southern California market, the Showgirls lead by Chad Michaels, refused to apply for the first season of the show, although they would go on to apply for later seasons once the show had established itself (Thunderfuck 5000 and Willam, 2018a). The first season winner Bebe Zahara Benet noted her hesitancy in applying because she didn't know what *Drag Race* was (Nolfi and Senderholm, 2020). Despite being asked to apply by producers and casting agents, it was only after ChiChi LaRue, a popular drag queen, asked Bebe to apply that she did.

Their refusal to apply makes sense since, at that time, the show's name held no social cache. To go on the show meant taking a huge risk. Bebe states that when she had seen drag on television before, it was to mock it or make fun of it. She didn't want to go on television if they were going to degrade her job: "I [didn't] want to be in a situation where people were laughing at me instead of laughing with me" (Nolfi And Senderholm, 2020). However, once she knew RuPaul was involved, she decided to apply. It seems that what would have helped get more people to apply to the show was using other big names in the drag industry to scout.

The same process seems to be implied in the application. Casting agents and producers would go scout for potential applications, and these scouted queens would then casting directors

would interview them. Queens who came to the open calls had to bring video footage of themselves performing. There is no other information regarding these scouting events. The other way to get on the show was through fan votes. Queens were prompted to create a profile on the Drag Race website. Then fans would read the profiles, and in some cases watch videos, and vote for their favorite queen. The more popular the queen seemed, the greater the chance of getting on.

This type of casting seemed to promote a diverse mix of queens for the first season. The queens came from throughout the country: Los Angeles, Long Beach, Las Vegas, Minneapolis, Denver, Fort Lauderdale, Cleveland, and Raleigh. Nina Flowers—originally from Puerto Rico, but at that time living in Denver—won the fan vote. There was also racial diversity, with only three white queens, making the majority of the cast queens of color. Further, there was a great diversity in the type of drag presented: "each of the nine has his own distinctive style and looks as a woman, ranging from madcap androgynous punk to prissy '50s schoolmarm" (Stanley, 2009). This type of aesthetic diversity within the show was important in elevating the art form and broadening what drag means to a broader audience.

Yet in this casting we begin to see the beginning of serialized tropes. Through the cast of the first season, the show introduces the audience to two important tropes: the big girl and the Puerto Rican queen. The big girl is a plus sized contestant, that is to say, fat. She can be of any race, so long as she is plus sized. In the first season, we see the plus sized queen represented by Victoria "Porkchop" Parker. The second trope is that of the Puerto Rican queen. As the name might suggest, this is a queen from Puerto Rico. As the show progresses and develops, there are several other tropes that appear as part of each season's story. Producers and casting agents work together to refine the use of tropes as the show progresses, eventually impacting the narrative of

the show, and, to an extent, the outcomes. Casting therefore plays into the story editors' duties. While there is more to say about this, I will focus on it later in the following chapter.

Drag Race Season 1

The pilot season of Drag Race premier in 2009 on the Viacom subsidiary Logo TV. The network at the time was dedicated to lifestyle and entertainment content for their queer audience. Originally Logo's programming was a mixture of documentaries, movies, television shows, and news that had queer characters or queer narratives. There were also syndicated shows that were popular amongst queer audiences, like *The Golden Girls.* These types of syndicated shows are typical for start-up networks as they are relatively easy to acquire and are relatively inexpensive for the network. As part of their original programing, Logo picked up *RuPaul's Drag Race*, the competition reality television show. Again, while the show was relatively inexpensive since the genre itself had low production costs. The show was meant to be a parody of *Project Runway* and *America's Next Top Model*, with RuPaul as the supermodel head judge.



Figure 6: The promotional image for the debut season.

The premise of the show was simple: Ru was looking for the next drag superstar, someone to follow in his footsteps after all his dreams had come true: "As the original supermodel of the world, I had all my dreams come true. And now, it's time for me to share the love" (Charles, 2009). Ru's statement of "and now, it's time to share the love" positions the show

as an inevitability. As if the show was always meant to happen. Further, the show's premise positions the possible winner as the next RuPaul. As such, most of the first season's challenges reflect in some way RuPaul's career: modeling, hosting, performing, etc.

Very early on in the first season, we see that the show is meant to reflect RuPaul's career. RuPaul dabbled in many artistic forays, including acting in the 1987 underground movie trilogy *RuPaul Is: Starrbooty*. These films, a pastiche of the Blaxploitation genre, star RuPaul as a crime fighting federal agent. However, these films were rather niche and did not attract a lot of mainstream attention. Arguably, RuPaul achieved mainstream success when he released his single "Supermodel (You Better Work)" in 1993. His success continued, and in 1994 he became face of MAC Cosmetics Viva Glam campaign, the first drag queen to sign a major cosmetics campaign. In 1996, he hosted his own talk show on VH1, *The RuPaul Show*. The show ran for two seasons from 1996 through 1998 with 100 shows total. Before and after the talk show, he continued to release music and act in movies, such as a cameo in 1995's *Too Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar* and as a supporting character in *But I'm a Cheerleader* (1999). While RuPaul was popular, she was never the star of a major movie during this time. In 1995, he also released a book: *Letting It all Hang Out*. In a sense, the drag queen market as we know it now is established in the image of RuPaul.

Some of the prizes for the first season also reflected RuPaul's career. The winner of the first season of RuPaul's Drag Race won a feature photo spread in paper magazine, an independent lifestyle and culture periodical that featured RuPaul in June 1993. RuPaul also makes a note of telling the contestants that this was her first national cover. Further, the winning contestant would also win a portrait for the L.A. Eyeworks Legendary Designer Eyewear Campaign taken by fashion photographer Greg Gorman. L.A. Eyeworks is a Los Angeles-based



Figure 7: RuPaul for L.A. Eyeworks (L.A. Eyeworks, 2024).

glasses design company. Their motto is "a face is like a work of art. It deserves a great frame" (LA. Eyeworks, 2024). Their Legendary designer campaign not only featured RuPaul in their "A Face is like a work of art" campaign in 1996, but also drag legend Divine in 1987. As such, there was a standing history between drag and the company. L.A. Eyeworks also gifted the winner a selection of designer sunglasses. Each episode features RuPaul's images from these campaigns. The winner also has a rap-solo appear in RuPaul's song "Covergirl." Thus we can see how even if the prizes, the show is attempting to find another RuPaul.

The rest of the prizes come directly from the show's two main sponsors: Absolut Vodka and MAC Cosmetics. For this moment, I specifically want to focus on the prizes, before moving on to discuss their involvement in the show. The winner of the first season won a headlining spot in the Absolut Pride Tour, an eleven tour stop that focused on major queer metropoles. The winner also won 20,000 dollars, courtesy of the two sponsors. The winner also received 5,000 dollars' worth of MAC makeup. However, the show's prizes were also not yet cemented by the time the show started filming. According to Ongina, the queens "in the beginning they didn't know how much they were going to give us. They were like, 'the prize is a bucket of fried chicken! Now react.' They didn't know what the prize money was suppose to be" (Nolfie and Sederholm, 2020). This explains why only some of the prizes are mentioned in the last episode

and why there is no discussion of the prize money in any of the contestants' confessionals, like we will see mentioned in later seasons.

The show had a low budget. It was filmed in a basement in Burbank, used a broom closet as a control room, and had the contestants wait in a hallway while the judges deliberated (Armitage, 2019). The season was so cheaply produced that the show used a, now infamous, blur filter throughout the season, a far cry from the high definition the show now currently films in. Further, because the show lacked the budget, the show used music without garnering the rights. Some songs used in the first season were "Stronger" by Britney Spears and "The Greatest Love of All" by Whitney Houston. Because the show didn't have the rights to the songs, the season never re-aired, making it very difficult for fans of the show to watch the pilot season. The season was shelved until 2013 when it was rereleased as "the Lost Season" (Katz, 2019). Some queens took umbrage to the season's rebrand. Jade Sotomayor, a contestant on season 1 stated, "it felt kind of shady to bring us back only to name us 'The Lost Season.' It was almost as if we were being called 'the Forgotten Season.' (Katz, 2019).

Despite the low budget and Vaseline-filter, the show garnered positive reviews. A review for the New York Times notes that the show is "a campy, good-humored ode to cross-dressing, and lip syncing, and striking an attitude" (Stanley, 2009). Joey Nolfy, the *Drag Race* beat journalist at Entertainment Weekly, stated that the first season was "really unrestrained by expectations because it was so new. It was doing this fun little campy stuff that feels like classic on-a-budget comedic drag before *Drag Race* really did change the face of what contemporary drag would look like" (Nofli and Sederholm, 2020). Unfortunately, a lot of the early promotional material seems to be lost to time. What we do have, however, is the actual season.

As the show state's it is looking for the "next drag superstar," the winner of the competition is meant to follow in RuPaul's steps. Therefore, the show tests the queens on their ability to act, pose and model, construct outfits, interview guests, and most importantly, sell items. For many of the contestants, this would have been their first time trying these skills such as acting or interviewing guests. While some queens may have acted before, particularly those queens from Los Angeles, for many participants would never would have had any prior opportunity.

Further, the show provided further complications beyond the challenges. For example, their makeup time was severely limited. In the second episode of season one, as part of the challenge, the contestants were asked to compete in girl groups and perform a lip-sync performance to a Destiny's Child song. The eight remaining queens were split up into two groups of four. Each queen within the group was tasked to make their groups' clothing, makeup, wigs, and choreography. This challenge presupposes that each queen knows how to sew, choreograph, style wigs, and do a face chart—a piece of paper with printed face that makeup artists map out where the product will go. Of the nine queens, only Shannel knew how to do a face chart as she had worked with the beauty brand Chanel. On the second day of the challenge, the queens have an hour and a half to finish any last minute details and get into drag. However, many of the queens were still working on their clothing. In response to the limitations Tammie Brown states, "we don't need this pressure" (2009).

While time constraints are a general trope of reality television competitions like *Project Runway*, they are not the norm for everyday drag life. It takes time for a queen to get into their costumes and makeup. Further, while most queens do their own makeup, many—but not all—do not make their own clothes or style their own wigs. While the queens might embellish costumes,

they rarely produce the outfit. Wigs are generally styled by other drag queens or hair stylists who are familiar with styling techniques. Thus, the show adds artificial requirements and constraints to the queens. As an example, RuPaul stated in an interview that he can rush his makeup and have it done within an hour, but he prefers six hours (RuPaul does not do their own makeup. Mathu Anderson did RuPaul's makeup for the first eight seasons, while former contestant Raven has done the makeup since season nine) (Gohl, 2016). Further, RuPaul does not make sew her own clothes. It could be argued that because RuPaul is so successful, he no longer needs to practice these skills. Even in the first episode, Nina Flowers says that she takes around two or three hours to do her makeup, but the show only gives her an hour and a half. Thus, within the context of the show, we see how the constraints of reality television change the field of drag.

Another limitation that is placed upon the queens is the stifling of their own personal performance styles. Once again, I point to Tammie Brown as an example of this limitation. When she is told that she "is completely out of her element" in the Destiny Child's lip-sync, she responds with, "these aren't the type of songs I like to do, I'm sorry" (2009). In the deliberation with the judges, RuPaul states, "My fear with Tammie is that she did not connect with us and she didn't connect with the material" (2009). The way that RuPaul phrases the sentences gives the implication that the "us" and "the material" are both related to each other. And, in a way, they are. Tammie's quirky individuality does not work well with the pop song. This point is further reinforced by her bottom two lip-sync performance, or non-performance. She refuses



Figure 8: Tammie Brown in the second episode's lip sync.

to do the lip-sync and instead just moves around. Further, because of her quirky individuality, she cannot appeal to a mass audience. RuPaul eliminates Tammie in that episode.

Despite how groundbreaking the show was, it works within the tropes of reality television. This is in part since the show pulls predominately from other reality television shows at that time: *Project Runway* and *America's Next Top Model*. This reliance on tropes in the first season is best epitomized when Akashia states, "every competition needs a bitch and that bitch is me" (2009). Even though the show is the first drag queen competition reality series, it still operated as every other reality show at that time, particularly when it comes to racialized gender representation. Wynn (2015) notes the use of Black women in reality television usually consists of women rolling their eyes, trash talking, and reinforcing the angry Black woman stereotype. While Akashia might lean into the role, the show also emphasizes that the audience should not like her. A review of the show notes how much the show focuses on Akashia as a villain: "we are going to have to watch more [Akashia], who is just evil and bitchy! See we learned our lesson and go along with whatever the producers want us to think" (Grant, 2009). Since most of Akashia's behavior is seen either in the werkroom or confessionals, it does not seem to play into the judges' decision making. Despite being in the bottom two for three weeks however, Akashia is eventually eliminated.

Some of the show's main maxi challenges are also stem from season one. The first every challenge is a variant of *Project Runway*'s unconventional materials challenge, where the queens need to replicate their own looks with materials provided to them from a studio wardrobe department and accessorize with "crap," as RuPaul calls it, from the dollar store. The challenge tests the queens' ability to replicate their looks regardless of the materials provided to them. This challenge privileges queens who are seamstresses and are familiar with sewing. But further, the

challenge also privileges queens who are thin, as the materials provided generally are not plus-sized friendly. As Victoria Parker says, “I’m a whole lot of woman. I took three outfits apart, put them all back together” (Charles, 2009). Whereas the other queens could work with the confines of what they were given, only Victoria mentions how she had to sew three different outfits to make a single outfit for herself. Within the first 20 minutes, we see how the show’s producers set the stage for a thinner contestant to have an advantage to win. This is a pattern that will repeat itself throughout the series.

We see an emphasis on this desire for replicability in the makeover challenge. In this challenge, the queens are tasked to take non-drag queens and put them in drag. In the first season the queens are paired with “girl fighter partners” and make them into “live female versions of [themselves]” (Charles, 2009). RuPaul frames this as a way to reveal “the secrets of drag, something every real woman should know” (Charles, 2009). This challenge is more about reducing drag skills to an everyday audience, taking tips and tricks of drag and applying them to non-performers. And while it is never explicitly said, this is also a branding challenge, as the queens need to replicate their drag onto another person, what the judges call “family resemblance.” This resemblance is meant to duplicate the drag aesthetic onto another person. For example, Bebe Zahara Benet infuses her drag with her own Cameroonian culture. When given a Middle Eastern contestant, she draws on fighter’s background for influence. Bebe notes that since she pulls from her own



Figure 9: Bebe's makeover partner's before and after picture.

cultural aesthetics, her makeover candidate should do the same. Yet, the judges critique Bebe for not replicating her drag onto the queen. Thus, family resemblance is more of creating a drag twin. A queen's branding cannot be a concept, but rather a materiality that can be duplicated.

Another pattern the show sets up in the first season is who gets to sit on the judges panel. The show followed the reality television convention of having a judges panel that supports the main host in making their decision, as seen on *Project Runway* or *America's Next Top Model*. As such, on *Drag Race*, we have two permanent guest judges throughout the first season: Merle Ginsburg and Santino Rice. Ginsburg is introduced by RuPaul as a fashion journalist and bestselling author. Ru describes Rice, on the other hand, as a "shamefully outspoken designer who's no stranger to the runway" (Charles, 2009). Ginsburg is by trade a fashion journalist who has written for *Harper's Bazaar, Rolling Stone,* and *Cosmopolitan* to name a few. We are to take away from her presence on the judges panel that she is there to critique the contestant's fashion and not their drag. Santino, is also there as a fashion critique, as he was a fashion designer who had appeared on the first season of *Project Runway*. Out of the three permanent judges, only one has active ties to drag: RuPaul.

There are also weekly guest judges that sit on the panel. Each week, throughout the first season, there were two guest judges. The show's first guest judges were Bob Mackie, a fashion designer who famously worked with Cher, and Mike Ruiz, a celebrity and fashion photographer whose work has appeared in *Vanity Fair, Spanish* and *Brazilian Vogue,* and *Paper Magazine*. As these are the first two guest judges to sit on the panel, I find it very telling about the perspectives privileged within the show. Four out of the five judges critiquing the queens in the first episode are fashion oriented. Only one of those judges has practical knowledge of being a drag queen. Given the judges' respective fields, it is not at all shocking that the plus-sized queen is first-ever

eliminated. Thus, we see a precedent of the show privileging more fashion forward drag rather over other styles of drag.

This is a pattern we see throughout the first season, out of all the twelve guest judges brought to the show, none of them are drag queens. Most of the guest judges are actors or involved in some way to the entertainment industry. However, we never see another drag queen sit on the judges panel throughout the series. While there might be other queens who appear in the show, they are never judges. The lack of drag queens on the panel works to reassert RuPaul's position as the only authority on drag. RuPaul's singular presence within the show also reasserts itself as he is also the mentor for the contestants. He is both mentor and judge, and to an extent executioner, to all the contestants. Thus, the queens' have no other point of view for drag within the context of the show. While occasionally the contestants are mentored by RuPaul's makeup artist, RuPaul is still present within these consultations. However, even then, they are not garnering a different perspective for drag, they are still associated to RuPaul's aesthetic as these consultants are directly tied to how RuPaul looks. As such, RuPaul's drag aesthetic is deemed as the only viable drag within the context of the show. Even further, with the types of judges brought to the show, we see a privileging of mass appeal over subcultural appeal. Instead of providing queens with feedback about how to improve their skills in traditional drag spaces, they are given feedback on how to operate within the entertainment industry.

The commercial interests are also present in the judges panel in the first season. There are two main sponsors throughout the first season: MAC cosmetics and Absolut Vodka. Both of these sponsors sit on the judges panel at some point in the first season. The then Vice President of makeup artistry Gordon Espinet was representing MAC cosmetics in the MAC/ Viva Glam Challenge-inspired episode. Jeffery Moran, the vice president of public relations and marketing

services for Absolut's parent company Pernod Richard USA, was present as a guest judge in an Absolut Vodka-inspired challenge. Their presence in the judging panel shows that the show's sponsors have direct input into who gets to be America's Next Drag Superstar.

In a sense, both brands are operating with communities they have already courted. RuPaul had previously worked with MAC in 1995 on their VIVA GLAM campaign, where 100 percent of the proceeds went to the MAC AIDS Fund. Further, VIVA GLAM was MAC's first advertising campaign. Prior to this campaign, the company thought advertising was too expensive and relied purely on word of mouth, which helped keep the makeup company niche. However, the two owners of MAC, Frank Toskan and Frank Angelo, both paid for VIVA GLAM's advertising out of their own pockets primarily to drive sales of the product and AIDS awareness (Benoit 2014). As such, RuPaul was technically also the first public face of the brand. RuPaul was also named the spokesperson and honorary chair for the AIDS fund. Both RuPaul and MAC's values of acceptance, diversity, and glamour aligned. However, RuPaul also fit the company's ethos because of his subcultural connections, which imparted the company subcultural credibility.

However, the MAC that sponsored the first season of *Drag Race* was not the same as the company RuPaul worked with. The Estée Lauder Company, a multinational makeup company, took control over MAC cosmetics in 1998. Given the first season's promotional material, it seems that Absolut was a more prominent sponsor than MAC. The sponsor's presence is seen throughout the show, however, in a couple different ways. In the werkroom, the audience sees the brand's name above the contestant's makeup stations. Further, the queens use MAC makeup throughout their run on the show. For example, when RuPaul is stating the rules for the first ever challenge, he states, "And as far as makeup is concerned, MAC has that covered" (Charles,

2009). We then see camera shots to MAC's name and shots of the product. This direct call out, however, does not happen in all episodes.

Lastly, the most visible way the brand incorporates itself into the show is through a sponsored challenge. The fourth episode of the season is called MAC/ Viva Glam challenge. The show's synopsis positions the brand's history with RuPaul: "Hoping to follow in the footsteps of MAC Cosmetics' first Viva Glam girl, RuPaul, the queens make their own Viva Glam screen test. Jenny Shimizu joins the panel to help judge the girls' drag queen status" (Charles, 2009). Of note, Espinet is not named in the synopsis, but instead the queer model Jenny Shimizu is. The queen who wins the maxi challenge wins a Mac/ VIVA GLAM ambassadorship.

RuPaul's VIVA GLAM campaign inspired the challenge. However, instead of a photoshoot, the queens are filming 30-second screen tests. The queens, however, are never told what the screen tests are supposed to be about. RuPaul gives the contestants vague instructions about showing their "Viva Glam" and to explain why they are a VIVA GLAM woman (Charles, 2009). Espinet is introduced and states that they want to see the queen's signature look and that "[they] want to see that [the queens] have a desire to do good for the MAC AIDS Fund" (Charles, 2009). RuPaul then tells the contestants about the fund's mission. Espinet's words "do good for" infer the type of relationship the queens will have with the brand. They will not be part of the brand, but rather work for it. Espinet's word choice places the contests as responsible for pushing the MAC AIDS Fund further, rather than pushing their own careers.

Quickly, however, we see the personal stakes of the challenge. Throughout the episode, some of the queens discuss their relation to HIV/ AIDS. For example, Bebe Zahara Benet states that HIV/ AIDS is pervasive in her home country of Cameroon. Her screen test addresses the issues in what she deems a "place far away," and notes how MAC is helping. Espinet notes that

"her screen test was great. The whole fact that she's African. She can speak right from the heart of, like, living it, seeing, being it" (Charles, 2009). However, the most impactful moment comes when Ongina tearfully shares her HIV positive status on the runway after she is declared the winner of the challenge. While her screen test doesn't discuss her own status—she instead focuses on celebrating life—she tells the judges that she had been living with HIV for two years, so that particular challenge win means a lot to her. As Ongina cries on the runway, we then see shots of Merle Ginsberg also crying and a shot of Espinet offering a supporting smile.

Ongina, as the winner of the challenge, did go on to be a spokes model for VIVA GLAM. In a podcast interview, Ongina reveals that as part of the challenge win, she had the opportunity to go to New York City and meet with MAC executives. She was also allowed to take whatever makeup or makeup accessories she wanted. While she personally did not take any makeup products, she did take two of every type of brush they had. As part of being a spokesmodel, she also presented a 25,000 dollar check on behalf of MAC AIDS Fund to the Harvey Milk High School, a New York City school that is designed for high school aged students who identify as part of the queer community. However, in the interview, Ongina states that after that event, she never heard back from MAC, which left her wondering, "where was the actual spokesmodel part? Where's my lipstick and my lip-gloss? Where's my photoshoot?" (Thunderfuck and Willam, 2018). Coincidentally, the 2009 spokesperson for VIVA GLAM that year was the singer Fergie.

There seems to be a disconnect between what the show promised the girls and what MAC delivered. Within the show, RuPaul does state that the winner will be a spokesperson for the brand: "the girl who wins this challenge will become a VIVA GLAM spokesperson" (Charles, 2009). However, an article about the event on *The Advocate* calls it a "spokesperson for the day"

(Voss, 2009). There is thus a disconnect about what Ongina's title was. Further misunderstanding seem to appear when Senior Vice President of MAC and head of the MAC Global AIDS Foundation Nancy Mahon calls the challenge a public service announcement for VIVA GLAM (Salzenstein, 2009). These incongruities lead me to believe that there might have been miscommunication issues between World of Wonder and MAC, which could explain why the makeup company was not a sponsor for the second season.

Absolut Vodka, on the other hand, did not have a direct relationship with RuPaul, but rather with the queer community. Chavez and Place's (2013) study highlights the long relationship between Absolut and the queer community. Prior to *Drag Race*, Absolut had about 30 years of marketing to gay consumers. But as the authors point out, most of Absolut's advertising is rather conservative and continues to make associations between gay men and several tropes, such as club culture and as a group with high disposable income. *Drag Race*, therefore, allows Absolut to widen their appeal beyond what Buckland (2002) calls the Party Boy aesthetic: muscular, white, and wealthy. Of the nine queens on the show, only three are white, and the only muscular queen is Puerto Rican. While Absolut can seemingly support these other facets of the queer community, they can also directly target the perceived affluent, white audience.

Absolut plays a more paradoxical role throughout the show than MAC. For example, part of the prize package includes a "headline spot on the Absolut Pride Tour across the USA." This tour stops in major cities like Los Angeles, New York, Miami, and Seattle to name a few. However, both Absolut and MAC are responsible for the 20,000 dollar cash prize. Yet, Absolut has less visible branding throughout the werkroom, including the behind the scenes show *Under*

the Hood. Although Absolut's name is said at the top of every episode, we rarely see the brand incorporated throughout the show.

Similar to MAC, there was an Absolut themed challenge. This episode challenges the remaining queens to a create looks "inspired by Absolut's real fruit flavored vodka" (Charles, 2009). Guzman and Chavez (2023) explore Absolut's role within the show, noting how Absolut's representative Jeffery Moran specifically critiques the girls as if they are going to be brand ambassadors. Importantly, both of the authors note how both the show and Moran seem to dictate that the contestants present traditionally feminine drag aesthetics, instead of camp. The preference for the former aesthetic points to a conservative take of drag that might not possibly alienate non-drag fans. This penchant throughout the first season seems to be in line with the show's search for a drag superstar who is closer associated to fashion and modeling rather than camp drag, positioning the former to be more commercial successful than then latter.

During the season finale, Absolut held a viewing party in Hell's Kitchen, New York. Bebe Zahara Benet and Rebecca Glasscock, two of the top three, were in attendance. Unfortunately, there is not much written about the event. What we do know is that after the live viewing of the finale, both of the contestants performed. Moran then came out to present a check to Bebe for 10,000 dollars, with presumably the other half of the prize money coming from MAC



separately. The check follow's Absolut's "In an Absolut world" campaign as the check reads, "In an Absolut world every queen gets her crown" (Lovekin, 2009). The first half of the check is in purple reflective font, while the second half is written in plain black text, drawing far more attention to Absolut's name and campaign.

Conclusion

The first season of RPDR was very much a pilot season. However, it is instrumental in how drag is broadcasted to a larger audience. It was one of the first times that drag that celebrated as an artform, and went from went from the dark clubs to a brightly lit runway in American homes. Also, future contestants saw what would be expected of them should they chose to go on the show. Now that the first season was out and the audience saw what the show was like, it drew many more applicants, even those who were originally wary of the show. Many of the contestants who were originally courted to be on that first season eventually did audition and appear on the show. But is also proved to be a financial success for the network. According to Logo, the first season of the show was the network's most successful launch and drove a significant amount of traffic to Logo's website (Stansky, 2009). It also was successful for the queens who had appeared on the show. Thanks in large part to the Absolut Pride tour, many of the season one queens had reached a larger fan base than was ever imaginable. They toured around the nation in a way that was unheard of prior. And that also came with a certain level of financial success. With the success of the show, the network greenlit the show for a second season. More importantly, I was instantly hooked. And the rest, as they say, is history.

CHAPTER 3: DO YOU WANT GAY SHIT?: *RUPAUL'S DRAG RACE*, A HISTORY THROUGH ADVERTISING

I somehow finagled my way into getting Logo TV on my cable package. While I do not remember a lot of details, which honestly at this point seems to be a running theme, I remember that I thought it was better if I told the customer service representative that my mom wanted the Oprah Winfrey Network. Logo was in the same cable package. I am not sure I needed to lie, but it felt right at the time. I just didn't want the customer service agent to judge me for asking for this strange channel. The new cable package also meant a higher cable bill. While I do not remember the exact price, looking at current cable packages for Spectrum (who was Time Warner when I younger), no base package includes Logo TV. Instead, I would have to get their TV Select Signature package at 64.99 per month. I would then need to add their Entertainment Package for an additional 15 dollars a month, making the monthly total 79.99 a month just for the digital package, which does not include the price of any of the hardware or internet services. Of course, these are contemporary pricings.

Admittedly, the show has cost me a lot of money over the years. When I moved out from home, and left my upgraded cable package behind, I had to download season passes from iTunes to watch the latest season. Admittedly, some I mostly started buying the seasons when I moved to Oregon. While I do have season 6, which cost 34.99, my collection contains seasons eight through fourteen, except for season 11. I also have *All Stars* seasons two through five, and season 9's untucked. Each season is about 24.99, while the All Stars seasons are 19.99. In total, my modest collection cost me under 300 dollars. Then I had to purchase a subscription to Paramount Plus, 9.99 a month, which grants me access to the series catalog, as well as new seasons of *All Stars*, but not the new regular series. Then I have to pay for a subscription to World of Wonder's

streaming service, 3.99 a month to start, but is now 4.99 a month, so I could watch the international seasons and some of their other digital content. This does not include buying different songs, albums, or EPs on iTunes from RuPaul and different contestants, or movies—such as *Hurricane Bianca 1* and *2*—or buying tickets for theatered drag shows (one woman shows, or touring theater shows such as *Jinkx and DeLa Holiday Show*), or paying for cover charges and drinks and meet-and-greet costs and tips at a bar to watch a *Drag Race* girl perform. It takes a lot of money to keep up with *Drag Race*.

But it also takes a lot of money to produce *Drag Race*. This the chapter explores the evolution of the show's economics. The fourteen years I am examining trace the show's move from Logo TV to VH1, changes in sponsors, and as I argue, a change in audience. This therefore leads the show to grow from a niche show on a nicher cable channel, to a mainstream phenomenon. Unfortunately, since the gender breakdown of the audience cannot be readily identified, I instead focus on what brands decide to sponsor the show. Since the chapter is more focused on the economics of the show as it grows, I am not doing a season by season recap. Rather, I am tracing changes in major advertisers, primarily those named at the top of the show. This chapter explores not only the sponsors, but also any sponsor-related challenges. Further, I also examine the sponsors' ads that feature the queens. For the sake of this paper, I will also classify the major sponsors into four different groups: makeup, queer-owned businesses, and alcohol and beverages, and miscellaneous. However, this chapter only explores two of these sponsors, alcohol by ways of Absolut Vodka and makeup, since they by far have the largest presence within the show. That said, I first start the chapter with a breakdown of the show's structure that was more or less formalized after the first season since it provides us with a basic language for discussing the mechanics of the show.

Basic Show Structure

The first season of the show is not as put together as it is now. One way that we see the show coming into itself is the basic breakdown of an episode. The first season did not follow this format, and instead was at times shot more like a docuseries with shaky cam. The cuts to commercials were not consistent from episode to episode. However, by the second season we see a more structuralized show. What follows is the general breakdown of a basic episode, not including premiers, finales, or reunions.

At the start of each episode, the audience is told what happened in the previous episode of the series: highlighting the challenge, any relevant story beat moments, the winner of the challenge, the lip-sync, and the eliminated queen walking away. After that, we see a preview of this week's episode, and then the winner's prizes are once again mentioned. Then we see RuPaul, in full drag, announce "may the best [drag queen] win!" (Charles, 2009). The theme song then plays. After some b-roll footage of Los Angeles in the morning, the contestants come into the "Werk Room" and discuss the previous week's elimination, the stress of the show, or tease each other. After a bit of banter, they get a televised message from RuPaul, cryptically telling them what the upcoming challenge will be. Then, werkroom RuPaul enters the room, usually dressed in masculine clothing. He presents the mini-challenge to the contestants with the winner usually winning an advantage for the coming maxi-challenge. In the case of the "Absolut Drag Ball" episode, the remaining contestants have to vogue against each other. After the winner is announced, the maxi-challenge is presented. The contestants then have time to prepare. RuPaul, once again in male drag, comes in and provides advice to the contestants.

After a commercial break, we still follow RuPaul as he gives advice to the remaining queens, before giving the queens general advice, and then leaving. Depending on the challenge,

we either see the contestants either filming, rehearsing, or as is the case with this episode, designing and making their outfits. These moments are generally interstitially cut with confessionals that elaborate on the contestants ideas, process, or emotions. We then cut to b-roll footage of Los Angeles at night, to signal the end of the day. The next day, elimination day, the queens return to the werkroom and get ready for the runway. At this moment, we the audience begin to see the transformation from male presenting figures to drag queens. It is also at this point that we get what some fans have labeled the "tragedy mirror" moment, where the contestants talk about past trauma like coming out, dating, or the like. We don't see it feature heavily in this episode, but as the series progress, it does become a staple in the show.

As the commercial break ends, the audience is brought to the runway for the main challenge. We see a now transformed RuPaul saunter down the runway, where he introduces the judges to the audience. After he states, "start your engines, and may the best [drag queen] win," we see the contestants walk the runway. In this episode, the contestants walk the runway three times—once for each look—while the judges make jokes and comments about the looks. After the runway, we get another commercial break.

When we come back, RuPaul announces the safe queens, who can go offstage. The remaining queens hear the judges critiques and get a change to interact with the judges. The contestants are then dismissed while the judges deliberate. The judges then discuss the positives and negatives of each queen's performance on the challenge and runway to help RuPaul decide who should win the week's challenge and who should "sashay away" (Charles, 2009). After RuPaul states the bring the girls back—"bring back my girls"—we get another commercial break.

The final segment of show begins with the queens coming back to the stage. The winner of the challenge is announced, and the bottom two remain. The bottom two must now "lip sync for their lives" (RuPaul 2009). The two remaining queens must then perform for the judges and RuPaul. After the performance, RuPaul announced who can "shantay, you stay" and who can "sashay away." The camera then follows the eliminated queen to the werkroom, where they can say a goodbye message to the audience. We then cut back to the runway, where RuPaul congratulates the queens and then declares, "If you can't love yourself, how the hell you gonna love anybody else? Can I get an Amen? Let the music play! (Charles, 2009). Then a RuPaul song comes on while the queens dance on the runway before walking off. The song changes mostly each season, depending on what song RuPaul is promoting. In earlier seasons, the song was associated with RuPaul's song catalog; however newer seasons feature new songs. Then credits start rolling.

Selling Us the Fantasy

Although Logo's target audience was predominately affluent, White gay and lesbian viewers, it is speculated that *Drag Race* drew a different audience. In their short-lived talk show on YouTube called *The Kiki*, Matthew Rodriguez and Kevin O'Keeffe discuss the audience of the first three seasons of *Drag Race* as predominately for queer people of color. They support this claim by stating that the winners of the first three seasons reflect the audience. Rodriguez states, "In a funny way, the winners in those eras kind of reflect the audience that the show is chasing. You talk about [seasons] one through three, you have Bebe, Tyra, and Raja. And it's funny because that is when the seasons felt like it was a kiki between queer people of color" (Grindr, 2018). Rodriguez' uses the word "kiki"—which comes from the ballroom culture, to mean a gathering for the intention of gossiping—feels intentional, as it creates an insider/ outsider

dynamic. Rodriguez envisions the insiders as queer people of color. However, his speculation is based on the idea that the show was listening to who the audience wanted to win. Rodriguez imagines the first three seasons of the show as a conversation between production and audiences.

Yet, audience input would be hard to incorporate into the show in the first three seasons. The show's season finales and winners were chosen before the show aired. For example, the winner of the third season was spoiled by tabloid blogger Perez Hilton prior to the show airing. Since production of the season had already wrapped, there was nothing production could do about the leak. This leak, however, reveals that the show was not particularly interested in audience feedback. The season's winner was selected by RuPaul without any input from the audience watching at home.

However, in response to the leak, production changed their finale formats from the fourth season on. Instead of just filming the finale on the soundstage, they instead started doing live finale tapings, crowning multiple winners in front of the audience. The winner is revealed only during the airing of the episode. Further, the show starts asking for audience feedback starting in the fourth season. The show provides a call to action by having RuPaul state, "I want to hear from you, the viewers. Who should be America's next drag superstar? […] Let your voice be heard. Tweet your thoughts to #DragRace" (Charles, 2012). As the seasons grew, they used new avenues of audience voting, all based in social media. That said, it is unclear how much audience voting impacts the show.

However, a worthwhile way I believe to see how the show's audience develops is through the advertisers. By analyzing who sponsors on the show, we can see what audience the series has garnered. As Ien Ang (1991) notes in her research, television needs an audience, but that audience is instrumental for advertisers. If advertisers can figure out who is watching any given

program, they can tailor the ads for that specific demographic. In a sense, I am using the same rationale.

Absolut Vodka

Absolut Vodka was one of the first sponsors of *Drag Race*. Sponsoring the show seems to fit within Absolut's overall marketing plan. Morgenstern et al. (2015) note that spirit brands, such as Absolut, mostly advertised their wares on entertainment channels during prime time hours. Likewise, they found that the brand mostly associated itself with partying (Morgenstern et al., 2015). Researchers found that generally alcohol advertisements used cliché understandings of the queer, particularly gay male, subculture, relying heavily on stereotypically attractive men or gay celebrities as endorsers (Adams et al., 2007). Given the images used in advertisements, it seems that alcohol brands likewise believe that the gay community consists of mostly affluent people, which itself is another stereotype. However, marketing alcohol to the queer community has also been criticized, as gay men are more likely to drink heavily (Hughes & Eliason, 2002).

As Guzman and Chavéz (2022) note in their paper, Absolut has a long history with *RuPaul's Drag Race* as an early sponsor of the show. Their paper shows that Absolut's corporate representative within the show had a direct impact on the marketability of drag, having direct input as to who should go home. The authors also explore "Cocktail Cabaret," a series of commercials with contestants from the second season. While Guzman and Chavéz' paper examines the first two seasons of the show, Absolut did go on to sponsor three more seasons and produce more commercials that feature former *Drag Race* contestants. Unfortunately, due to the nature of these advertisements, some have been lost to the digital wastelands, never to be seen again. However, thanks in part to some fans of the show and the contestants, we do have a couple of glimpses of these ads.

First, let's discuss the commercials for seasons one and two. The name of the series of ads that feature the first seasons queens is called "Another Exceptional Moment." The premise of these commercials is rather simple. The ad begins with a black screen and the words "Logo and Absolut present 'Another Exceptional Moment.'" The stereotypically attractive bartender prompts the queen with "what will it be," asking for their drink order. The queen instead asks for a drink through adjectives like "refreshing" or "sophisticate" which then prompts the bartender to use the same word to describe the queen. The queen then turns to the camera and recounts a story from their past. As they return back to the bartender, he presents their drink. The commercial ends by telling the audience that drink recipes can be found on Logo.com and to watch *RuPaul's Drag Race*. The one-minute ads would have ran throughout the second season.

The two commercials feature the winner Bebe Zahara Benet and Nina Flowers, the season's respective winner and runner up. Bebe asks for a "sophisticated drink" and then recounts a story when she "wasn't always such a lady" (BeBe Zahara Benet, 2013). Bebe recalls the story of when she use to be a male model in Paris, until one day one of the female models did not show up: "I knew that was my moment. As if summoned by a higher power, I stepped out of my trousers and got into the most elegant evening gown. I must tell you that when I walked down that runway, I never wanted to turn back. And you know, I never have" (BeBe Zahara Benet, 2013). The "I wasn't always such a lady" is a play on the fact that Bebe is in drag, and prior to the story, she was a male model. At the end, the bartender then presents her the "sophisticated" drink: an Absolut Dirty Martini.

Nina's commercial is fairly similar. She asks for "something original, refreshing" to which the bartender responds, "Nina Flowers is always refreshing and original"(Nina Flowers, 2012). Nina then turns to the camera and tells a story about her getting her first tattoo and how the other drag queens in Puerto Rico told her she would ruin her career. She notes, however, that she went on to get many more tattoos and her "career has never been better," proving her naysayers wrong (Nina Flowers, 2012). Throughout her soliloquy, there are glamor shots of Nina and also some shots of her tattoos. While she tells this story, we can see the bartender in the back making a Nina's cocktail, and occasionally we get B-shots of him pouring the Absolut Vodka into a glass and making the cocktail. At the end, we see that the cocktail is the Absolut Tonic Twist.



Figure 10: Still from Nina Flower's Absolut Commercial.

These ads are unique in that they provide insight into the queens that we do not see in the show. For example, while it is noted—and obvious—that Nina Flowers is heavily tattooed, we do not get much more about them. If anything, during the first episode, the other queens note that Nina has tattoos, and that makes her look like "rough trade," gay slang for a male prostitute who seems dangerous or thuggish. Of course, there is some racialization occurring, as Nina is Latine. However, what marks her as trade is not her ethnicity, but her tattoos. As such, Nina's tattoos also function as a marker of masculinity. Yet, the audience does not get any insight into why Nina is so heavily tattooed, until the ad. She has tattoos because she likes them and they seem to be an extension of her self expression.

These ads seemingly speak to how the show helps reframe gay identity from white to BIPOC identities. However, while these ads might seem as if they are doing counter-hegemonic work, the message is constrained by the parameters of the advertisement. Ultimately, both Bebe and Nina's stories are flattened; they do not get any complexity, especially given their respective backgrounds. We do not get any insight into how Bebe's modeling career was challenged by other models or professionals in the Parisian fashion scene, nor do we get any understanding of why tattoos are a bad thing within Puerto Rican drag. Instead, the audience gets to hear a story with a happy ending.

Thus, the narratives seem to be secondary within the advertisement. There is an odd disconnect between the stories the queens tell and the cocktails presented. Neither of the drinks seem related to the story they are telling, nor are they connected to any of the Absolut flavors featured in the Absolut challenge—citron, lemon, mango, and raspberry. Further, neither of the drinks made are unique drinks; they are just cocktails that just so happen to be made with Absolut Vodka. Tentatively, the drinks coincide with a brand identity for the queens, "sophisticated" and "original" respectively. These two commercials both seem to feature the unflavored Absolut Vodka. However, there is never a close up of the bottle of vodka at any point. A bottle of vodka exists behind the queen, but due to the effects on the video, it seems fairly blurry.

The ads featuring the second season's contestants feature a bit more of a connection. This campaign is called "Cocktail Cabaret" and features the top six queens wearing outfits inspired by an Absolut cocktail. Guzman and Chavéz' (upcoming) paper discusses Jessica Wild's segment, as it connects directly to her elimination. The premise of the campaign is relatively similar to the season one ads. However, instead of the queen addressing the at home audience directly, these

ads has each queen standing on stage in front of an audience. The audience drinks the queen's associated cocktail. Just like the season one ads, each queen gives a monologue about an element of their drag. For example, Jujube discusses how the Hollywood sign inspired her to take up drag. Raven discusses her first time in drag. Tyra Sanchez, the winner of the season, discusses how the birth of her son inspired her to do drag. Each ad ends joyously, with drag being pivotal to the personal growth of each contestant.

The ads partly develop the narratives from the second season's Absolut challenge. As mentioned in Guzman and Chavéz' paper, the second season Absolut challenge asks the girls to write a memoir of their life. In a similar vein, this ad follows up on that concept. However, in that episode's challenge, the queens had to promote the new Absolut Berry Açai vodka. There was no real connection between each queen's book and the vodka. This time, there is a bit more of a tie in with the outfit the queen wears. For example, Pandora Boxx, is in a red dress with two stalks of celery on her back. Her drink is the Absolut Bloody Mary. Raven takes a similar approach, with tea leaves sprouting out of her corset. While not all queens decided to take a campy, literal approach to their dress, they all have an element of their representative cocktail in their outfit. For example, Jujube—whose drink is the Absolut Cosmo—is in a sequin, pink dress. Although similarly to the first season ads, there is no connection between what they are monologuing about and their cocktail.



Figure 11: Pandora Boxx as the Absolut Bloody Mary in Cocktail Cabaret.

In a press release Moran notes that "Absolut yet again paves the path as a presenting sponsor of a show that will go from mild to wild this season. With such exceptional contestants, we knew we had to really put them through the paces, and the special Absolut episode will test their abilities to balance their creativity while staying true to themselves" (Clark, 2011). Moran manages to get some of the brand's keywords into the release, particularly "exceptional." There is also an element of branding within Moran's comments presented in the phrase "true to themselves."

Whereas season one had a ball challenge and season two had product placement challenge, the third season's Absolut-sponsored challenge was called the "RuPaul-a-Palooza." RuPaul introduces the challenge within the show by telling the contestants that they'll "need to find inspiration from the vast herstory of music to perform in a ladyboy music festival we're calling RuPaul-a-Palooza, sponsored by Absolut Vodka" (Charles, 2011). The challenge draws inspiration from Lallapalooza, an annual music festival in Chicago. However, in this music festival the girls will perform different remixes of RuPaul's song "Superstar." Each of the contestants will have to record a cover of the song in a different genre: country, disco, hip-hop, pop, punk, and reggae. The queens then have to put together an "appropriate performance outfit" as they will perform the song on the mainstage. Thus, the "ability to balance their creativity while staying true to themselves," as Moran noted in the press release, is about the queen blending their respective genre with their own unique style. Unlike the previous season, where the queens had to sing live, this season's queens recorded the songs as part of the challenge and will instead lip-sync in front of a live studio audience.

After RuPaul introduces the challenge, he welcomes Jeffery Moran, the show's Absolut representative, to the contestants. As Moran comes out, the Pit Crew provides the queens Absolut

vodka cocktails. The pit crew then stand slightly behind RuPaul and Moran while holding Absolut Vodka signs. Moran then gives the girls some advice: "you need to let your personalities shine through. We really want to see that you know who you are. Show us what it means to be part of this family and part of Absolut" (Charles, 2011). Moran's advice seems to imply that this is also a branding challenge, as despite what genre the queens have to perform, they must let their own individuality shine through. Further, Moran's words of "what it means to be a part of this family and Absolut" implies that the queens must also show what they would bring to the table as an Absolut representative. That said, the Absolut connection within the show is tentative. There is no clear connection between the brand and the challenge, other than Moran's presence. While it is "RuPaul-a-Palooza presented by Absolut," no one in the audience is holding a cocktail, nor do we see any Absolut signage. Unlike the previous Absolut challenges, there was no direct product tie in.

While not mentioned within the show, Moran also ends up judging the girls' performances. Moran takes umbrage with two specific queens' outfits: Alexis Mateo and Yara Sofia. The former performed the hip-hop version of the show, while the latter performed the pop version. When RuPaul question's Alexis about her outfits, she states that she was inspired by Lil Kim's outfits. Moran takes offense to Alexis' use of a silicone breastplate, a pair of false breast that are usually worn around the neck like a bib. Moran states, "if I pick her up and we're going to an interview and I see those—you gotta cover those up!" (Charles, 2011). I should note,



Figure 12: Yara Sofia and Alexis Mateo in the RuPaul-a-Palooza challenge.

that they were covered up. She covered up the areolas with yellow stars and wore a fishnet shirt. However, Michelle Visage, a permanent judge on the show, also agreed with Moran, stating that she looked like a stripper. He takes similar issue with Yara's outfit, telling her "I appreciate that sex sells. I might have maybe covered up a little skin" (Charles, 2011). Visage tells Yara that she looks like Britney Spears at the MTV Music Video Awards. Thus, Moran's feedback is incongruous with what Visage said. In both instances Moran takes offense to the alleged sexual outfits the contestants are wearing. The performance was not critiqued, but rather what they were wearing. However, ultimately, neither queen ends up in the bottom; both are safe.

Moran also is perturbed by Shangela, who performed the country cover. Shangela chose to dress to what she called "contemporary country" similar to country singers Carrie Underwood and Taylor Swift. As such, she wore an asymmetrical golden dress with a rhinestoned cowboy hat. The judges stated that the outfit did not read country enough. Shangela did push back against the judges' critiques. In deliberation, Moran states, "she didn't do it for me. And I understand the whole 'I want it to be current and I want it to be now country,' like, fine. But if somebody is paying you to do something, sweetie, you gotta deliver on that" Charles, 2011). Moran's critique is that she did not give the deliverable that the judges were looking for, which is to say a stereotypical country look. We therefore see that while this is in a way a branding challenge, it also teaches the queens how to work on a project with multiple people—such as the record producer and the brand



Figure 13: Shangela in her country outfit.

representative—to meet the demands expected of them. Shangela does end up in the bottom two, but is ultimately not eliminated.

Through Moran and RuPaul's critiques, we see how the fields of drag and marketing are being merged, resulting in new rules that the queens must adapt to and follow. Shangela is essentially punished for not conforming to Moran's professional habitus. Moran critiques of Shangela as well as Yara Sofia and Alexis Mateo, show that he is pushing these queens outside of their regular field. While Yara and Alexis' outfits might have worked for a drag performance, they do not meet his professional standards. As such, he wants them to meet his professional habitus, defined as "a mastering of a specific, professional game in a specific professional field" (Schultz, 2007). The queens are tasked, unbeknownst to them, to meet Moran's professional requirements. Moran's statements of "if somebody is paying you to do something, sweetie, you gotta deliver on that" and ""if I pick her up and we're going to an interview and I see those—you gotta cover those up" are particularly telling. The queens were not challenged to do an interview; they dressed for a stage performance. They were also not the paid to deliver a particular look. As such, his requirements of these queens are inconsistent with the demands of this challenge.

Thus we also see how Moran's critiques push a market-friendly, normative gender presentation. His note to Alexis that there is too much (fake) cleavage showing shows that he is treating the queens as if they were cis-women. As we saw with Shannel in season one, Moran's interpretation of marketable drag codifies very traditional gender norms. As such, the queens are also being held to more mainstream standards of what is acceptable. While Alexis' breast plate might have been acceptable in a nightclub setting, Moran sees them as unacceptable for an interview. The same could be said about his comments regarding Yara's outfit being too revealing; it is too revealing in terms of a mainstream audience. Moran's perspective therefore

speculates a broader audience that might be uncomfortable or unfamiliar with camp aesthetics or more sexually suggestive looks.

Like the previous seasons, there were also ads that feature the contestants. Absolut's support of the Queer community is highlighted in the campaign. The commercial called "Absolut Vodka Through the Years" features the top five contestants from the third season. The commercial was uploaded to Vimeo by the animation studio Pixel Party, led by New York based artist Jen Epstein. The caption of the video provides some insight into the advertisement:

> Absolut Vodka partnered with the Logo Network to celebrate 30 years of going out and coming out in their new campaign. Each 15 second spot showcased a RuPaul's Drag Race queen and decade from the 80's through the future. Each spot also shows a step of the "getting ready process" from painting your nails, picking your outfit, doing your makeup and mapping where you're going. The minute long commercial shows the girls communicating through the decades as they get ready with their respective drinks. The backgrounds reflect the decade as well as the flavor of the cocktail. We wanted the campaign to be fun, flirty and most of all, outrageous! (Party, 2012)

Instead of having each girl represent a drink, like they did for the second season contestants, each queen represents a decade. For the most part, they are assigned a decade by their elimination order, except for Yara Sofia who was in fourth place is placed in the 80s. Likewise, Shangela, who was in fifth place, was moved up to the 90s. However, instead of promoting different flavors of Absolut, there is just one singular original cocktail presented, as mentioned in the description, the Absolut Outrageous Cocktail, which features Absolut Mandarin and Absolut Citron. These two flavors of vodka can be seen throughout the advertisement.

While Cocktail Cabaret featured more of the queen's individual personalities, this ad is more focused on the concept. As such, we don't really get to know much about the queens through the ad. It relies on the audience already knowing who these queens are, which reflects the show's growing popularity. That said, two of the queens do manage to get their catchphrases across in their 15 second spots. A 90s-dressed Shangela manages to get in "say what" when she looks at her beeper, and a 2000s-clothed Alexis Matteo says "bam" when she closes her flip phone. Most of the other queens have scripted lines that don't feature a catchphrase. The ad ends with a futuristic Raja, the winner of the season, saying "now, are you coming out?" This is word play. "Coming out" both means going out to a club as the ad insinuates, and coming out of the closet. It seems wild that in the future there is still a closet to come out of, but go off sis.

Absolut again sponsors the fourth season. However, we start seeing a decline in Absolut's presence within the series. Unlike in previous seasons, Absolut does not sponsor a maxi-challenge, but rather a mini-challenge. This Absolut mini-challenge is in the episode "Frock the Vote," wherein the queens are told that they "need to stand tall, by decorating a pair of platform shoes. Take them from plain to par-tay" (Charles, 2012). RuPaul introduced Moran to the queens. Moran stands in front of a series of Absolut bottles and cocktails, telling the girls that what they see is "a series of classic cocktails that will be the inspiration for today's mini-challenge" (Charles, 2012). Unlike previous seasons, Moran doesn't give the queens specific instructions, instead telling them that Absolut has supported the LGBTQ+ community for more than 30 years.

We see Absolut feature cocktails more than individual flavors of vodka once again in this mini-challenge. There are six cocktails given to the contestants: Absolut Collins, Absolut Punch, Absolut Grapevine, Absolut Berri Sour, and an Absolut Greyhound. While the audience is not told directly, it seems that the queens were given ad copy of the drinks. For example, there is a

closeup of copy for the Absolut Greyhound which read, “future facing, sleek, surreal, and a bit absurdist.” Likewise, the queens are provided specific, drink-appropriate materials to decorate their platform shoes. Chad Michaels, who was given the Absolut Greyhound, states that her shoes are “for the girl on the go on New Year’s Eve to wear, and she’s got her greyhound in the foot to go.” Chad Michael’s description of the shoes seems to imply “future facing” with the New Year’s Eve comment, but Moran at no point critiques the shoes, so we do not know if Chad Michael’s platforms lived up to the ad copy. RuPaul mostly provides quippy one liners, but no actual critique. While there is a winner for this challenge, they don’t win any special prize.

This episode’s maxi-challenge lines up with the 2012 election, and forces the queens to run for president in a mock debate. While Absolut has no presence within the challenge itself, Moran does join the judges panel. However, all of the feedback Moran provides to the queens speaks to being “the next drag superstar,” such as telling contestant Dida Ritz that “it might be uncomfortable to talk politics, but remember, you’re in the running for America’s next drag superstar. You exude beauty, but we also want to know that you are smart” (Charles, 2012). Unlike previous seasons, Moran’s feedback is less about a working relationship with the brand, and more focused on the goals of the show. In fact, he never mentions working with the queens, unlike his feedback in seasons two or three. Even when he is discusses Sharon Needles, whose runway leaned more futuristic, Moran noted in deliberation that “you have to remember that if you’re going to be America’s next drag superstar, you don’t want to do shock value all the time” (Charles, 2012). This comment is the closest we get to seeing his professional habitus at work. And while, again, he mentions being America’s next drag superstar, he does not speak to how he feels about her particular aesthetic as representation for the Absolut brand. Ultimately, Sharon Needles wins the challenge, while Dida Ritz is eliminated.

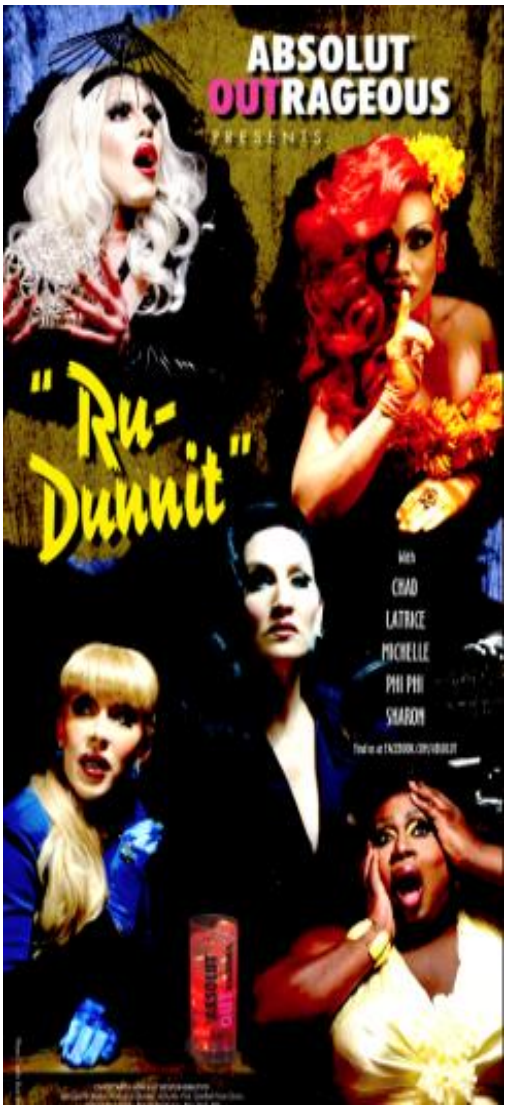


Figure 14: Ad for Ru-Dunnit by Rob Rosiello.

The fourth season's advertising was called "Ru-Dunnit," a noir inspired campaign. The name of the campaign is a portmanteau of RuPaul and whodunnit. The premise of this ad was that Sharron Needles, the winner of the fourth season, needs help finding her stolen crown. She hires head judge Michelle Visage, who is cast as the private detective, to help her retrieve her crown. The three suspects are the other members of the top four: Chad Michaels, PhiPhi O'Hara, and Latrice Royale. The director and producer of the campaign Carly Usdin claims that the ad was meant to be interactive: "On-air spots would set up the case and threw to Facebook, where fans got to play a choose-your-own adventure version of our drag-tective film noir caper" (Usdin, 2013) . The total campaign is about seven minutes long, but not all segments include Absolut.

The vodka's inclusion within the ads is tenuous. As Visage interviews the suspects, a bit of wordplay leads to the mention of an Absolut cocktail. For example, during her interrogation, Latrice tells Visage, "you think I want anything from that spooky skirt? Look, I got my own crown. Latrice is absolutely cosmopolitan" (Usdin, 2013). After this statement, there is a record scratch and Visage states, "No, this is an Absolut Cosmopolitan" and then winks at the camera. Unlike the ads that featured the season two contestants, the queens here were not dressed to

match the cocktail. While Latrice does state that she is "absolutely cosmopolitan," her outfit is yellow and does not match the color of the Absolut Cosmopolitan cocktail which is pink in color. Chad Michaels wears a blue and grey dress, but her cocktail is the Absolut Greyhound. Coincidentally, she is the only queen whose drink from the mini-challenge is the same in the commercial. The only person that matches their cocktail is PhiPhi, who wears orange for the Absolut Mandarin Punch.

However, their outfit choices make sense when considering the color of the label, which becomes more apparent in the caper's resolution. In Visage's office, everything is black and white, except for Visage, Sharon Needles, whatever other queen is featured, and the Absolut bottle in the background. Chad Michael's blue outfit matches the blue of the Absolut Vodka logo, while Latrice's yellow matches the color of the Absolut Citron logo. There are multiple endings with each queen stealing the crown, but they all end the same. Sharon forgives each queen for stealing her crown, citing their sisterhood as a reason. Visage and Sharon toast to the job well done with an Absolut Tune, a mixture of "sparkle and spirit in one" (Usdin, 2013). While the Ru-dunnit doesn't mention any details about the drink, an Absolut Tune, cocktail marketed by the brand in 2012, is a mixture of "crisp Brancott Sauvignon Blanc wine from New Zealand" and classic Absolut Vodka (*Absolut Vodka - Absolut Tune*, n.d.). From a simple watch of this spot though, it could be assumed that an Absolut Tune was a cocktail, especially given the cocktails mentioned throughout the campaign.

Moran's, and therefore Absolut's, final appearance is in the fifth season. This season Moran show's up to judge the Roast of RuPaul. However, unlike in previous seasons, Moran does not show up and discuss Absolut's queer involvement with the rest of the queens: "over 30 years ago, Absolut was one of the first spirits to support the gay and lesbian community. They

were also the first to launch a citron and mandarin vodka, making the world a fruiter place, one cocktail at a time" (Charles, 2013). "Fruiter" here is a pun, playing on the word's connotation with queerness. Therefore, RuPaul is stating that Absolut has made the world gayer for over 30 years. The Pit Crew then gives the queens an Absolut cocktail. They never disclose what cocktail the queens get.

Moran sits on the judges panel during the roast. He does banter a bit with RuPaul at the start, saying that RuPaul's green dress would be "Absolut Pears, in the garden of good and evil." Aside from this singular reference, there is no other mention of Absolut throughout from Moran. Although the queens are told they are allowed to make jokes about any of the judges or contestants, the audience never sees any jokes made about Moran. Even in the judges' critiques, we don't get to see much of him. When he does provide feedback to the queens, it is once again about the challenge, rather than an element of working with the brand.

That would be the last that the *Drag Race* franchise would see of Jeffery Moran and Absolut Vodka. There has never been a reason provided why Absolut stopped sponsoring the show. In fact, fans didn't know the brand stopped sponsoring the show until the sixth season premiered. There are, of course, fan rumors about sudden disappearance, but nothing has ever been corroborated. That said, I don't believe a single fan of *Drag Race* can't drink an Absolut Berry Sour without quoting Jessica Wild's iconic line, "I lob dis drink."

Makeup

As long as the show has existed, it has always had a makeup sponsor. Yet, even in studies of drag, there is little discussion of the importance of makeup to the field. Movies like *Too Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar*, deliberately start with the actors getting into drag by applying makeup. Placement of makeup can change the look of the face to appear more feminine

or masculine. In a WOW Presents YouTube video, RuPaul's former makeup artist Matthew Anderson notes that he uses makeup to "dome" the face because "it's very feminine, the roundness of features" (WOWPresents, 2013). In a sense, drag queens use techniques similar to stage makeup, but to sculpt the illusion of a new face. Like a stage performer, the drag queen needs to exaggerate the shadows and highlights of her face so that they are not washed out by stage lighting (Rodulfo, 2018).

As noted in the previous chapter, one of the show's first sponsors was MAC Cosmetics. However, by the second season, MAC was no longer an advertiser; instead, they were replaced by Nyx cosmetics. Like the previous season, the queen would win a "lifetime supply of Nyx Cosmetics" and become the face of their website (2011). Similarly, there was also a Nyx Cosmetics-inspired challenge, but this time, the queens were challenged to place gay elders in drag, or as RuPaul calls it "a Nyx cosmetics, golden girl makeover" (2011). While the same rules of the previous challenge still apply, the makeover is performed on cis-men rather than cis-women. Toni Ko, the then owner of Nyx Cosmetics, was a judge for that episode, alongside other guest judges Chloris Leachman and Debbie Reynolds. On stage, the queens tell the judges what products they used and in what way in their makeover. While Ko does provide some feedback, it is mostly about the makeover itself rather than a brand relationship, critiquing hair choices or lip-liner color. Most of the feedback in this episode comes from Leachman and Reynolds.

While Nyx did not return for season three, they did once again sponsor the fourth season of the show (2012). There was, however, no Nyx inspired challenge. Likewise, Ko does not make an appearance throughout the season. While there was once again a makeover challenge, there is no discussion of Nyx cosmetics seen on camera, aside from branded material in the workroom.

Nyx Cosmetics is currently a subsidiary of L'Oréal cosmetics, but in 2010—when the show was filmed—it was independently owned by Toni Ko. Unlike previous sponsor MAC, Nyx was, and currently still is, a much more accessible brand. Nyx was meant to fulfill a niche in the market, "department store beauty at drugstore prices" (O'Connor, 2016). It was available to consumers at stores like Ulta, a beauty store that sells both high and low end makeup and beauty products, or drugstores like CVS. Nyx's sponsorship of the competition is a move from a prestige brand, MAC, to a drugstore brand shows us a change of perceived audience, from a wealthy audience with expendable income to perhaps a more money-conscious audience. This implies a break from the previously accepted norm of an affluent gay audience.

RuPaul's Drag Race aligned itself well with Nyx's commercial strategy. The company notes that they are a "fierce community of independent spirits [who] believe in unstoppable self-expression" (Nyx, About). Around 2008, the then owner Toni Ko was already noticing the influence of the budding YouTube makeup guru community and started to offer them products in exchange for reviews. While there are no on camera reviews of the product in either season, Nyx Cosmetics sponsorship the show would have been well within the company's ethos.

Other makeup sponsors for the show are Kryolan Cosmetics, who sponsored season three, and Colorevolution Cosmetics, who sponsored seasons five (2013) and six (2014). Similar to Nyx, these are privately held companies. Kryolan markets itself as a professional makeup company, mostly for movie or television makeup artists. In fact, the company supplied silicone masks for the 1969 *Planet of the Apes* (Roxborough, 2013). The brand's collaboration with the show makes sense. They wanted to show off what their stage makeup could do and perhaps reach a broader audience outside of just industry professionals. On the other hand, Colorevolution, is a more natural mineral makeup company meant for everyday wear.

Season four and five do not directly address the makeup sponsor of the show. While the reward for winning the season is mentioned, neither season features a challenge that highlights the sponsor. Colorevolution, on the other hand, does. The seventh episode of the sixth season is called "Glamazon by Colorevolution" and challenges the queens to show the range of RuPaul's makeup line, Glamazon. Colorevolution calls Glamazon "a limited-edition makeup collaboration between RuPaul and Colorevolution" (RuPaul Collection, 2015). The queens need to create "30-second commercial campaigns that target today's women" (Charles, 2014). The groups are divided and given target audiences: "mean girls, spoiled teenagers obsessed with beauty and texting and tweeting and twerking; hot mamas; glamorous working girls, from hookers to CEOs; and the cougar demo, mature ladies who only get sexier with passing years" (Charles, 2014). Of note here is that while there is an element of playfulness in the categories, RuPaul is clear that the makeup is to target women and not drag queens.

RuPaul's intended demographic is made clear when the bottom two note that their "add is more tongue in cheek, but definitely has the potential to sell makeup to some other crazy drag queens" (Charles, 2014). Further, the bottom two are criticized for their incoherency of their ad, with the judges noting that it felt more like an ad for plastic surgery than the makeup. This challenge, however, is not judged by anyone at Colorevolution. Instead, we have two actresses and the usual judges consisting of Michelle Visage, Santino Rice, and RuPaul. In all, while the queens are challenged to make these ads, it is unclear whether these ads will be used. However, it is clear that the episode itself functions as an ad for the product. This point is further proved as no one is eliminated in this episode. As such, the episode does not function to push the competition along.

Outside of that singular episode, however, there are no other sponsor-related main challenges. In fact, after the Colorevolution challenge, the show does not feature any sponsor related challenges. Even the longest sponsor of the show is Anastasia Beverly Hills, who has sponsored *RuPaul's Drag Race* from 2015 until present, has not had any sponsored main challenge. Anastasia Beverly Hills, also known as ABH, is a privately-held, prestige American makeup company founded by Anastasia Soare in 1997. Up to their sponsorship of *Drag Race*, it does not seem like the brand had many inroads with the queer community. In 2019, four years after they started their sponsorship of *Drag Race*, they did release an eyeshadow palette in collaboration with former contestant Alyssa Edwards. That said, it seems like the brand does not necessarily do much marketing towards the LGBTQIA+ community.

That said, Norvina, also known as Claudia Soare, the president of Anastasia Beverly Hills has been a guest judge twice. In season 13, the girls had a mini-challenge where they were tasked to star in their own "live makeup tutorial teaching how to create a perfect glam selfie" while featuring the Norvina palette from Anastasia Beverly Hills (Charles, 2021). However, the queens are paired up. One queen has the be the face, while the other queen is her arms. After they are given nine and a half minutes to get into drag, the queens go a studio where they are judged by RuPaul and Norvina.

As the girls begin their mini-challenge, RuPaul reminds them that "the girl with the prettiest face wins" (Charles, 2021). The mini-challenge is comedic. While one queen talks about the product, the other queen stands behind her and blindly applies the makeup to the queen's face. This comedic bit ends with most of the face queens having egregiously applied makeup. Norvina gets to select the winning duo. The two winners of the challenge win $2,500 worth of Anastasia Beverly Hills cosmetics. There are no repercussions for losing the mini challenge, nor

is there any feedback provided. As is the case for the show, the mini-challenge rarely has a negative impact on the main challenge.

Norvina once again shows up to judge a mini-challenge the next season. In this season's mini-challenge, the queens are tasked to paint a recreation of Gus Cutty's mural of Dolly Parton and RuPaul located in Ashville, North Carolina. The queens split themselves up into two groups: Team Dolly and Team RuPaul. Production provided the queens paint inspired by the Norvina Lilac eyeshadow Palette from Anastasia Beverly Hills. RuPaul then gives the queens thirty minutes to paint their respective side of the mural. Norvina once again gets to declare the winner: Team Dolly. They each win $1,500 worth of Anastasia of Beverly Hills cosmetics. Norvina thanks the girls for trying her new palette, before they all return to the werkroom. Once again, there is no negative outcome to not winning this mini-challenge.



Figure 15:Top: The mural the contestants painted. Bottom: The original Mural in West Asheville.

Conclusion

The show's longest running advertisers play into the field of drag. Both alcohol and makeup are already two commodities that are central to drag queens. Performers generally worked in night clubs, making sure to direct their audience to the bars and sell alcohol. And

further, queens already used makeup to get into drag. Advertisers were not rocking the boat by promoting these two commodities.

Yet we do see two distinct audiences being courted by these commodities. As previously mentioned, alcohol had for a long time marketed towards gay men, viewing them as generally affluent. However, while makeup is intrinsic to the field of drag, that commodity is generally marketed towards women (*Cosmetics Market Size, Share | Global Industry Trends [2032]*, n.d.). Even though now there are more men wearing makeup, they still constitute a small part of the consumer demographics. Even the audience for long time makeup sponsor Anastasia Beverly Hills is primarily female, with only 21% of their consumers identifying as male (*Anastasiabeverlyhills.Com Traffic Analytics, Ranking & Audience [March 2024]*, n.d.). As such, one sponsor is focusing on one gender, while the other focuses on another gender.

As I mentioned at the start of this chapter, there are still some more sponsors to examine. However, this might be a useful stopping point for right now since there have been no stable sponsorships aside from Anastasia. Absolut was once a major sponsor, but stopped sponsoring the show during what many fans think was the show's golden age. Absolut stopped just short of the show's imperial phase, which saw many changes not only within *RuPaul's Drag Race* the show, but also the distribution, the audience, and the show's expansion to different countries. This new expansion is flamed in part by new sponsors, which we will discuss in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4: PAX RU-MANA: FURTHER ADVERTISING IN *DRAG RACE*

When we last left off, I had just discussed the two major advertisers within *Drag Race*: Absolut Vodka and Anastasia Beverly Hills. Absolut stopped sponsoring the show after the fifth season. Anastasia Beverly Hills, on the other hand comes in during the seventh season. Anecdotally, many fans consider season's four through six the show's golden age because these seasons have tight narratives, compelling contestants, and memorable challenges. These seasons also stand as the point where the show found its groove, so to speak. The format had been solidified. Fan-favorite challenges had also been set, such as the Snatch Game, where contestants must impersonate celebrities, or the makeover challenge, where queens must makeover another person to have a "family resemblance." Where seasons one through three set the groundwork that would eventually become *Drag Race*, seasons four through six would perfect the formula.

However, season seven coincides with a shift within the show. *RuPaul's Drag Race* will air seasons seven and eight on Logo and then change to VH1. Further, *Drag Race: Untucked,* the main show's companion series, would also move from Logo TV to YouTube to VH1 and then to MTV. Yet, even with this change, there is no significant impact to brands who sponsor the show, but there is an impact in how they engage as I will discuss in this chapter. These sponsors, however, have minimal impacts on the field of drag. Instead, we see brands and advertisers take a much more passive role, akin to Anastasia Beverly Hills' approach. The show still provides advertisers and sponsors a unique way to reach queer and queer-friendly audiences. So, while initially, there were large corporate sponsors, we see their presence reduce as the show progresses, and instead is replaced by niche, queer and (seemingly) queer-friendly businesses.

Therefore, this chapter explores this change. These are sponsors who are either mentioned during the prize package announcement at the top of each episode, or who get a

unique call-out from RuPaul. While I will not be able to discuss every company that gets a name-drop, I will primarily focus on queer-owned brands, like the Al and Chuck Travel, the social networking application Scruff, and the international burger chain Hamburger Mary's. Then, I move to discuss queer-friendly advertisers—like Hello Kitty and Broadway's *Frozen*—and other big corporate sponsors. Of note, some of the odder sponsorships occur in the twelfth season, and therefore I will categorize them all under the one season. The show provides a novel opportunity to advertisers. I focus on these brands as ways that the show has provided a unique avenue for brands—be they queer-owned or not—to reach a seemingly queer audience.

Queer Businesses

In a capitalist society, queer businesses are important to the queer community. According to Center for LGBTQ Economic Advancement and Research, small, queer-owned businesses tend to support their neighborhood economies through creating jobs and providing much needed goods and services (Center for LGBTQ Economic Advancement and Research, 2021). Per the National LGBT Chamber of Commerce, LGBTQ+ businesses within the United States are projected to have contributed over 1.7 trillion dollars, and have created (National Gay & Lesbian Chamber of Commerce, 2017).

However, usually these queer businesses marketed within their community. Marketing directly at queer people in mainstream formats has had a long and complicated history. In 1994, Ikea published a television commercial that featured two gay men shopping for furniture. While the ad only aired in the East Coast of the United States, it garnered backlash, including a bomb scare at an Ikea retail store in New York (Horovitz, 1994). However, most brands feared queer-targeting advertisements in mainstream press for fear that their products might be deemed a "gay product." As such, most advertisements were "gay vague, using subtle elements that would

register for LGBTQ+ people, but fly over the heads of heterosexual audiences" (Telford, 2023). Katherine Sender (1999) calls this type of queer reading of advertisements "gay window advertisements" (Sender, 1999). This type of advertisement made it relatively safe for advertisers to market to queer audiences without retribution from homophobes. Generally, queer companies or brands were not likely to advertise in mainstream avenues. Thus, *RuPaul's Drag Race* provides a unique opportunity for both queer companies and queer-friendly brands to market directly to their desired audience.

Project Publicity

The show from the onset has had queer-owned sponsors. While MAC cosmetics was a queer-owned business originally, by the time the makeup company sponsors the show, corprate ownership had changed hands to a larger conglomarate. As such, much of the first season's sponsors were not queer. They were queer-friendly. However, in the second season, Project Publicity, arguably the first queer owned business, provides part of the winner's prize package. Project Publicity is a public relations firm that is described within the show as "the leading LGBT firm" (Charles, 2010). The firm provides a one year contract to the winner. In an interview, Len Evans, one of the founders of Project Publicity, notes how they started the company because they found that there was a need for a PR firm that specialized in LGBT+ publicity (*Meet Len Evans*, 2023). Their mission, according to the company website states, "is to catapult alternative culture into the mainstream" (www.projectpublicity.com, 2023). In this way, both the PR firm and the show share the same goal: to push an alternative culture into the mainstream, in this case, drag.

While they do sponsor the show, there are no specific challenges that relate to the brand, nor do any of the company's representatives show up as judges. The company has minimal

presence within the show. They are mentioned at the top of each episode, but aside from that, there is no other discussion of the company. It does not seem like the show and the public relations firm still work together however. The show and production company are working with Metro Public Relations, which is a female-founded firm based in Los Angeles. However, Project Publicity does seem to work with some of the contestants of the show, such Mz. Cracker and Tina Burner. Both of these queens are based in New York, and so is the firm. If there are any other connections between the publicity firm and RuPaul's Drag Race, it is unclear from any marketing or promotional material. However, Project Publicity's sponsorship of the show seems to be more aligned with an attempt to have name recognition rather than it is to draw new consumers to their product.

AlandChuck.Travel

Another of the first openly queer-owned companies to sponsor the show was the website AlandChuck.Travel, which for clarity I will name Al and Chuck Travel from here on out. Al and Chuck travel was, according to their website, "America's Largest gay owned travel company" (Al and Chuck, About, 2013). While queer consumers have long been courted by online travel agencies, mostly because of their perceived disposable incomes (Chavéz and Gould, 2016), Al and Chuck Travel was different because it was by queer people for queer people. On average, queer people average about seven trips a year and spent 63.1 billion US dollars (CMI 24th Annual LGBTQ Tourism and Hospitality Survey, 2019; IMTJ Team, 2019). However, these facts are compounded generally by safety issues. There are many places that LGBTQ+ people do not, or cannot, travel to for their own safety (Prager, 2020).



Thus, Al and Chuck was uniquely positioned to solve that problem. Al and Chuck Travel was owned by partners Al Furguson and Chuck Scott, who founded Legendary Journeys. While Legendary Journeys was queer-friendly, Al and Chuck travel was aimed at queer travelers with their needs in mind. As such, Al and Chuck functioned as a travel agency that facilitated travel to site-specific travel destinations for Pride events, gay festivals, and circuit parties. However, they reached a brand new audience when they partnered with *RuPaul's Drag Race* and launched their "Drag Stars at Sea" package.

Al and Chuck Travel officially sponsored season three of the show. While there is no mention of the brand at the top of the show, there is an announcement that rolls at the end that says, "grand prize is contributed in part by Al and Chuck Travel" (Charles, 2011). Aside from putting up some of the prize money, two queens win travel packages as part of their maxi-challenge win. One queen wins an Alaskan cruise for two, while another queen wins a Caribbean cruise for two. Further, they also gave a prize to the queen that the fan's voted as Miss Congeniality, Yara Sofia. She was awarded a trip for two to the Grand Lucayan Island in the Grand Bahama Island. Al and Chuck Travel have no direct involvement with the show other than putting up some of the prize money and those two cruise packages.

Al and Chuck Travel show up once again in the fourth and fifth season, as well as *RuPaul's Drag Race: All Stars* season one. This time, instead of getting a name check at the end of the episode, they are introduced at the top of the show, alongside the other show sponsors. The travel company also awards the winners of their respective seasons a "one-of-a-kind trip" (Logo, 2012). Similarly, just like in the third season, three queens in season for win cruises as part of their maxi-challenge win. At no point in any of the three seasons do we see a representative from

Al and Chuck travel. However, in season five no queen wins a trip as part of their maxi-challenge win.

The relationship with the show was mutually beneficial. While the show was able to award prizes and ultimately the winner's package with sponsorship from Al and Chuck, the travel agency also got exclusive access to the drag performers. Al and Chuck were able to capitalize on any fan of the show, so long as a potential client had a favorite drag queen that season. Regardless of the aesthetic of the queen, Al and Chuck could accommodate. Therefore, there was no reason for Al and Chuck to try to shape the field of drag too much. An attempt on their part to change drag in any which way might alienate a possible client.

By season six, 2014, however, they were no longer a sponsor of the show. While Al and Chuck Travel's presence within the show was short, they did continue working with several of the drag queens from the show for their "Drag Stars at Sea" package, up until 2017, when the company filed for bankruptcy. The premise of the package was quite simple. Fans of the show could book cruise reservations with Al and Chuck and get to "get up close and personal with [their] favorite drag stars" (Al And Chuck, Cuba, 2016). While there would be the traditional fare of drag queens performing, the cruise also promised a more intimate feeling, as queens and fans alike would be able to mingle on the cruise. There would be no separation between the two. As seen in their promotional material, queens are both in and out of drag, walking around the cruise and partaking in off-ship expeditions. In many aways, Drag Stars at Sea would be a forerunner for another event, which I will discuss in the next chapter.

Scruff

Another gay brand that sponsored the show was Scruff, a gay dating application available on Apple and Android. Scruff, programmed and developed by Perry Street Software, is a geolocation dating and networking application, similar to their better known competitor, Grindr. However, Scruff is still currently still a queer owned business, unlike its competitor. Unlike other brands who sponsored the show or (Team, 2019) prize money, Scruff sponsored the Pit Crew, the scantily-clad men who occasionally assist in mini and maxi-challenges. Sponsoring the show therefore provided two unique opportunities for the brand: highlighting the product that could be found on the application and reaching a broader queer audience.



Figure 16: Bianca del Rio with the Scruff Pit Crew in the season six photoshoot.

Usually the Pit Crew are muscular cis-men, usually gay, but there are heterosexual Pit Crew members. They rarely speak. They are mostly hunky set design. They wear nothing but briefs and stand around RuPaul. Occasionally, the Pit Crew might function as props for the queen's mini or maxi challenges. For example, they will be used in photoshoots with the queens, or be used as props for comedy skits. While each member of the Pit Crew does have names, they are seemingly irrelevant in the show. They are merely gay eye-candy for the queens and the audience. RuPaul usually announces their entrances by announcing "oh Pit Crew." Usually, each season had two pit crew members.

However, Scruff sponsored season six. In doing so, the Pit Crew got a slightly new name: the Scruff Pit Crew. Further, there were now four Pit Crew members. Whenever RuPaul introduces the Pit Crew, he instead says, “oh Scruff Pit Crew” while the queens chant “woof.” The woofing relates back to the application’s “woof” feature, which allows users to express interest in a profile. The Pit Crew then walks in wearing Scruff-branded underwear. Usually, after they walk into the werkroom, there is a close-up of their groin. In season six, however, the close-up functions as a way of highlighting the underwear band that has Scruff written on it. In the ninth episode of the season, the owner and founder of the app Johnny Skandros, who also goes by Johnny Scruff, did make an appearance. He leads about ten underwear clad men into the werqroom. Ru does prompt Johnny if the guys that he brought in can be found on Scruff, to which Johnny responds, “you have to log on to find out” (Charles, 2014). They then play a mini-challenge called Hungman, “which is like hangman, but bigger, and longer, and a lot scruffier” (Charles, 2014). In reality, the game is hangman, where each of the Pit Crew members have letters attached to their rears and flip over to create a word that usually has the word “ass” in it. The winner wins a year supply of lashes. Johnny leaves unceremoniously. Since they were sponsoring the male model and not the drag queens, there was never a Scruff related challenge, nor was any representative present at any moment throughout the season. They only sponsored season six.



Figure 17: Pit Crew wearing Scruff-branded underwear.

Scruff’s sponsorship of the show is unique, but in line with the overall ethos of the show’s traditional gender representation. As mentioned before, the show tends to reward queens

with an overall traditional feminine presentation. Scruff's sponsorship of the Pit Crew—alongside the queens "woof-ing" at the men—plays into the sexualization of a specific type of gay man. The queens are not sexualized, but rather the men that fit the normative beauty standards. That said, Scruff does not step foot into the field of drag at all. While they do manage to target queer consumers and show off their products, so to speak, they do not have any impact on drag at all.

Hamburger Mary's

Hamburger Mary's is another queer brand that sponsored the show. Hamburger Mary's is a drag-themed burger restaurant chain. There are about 17 locations nationwide, generally located in gay neighborhoods. Hamburger Mary's claims to be "an open air-bar and grille for open-minded people" (Hamburger Mary's, About, 2023). Because the burger franchise is easily accessible to non-LQGBTQ+ audiences, Hamburger Mary serves a predominately straight clientele (Hilderbrand, 2023). As the name suggests, they serve hamburgers as well as cocktails, usually with campy names. For example, their barbeque bacon burger is named Barbara-Q bacon, or the Miss Piggy, a pulled-pork sandwich. The restaurant chain also offers opportunities for local drag artists to perform, either through their "Dining with the Divas" series, where queens walk around the floor during dinner, or during a Drag Brunch setting, or Drag Bingo.

Unlike Scruff, however, they sponsored two seasons: *RuPaul's Drag Race: All Stars* season 1 and season 9 of the main franchise. Such was the case when Hamburger Mary's was featured in the final episode of *All Stars* one. As part of their final challenge, Hamburger Mary's was, fictionally, naming a hamburger after each drag queen. The queens have to prepare for a press conference as they accept the honor. The audience sees the outside establishing shots of the venue. Inside, while left unsaid by the queens, it does seem that they do have to discuss what

their burger consists of, and where it will be sold, as each queen mentions the burger's ingredients. Then, after their speech, each queen takes a bite of their burger for the press. Who the press represents, however, is unknown. Each queen, then, unbeknownst to them is given an "official proclamation" and a key to the city of West Hollywood. After a final speech accepting the key to the city, each queen then leaves the restaurant. There is no other mention of the brand again in that final episode.

As previously mentioned, untucked is a companion series that usually follows the main show. The premise of untucked is simple. The show follows the queens backstage after the judges' critiques. Per the show's description, Untucked goes "behind the scenes with this season's queens for all the drama, shade, and laughter you didn't see on the runway as the queens anxiously away their fates" (*RuPaul's Drag Race: Untucked - TV Series | MTV*, 2024). Originally, *Untucked* aired right after *Drag Race* on Logo TV. The first season of the show was titled *Under the Hood*, the title which followed with the drag race theme. However, from season two on, the show was renamed *Untucked*, which is a drag term for undoing a tuck. Tucking is the act of a drag queen hiding their genitals to create the illusion of having a flat groin. Tucking, therefore, helps push the female-illusion. Because of the correlation with the show, however, untucking also became a way of saying relaxing or waiting.



Figure 18: Queens enter backstage.

However, the *Untucked* for seasons seven, eight, and nine were only available on WOW Presents' YouTube channel. As such, it was not viably accessible to passive fans of the show. Instead, fans had to seek out the episode on YouTube. Hamburger Mary's also sponsored the

season nine's *Untucked*. When the show starts, the audience sees a television screen that reads "Untucked, brought to you by Hamburger Mary's" (Untucked, 2017). Given the nature of *Untucked*, Hamburger Mary's presence within the show is minimal. There is no challenge, or even a brand representative. As the queens walk into the backstage holding area, the audience sees the Hamburger Mary's statue, which is a figure of a busty, blonde woman wearing a pink dress, fishnet stockings, and red high heel shoes while holding a burger in the air. Further, the audience also sees glasses in the shape of Hamburger Mary's legs. While the queens are not allowed to drink from these—they have a strict one drink maximum on set—they are there for decoration. Such, the audience can see the visual markers of Hamburger Mary's on set even if they do not engage directly with the queens.

While they sponsor *Untucked*, there is also some inclusion of Hamburger Mary's within the main show. By the ninth season, *RuPaul's Drag Race* had also changed channels. It no longer aired on Logo TV. Now it was on VH1. While both Paramount and Viacom channels, VH1 has a broader audience. Per National Media Spots, VH1's audience is predominately female, with only 39% of the audience consisting of men (National Media Spot, VH1 2024). This is the inverse of Logo TV, where the males consisted 52% of the audience (National Media Spot, LOGO TV, 2024). Yet, it is unclear if Hamburger Mary's knew where the show was to air prior to their participation. In the ninth season's fourth episode, the winners of that week's maxi-challenge win one thousand dollars and also win "a year's supply of burgers" (Charles, 2017). However, it is unclear if the one thousand dollars are also provided by Hamburger Mary's, or if the franchise is just rewarding the one year supply of burgers. That said, the challenge had no correlation with the hamburger restaurant, nor was there a representative from the company there to judge the queens.

Hamburger Mary's investment in the show seems to be predominately for cachet. Although the brand is already heavily associated with drag within the queer community, and several queens from the show had performed in their venues before and after their run on the show, Hamburger Mary's as an institution was not associated with the *Drag Race* brand. Thus, their investment in the show is not to change the field of drag, but to rather position themselves also within the field. Hamburger Mary's is not invested in shaping drag in any which way. Instead they are merely interested in promoting their brand to an audience who already enjoys drag.

Interior Designs

Before Hamburger Mary's sponsorship, however, *Untucked* was sponsored by another company. Prior to the show's move to YouTube, the interior design company Interior Illusions sponsored *Untucked*. Interior Illusions, as stated, is an interior design company based in West Hollywood, California founded by Mike Valles. It seems that while they are a queer-owned business, they do not define themselves as such. Rather, per their website, "Interior Illusions is a multi award-winning brand, recognized by the design industry to be one of Southern California top design destinations for the most discerning clientele and interior designers alike" (Interior Illusions, About, 2023). They sponsored the backstage area of seasons two through five, and were sometimes featured within the main show.



Figure 19: A tweet from the Official Drag Race Account.

Unlike Hamburger Mary's sponsorship, however, Interior Illusions provided the furniture and two different sets for the queens, the Interior Illusions Lounge and the Gold Bar. In each

main episode, RuPaul dismisses the girls and tells them that “while [they] untuck in the Interior Illusions lounge, the judges will deliberate” (Charles, 2010). The brand, therefore, also gets a name drop in each episode of the tentpole. The brand seems to recognize how synonymous Interior Illusions became with the show, as their LinkedIn profile notes, “The "Interior Illusions Lounge," has become a colloquialism in terms of cable television due to the famed "Ru-Paul's Drag Race [sic]," the most successful show of its kind ever. It features a satire lounge designed on a whimsical note to facilitate a reality TV show style post-competition meeting room” (Interior Illusions, 2023).

However, the Interior Illusions Lounge and Gold Bar did collaborate with Absolut through the decor. In the background of both rooms, the audience can see decorative bottles of Absolut vodka, which according to former contestants were filled with actual vodka. That said, generally the queens did not really discuss Absolut in any way. The spirit was merely used in unnamed cocktails that worked as a way to help the queens relax in *Untucked*. In a way, both brands here synergize to promote a laid back, relaxing brand to the viewers at home. Likewise, this synergy was then promoted by the show’s official Twitter page by stating, “Enjoy an Absolut Cocktail in the Interior Illusion’s Lounge” (RuPaul’s Drag Race [@RuPaulsDragRace], 2013). This tweet was published during the fifth season—Absolut’s final season sponsoring the show—during the run of the show. While generally we see brands mostly keeping to themselves, it is one of the few instances where two brands work collaboratively with the show.

Given the nature of *Untucked*, Interior Illusions, unlike Absolut, did not have any other presence on the show. There was no company representative, nor was there any prize associated with their brand. Similar to Hamburger Mary’s, it seems that Interior Illusion’s sponsorship of *Untucked* was mostly to promote their name. The brand itself does not seem to care about drag.

But given its proximity to West Hollywood, which is a gay enclave in Los Angeles, it could market their skills to a queer consumer base.

Squatty Potty

Season nine's penultimate episode features a unique sponsor: Squatty Potty. As the name might imply, Squatty Potty is a company that makes stools that raise the knees while using the rest room. Formally, the company states that they "are a consumer products company whose product lines consist of toilet stools, sprays and other bathroom accessories" (Squatty Potty LLC, 2017). The product was invented Robert Edwards, who is a gay, and was featured on the reality television show *Shark Tank*. While the imagery used in their 2016 viral and Webby Award winning YouTube advertisement "This Unicorn Changed the Way I Poop" could be said to be gay-friendly, as it features a unicorn that poops out rainbows, this would be a stereotypical reading of the ad. Aside from some rather, dare I say, cliché stereotypes, the ad is not queer, nor camp. It is rather tongue in cheek though.

Perhaps that tongue in cheek quality is what lead them to advertise on *Drag Race*. As part of the final challenge, the four remaining queens have to do podcast interviews with RuPaul and judge Michelle Visage. While these interviews are seemingly for the RuPaul's and Visage's podcast called "What's the Tea," there has always been an interview portion as part of the finale. I should point out that "What's the Tea" is an audio only podcast, and the cameras are only there because of the competition show. The segment is usually called the Tic-Tac chat because Tic-Tacs are usually present at the interview. Their presence is a callback to a skit on the *RuPaul Show* (1993), where RuPaul sells his Tic-Tac diet as part of a fake infomercial. The joke then and now is that RuPaul maintains his figure by only having one Tic-Tac for breakfast and lunch, and

just water for dinner. Tic-Tac does not sponsor *RuPaul's Drag Race* and they are not part of the "promotional consideration provided by" credits.

This segment is meant to give the judges an opportunity to talk to the finalists and get to know them beyond the drag persona. For example, Sasha discusses her relationship with her deceased mother and how that shaped her understanding of drag, Peppermint discusses her transition and her drag, Shea Couleé discusses being bullied for not being Black enough, and Trinity Taylor discusses her complicated relationship with her grandmother. Generally, these are moments for the two head judges to get to know the final contestants more. They also serve to provide develop some of the finalists' narratives on the show.

As each queen departs their interview, they are given a parting gift: a wooden Squatty Potty. RuPaul then reads copy that states, "today's podcast is sponsored by Squatty Potty. Best poop of your life, kiddo. Guaranteed" (Charles, 2017). The camera then pans to a close up of the product which has the company name etched into it. Regardless of what the conversation was prior, when the product is introduced to the queens alongside cheerful nondiegetic music. While ostensibly the segment is filmed as part of the podcast, these interviews are never released and therefore not part of the actual podcast. They are filmed to be part of the reality television show. While all four queens do the interview, only two queens are seen getting



Figure 20: Judge Michelle Visage show's off the Squatty Potty.

the squatty potty: Sasha Velour and Shea Couleé. It is unclear why the other two finalists—Peppermint and Trinity Taylor—are not seen getting a Squatty Potty.

The show was capable of highlighting smaller, queer owned brands and companies to a broader audience. The show, therefore, provided an avenue for queer brands that they might not have had prior. However, in many ways, these queer brands are working within connections that have already been established. Al and Chuck and Project P.R. were already working with the queer community prior to their sponsorship of the show, and Hamburger Mary's was already working with drag queens before sponsoring *Untucked*. What, then, do queer brands gain by advertising on *RuPaul's Drag Race*? If economic capital is the goal, then only Al and Chuck seemingly do the best. The company was based in Florida, but thanks to the show, it was able to attain a national consumer. Their Drag Stars at Sea tours were seemingly their biggest events, and therefore what they became known for. Sponsoring the show allowed them resources that other brands could not access, namely the queens.

The same could not be said about Hamburger Mary's. Their sponsorship of the show comes at two different moments in the show's history as they sponsor the show while it is both at Logo and VH1. Yet, their sponsorship of All-Stars season 1 is tempered by the fact that fans generally see the season unfavorably. This is for a variety of different reasons, notably dubious twists and removing fan favorite challenges. *Untucked*, therefore, might be a better for the brand because it provides a more organic setting for the queens as they decompress with a drink, which aligns more with the brand. Yet, the Hamburger Mary's sponsorship is a bit more one-sided. *Untucked* was on YouTube, reaching a significantly smaller audience than the mainstay show. Even though there was an episode of the main show where Hamburger Mary's was mentioned, the relationship here benefits *Drag Race* more than the advertiser. Working with an already well

established queer brand grants *Drag Race* some queer social capital and allows the show to claim that they still support the queer community.

Scruff, on the other hand, is a bit different. Scruff's support on the show was intrinsically tied to gay male sexuality through their sponsorship of the Pit Crew. For a long time, anecdotally they were the second-best gay dating app—the first is of course the well-known Grindr. Sponsoring the show then promotes their name to a broader audience and the connection to the Pit Crew can show the audience the types of men present on their application. Inadvertently, however, it does serve to position the contestants as the Pit Crew's opposite. This oppositional dynamic therefore creates a gendered binary within the show, where the muscular and hairy men are sexualized, and the feminine drag queens are the sexualizer. While this queer sexual dimorphism might seem like a reversal of the heteronormative world, ultimately Scruff's sponsorship is rather safe because it is bound in normative ideals of male beauty standards.

During the golden era of *Drag Race*, it was a significant shift to have an ostensibly queer show on a queer network highlight queer brands. The show here also functions as gatekeeper, as they are able to select what brands are deemed relevant to their audience. In this golden era, *Drag Race* was able to promote queer businesses to their ostensibly queer audience. But the relationship was two-fold. Not only did these brands reach out to a broader, national audience, but they were able to market themselves in a way that was previously unknown to them through sponsorship. Brands were able to rely on a queer audience's internal knowledge of their community. However, the show also greatly benefited from having these queer brands presented, and not only because of the financial support provided. Rather, the show was able to situate itself within the queer community more broadly, showing that they also supported other queer brands. The show essentially presented a "rising tide lifts up all ships" to queer brands, especially after

the shift to a larger network, seemingly more mainstream audience. However, as the show has gone more mainstream, it hasn't featured more queer-owned brands recently, however, they have shifted to queer-friendly advertisers.

Queer-friendly

As we have already discussed, *Drag Race* did provide an excellent opportunity for non-queer brands to market and reach queer audiences. However, as the show's audience grew and then shifted from Logo TV to VH1, we did also see a growing number of more mainstream brands appear.

Hey Kitty Girl!

In the seventh season of the main show, the remaining five queens were introduced to the most kawaii judge ever—Hello Kitty. Prior to Hello Kitty's introduction, RuPaul tells the queens the prompt for the challenge: "Ladies, America's Next Drag Superstar needs to know how to brand her charisma, uniqueness, nerve, and talent. Now, for inspiration, you'll be joining forces with a global marketing phenomenon worth over eight billion dollars" (Charles, 2015). RuPaul then goes on to list off the many corporate assets that Hello Kitty has, such as makeup, jewelry, and dolls. Hello Kitty walks into the Werq Room, where RuPaul tells the queens that they are going to be making outfits out of Hello Kitty merchandise. RuPaul further elaborates that although the clothing will be made with Hello Kitty items, the looks still have to be identifiable within the queen's aesthetic. However, the contestants are also tasked with making a second look; they need to turn themselves into a Hello Kitty character that would be Hello Kitty's new best friend. They need to create a new character and an outfit that they can wear as a mascot.

Hello Kitty did not judge this runway, mostly likely because she is a cat and can't speak human languages. She does, however, get to walk down the runway after being introduced as an extra-special guest judge. While the queens walk the runway as Hello Kitty's new best friend, a voice over introduces the character. Most of the possible friends are tongue-in-cheek, and probably align with more adult fans of Hello Kitty. RuPaul does state that appreciates Violet Chachki's—first in the above image—tameness when it came to the Hello Kitty best friend because "she is dealing with an iconic brand" (Charles, 2015). Then the camera then points to Hello Kitty who is nods in agreement.



Figure 21: The five different Hello Kitty companions the contestants create for this challenge.

RuPaul's feedback notes how drag queens are expected to present variants of their brand when representing a corporate sponsor. Through his feedback—and Hello Kitty's agreement—we see a slight change in the field of drag. Queens must have a unique and identifiable brand, but it also needs to be flexible enough so that advertisers can capitalize on it. So while Violet Chachki's brand is vain burlesque, fashion queen, she did not full out do a burlesque inspired friend. Instead she went with a Dior-inspired outfit. Judge Michelle Visage states of the character, "she was super fun, but still vain" (Charles, 2015). Violet was able to present her character, but in a more marketable way.

I do, however, also want to draw attention to Katya's character, which is fourth in the above picture (Tumblr, 2023). Although the person who portrays Katya is from Boston, their

drag persona is Russian. Therefore, a lot of Katya's looks are also Russian-inspired. This aesthetic then translates over to her Hello Kitty character. Katya's friend for Hello Kitty is a Slavic-inspired cat with yellow teeth and a babushka that waves a USSR flag. Hello Katya claims that "she feels her socialist side will balance out Hello Kitty's decadent capitalism" (Charles, 2015). While RuPaul laughs at the joke, Hello Kitty seems a little concerned, as much as a mouthless humanoid cat can be. The judges do not negatively critique Katya for her take on the Hello Kitty best friend, but they do judge her negatively for her runway. It is unclear how much the Hello Kitty best friend portion of this challenge impacted the judges' decisions. To the audience, it seems that the negative critiques were mostly about what outfits the queens made with the materials provided. As such, Violet wins the challenge and wins a "Hello Kitty extravaganza package," which seems to be comprised of luggage, shoes and accessories (Charles, 2015). Katya, on the other hand, is eliminated.

While Hello Kitty has not made another appearance on the show, the challenge does have a lasting legacy. This branding challenge is different from previous seasons' challenges. Even though the branding challenge has always been a presence within the show, season seven's is the first to be explicit about using the word "branding." While in the second season RuPaul does say the word to describe the book challenge, as discussed by Guzman and Chávez (2023), that is not how RuPaul describes the challenge to the queens. Further, other commercial or branding challenges up to this point required the contestants to make commercials, whereas this Hello Kitty challenge is directed at branding. The branding challenge becomes a staple in the show from this point forward, with most seasons including a variant of this challenge. Further, form this point on, each queen who comes on the show needs to have a recognizable brand regardless of where they are in their career.

Season 12 Sponsorships

The show's twelfth season aired on VH1 and had been airing there for at least four seasons. Further, the show was getting positive industry attention. By 2020, RuPaul had won four Primetime Emmy's for Outstanding Host for a Reality/ Reality Competition Program and *RuPaul's Drag Race* had won two Primetime Emmys for Outstand Competition Program. Likewise, the show was Primetime Emmy's for their hair team and RuPaul's costuming. The show was not only a commercial success, but also fairly well received by the entertainment industry.

With the show's success, also came more unique sponsorships. Season twelve had two very unique sponsorships: the subscription box Fab, Fit, Fun and Pretty Litter. Each of these two brands gets a special mini-challenge. The former gets their unique mini-challenge in the eighth episode. Fab, Fit, Fun is a seasonal subscription service that delivers a box with full-sized beauty, fashion, fitness, and lifestyle products. Per their own website, their audience is predominately "women, ages 18-34, who love a good deal, want to hear about the latest and greatest trends" (Audience, 2023). Their presence within the show, therefore, stands out since the show is marketed as a predominately queer audience.

As part of the mini-challenge, RuPaul tells the contestants to pair up and "using these wonderful products provided by Fab Fit Fun, you need to curate a box for your bosom buddies. And then you'll exchange gifts, and share the love, with a whole lot of shade on the side" (Charles, 2020). This challenge is meant to simulate the traditional reading challenge usually done each season. Shade—for the uninitiated—is a subtle, critical comment, usually done in jest, but not always. Reading, on the other hand, is similar, but more direct. Either way, in the context of the show and this challenge, it is meant to be done in good fun. Throughout the challenge

though, RuPaul does keep repeating the phrase “bosom buddies,” but it is unclear if that was a reference to the 1980’s sitcom, or just a phrase he likes to say.

As the challenge starts, two sets of contestants sit down and trade insults. These insults, however, are based around elements from their Fab Fit Fun boxes. For example, Gigi Goode tells Crystal Methyd “Crystal, now I know the judges are always saying that your makeup is just, uh, terrible. So, I got you the season one filter, okay? It’s just a towel that you put over the lens of the camera” (Charles, 2020). While she says this last bit, Gigi pulls out a towel from the box. Gigi’s read references the notorious filter applied to the first season of the show, which I have previously discussed. Each group then trades insults back and forth based around another object, such as face wash (“to wash both your faces”) or a coffee mug (“because your mug is busted”). RuPaul choses the winners of the challenge—Jackie Cox and Gigi Goode—each of which win a one year subscription to Fab Fit Fun and a thousand dollars. Here, however, there is a slight discrepancy. RuPaul says that “Fab Fit Fun is providing one thousand dollars,” but in a confessional, Jackie Cox says that she won a one thousand dollar gift card. Either way, the audience never finds out. Further, it does not provide an advantage within the competition nor does have any other impact.

PrettyLitter, a cat litter subscription service, gets their own mini challenge in the ninth episode. Per their website, “PrettyLitter is created to give cat parents a proactive tool into their cat’s health and peace of mind knowing through early detection if your cat is experiencing a potential health issue” (PrettyLitter About, 2023) RuPaul tells the contestants, “Ladies. America’s Next Drag Superstar needs to make sure her pussy is on fire 24/7. So, for today’s mini challenge, you’re auditioning for the title of Kitty Girl 2020, sponsored by Pretty Litter dot com, the health monitoring cat litter” (Charles, 2020). RuPaul then tells the queens to get into quick,

cat drag, meaning that they must dress up like cats quickly. After the queens change, each contestant goes up to a section of the Werq Room made to look like a living room with a large litter box, filled with, of course, Pretty Litter. The pink litter box also has the company website on the side.

Each queen has their own interpretation of cats. For example, one cat is inspired by internet sensation Tardar Sauce, more commonly known as Grumpy Cat, while another queen references Eartha Kitt's Catwoman from the 1970's *Batman* Show. Each queen then also has to pretend to be a cat while trying to make RuPaul laugh. For example, RuPaul makes one queen chase a red laser dot on the wall, while another queen uses a scratching post as a strip pole. There is no real directive for this challenge, other than pretend to be a cat. However, despite the ad copy that RuPaul reads at the top of the mini-challenge, there is no other connection to Pretty Litter. No one from the company makes an appearance to judge the girls. The contestant who referenced Eartha Kitt wins the challenge. The reward is a gift card to Fierce Drag Jewels and notably not Pretty Litter. There is no connection between the mini or maxi-challenge to speak of.

Another unique sponsor of season twelve was the Broadway musical *Frozen*. While our previous sponsors had associated mini-challenges, Frozen on Broadway sponsored a runway. In the sixth episode of the season, RuPaul introduced the runway theme as "inspired by the Broadway musical, the category is 'Frozen Eleganza'" (Charles, 2020). The runway theme challenges the girls to dress in their interpretation of "Frozen Eleganza." This is a runway prompt that the production team would have given the contestants. As such, the queens would have had to prepare this look at home as part of their package. Further, this theme comes after the Snatch Game maxi-challenge. In this maxi-challenge, the queens must impersonate a celebrity while playing a parody of *the Match Game*. This challenge has been a mainstay of the series since the

second season. The objective of the challenge has remained mostly the same throughout the show's run: be the funniest. In a way, the Snatch Game tests the contestants ability to be witty on the fly, as well as improvisation skills.

However, the runway is disconnected from the maxi-challenge. The runway is decorated with trees with icicles hanging from them. Some queens make direct references to *Frozen*. For example, Jackie Cox notes that her outfit is inspired by Elsa's crown. Likewise, another queen—Jan—says her look is a cross between Elsa and White Walkers from *Game of Thrones*. However, not all queens took "Frozen Eleganza" to mean the Disney property. For instance, one queen comes dressed as a Titanic survivor floating in the water, while another queen is dressed as an ice cream woman with a large ice cream cone prop. Given the inconsistencies in the queens' references, it might appear that the producers presented the runway theme differently to the queens before the show. Thus, it might have appeared as Frozen Eleganza instead of *Frozen* Eleganza on their look sheet. This is a common issue within the show, as themes change last minute.

There is also an associated Lip-sync For Your Life. The bottom two queens have to lip-sync to the Broadway cast version of "Let It Go," originally made popular by Idina Menzel in the Disney movie *Frozen*. While prior to this moment references to the movie had been made, this is the only time the audience sees on screen the words "Disney." The reference is only in the lower-third credits of the song, noting that the song belongs to Disney Theatrical Productions. Halfway through the lip sync, production then starts throwing snow onto the stage. This is a unique intervention from production, as usually it is up to the queens to provide their own props for lip-syncs. That said, there is no representative from Disney to judge the queens, nor did the

challenge relate to Disney in any way. If anything, this runway was just a casual advertisement for the Broadway show.

Season 12 in unique for a couple different reasons. First, it aired during the COVID-19 lockdown, so a majority of the queens were unable to travel to different gigs. And partly because of that, the finale was filmed on Zoom. However, what makes it more notable for our conversation is the edit of the season. Season 12 had to be reedited last minute because one of the queens who reached the top four was disqualified for sexual misconduct that occurred prior to her being on the show. As such, the queen was edited out of the show as much as possible. However, she is kept in the group segment for Fab, Fit, Fun. This makes sense because it is a group challenge, and it would have been unfair to the other queens to not have their segment presented. She is also not edited out of the Pretty Litter mini-challenge, even though that seems like it would have been an easy edit out and just not show her segment. However, she is completely edited out of the Disney's *Frozen* runway. That said, she still places high in the challenge, so she does have camera time outside of the runway. Because she was still present in other runways, it seems like a deliberate choice by the editors to remove her entirely from this runway challenge.

These sponsors though, while unique, are mostly capitalizing on the show's growing audience. And yet, despite their seemingly disparate products, they all assume an affluent audience with disposable income. Even though there were network changes, the show still operates under the assumption that their core audience is affluent.

Bubly Sparking Water

The last sponsor I want to discuss in this chapter is Bubly, who sponsored the finales for seasons 13 and 14 as well as a singular episode of *Untucked* for season 12 and the whole season

of *Untucked* for season 13. Bubly is a zero calorie, flavored sparking water canned beverage owned by PepsiCo. In season 12 episode six, as the safe contestants walk backstage to the Untucked lounge, they are greeted by former contestant Vanessa "Miss Vanjie" Matteo. She is standing in front of a table with different colored cans—presumably different flavors—of Bubly. She tells the queens, "I brought the Bubly Sparkling Water. I hope you're bringing the drama" (Charles, 2020). Miss Vanjie then tells the queens to grab a "delicious Blackberry Smash." The cocktail Miss Vanjie directs the girls to is bourbon based, and uses the blackberry Bubly as a mixer.

Just like Disney's *Frozen* on Broadway, Bubly appears in the episode of *Untucked* coincides with one of the main maxi-challenges of the season, Snatch Game. This is perhaps one of the more iconic challenges on the show, which has appeared since the second season. Because it is such a fan favorite challenge, it makes sense that advertisers want to monopolize on the number of viewers this episode draws. Miss Vanjie appeared in the main show, telling the queens what not to do in the Snatch Game. However, in *Untucked*, she is debriefing with the contestants to see how they feel after the challenge. Despite the clear sponsorship, the queens do keep their banter relatively consistent with their personalities and still curse and discuss their sexualities. However, Miss Vanjie does not stay for all of the show and leaves before the top and bottom girls arrive. Just like Miss Vanjie, Bubly never makes an explicit appearance again in the show.

The brand's incorporation in *Untucked* for season 13 is rather subtle, and never is explicitly named. As the queens enter the Untucked lounge—which is just the Werq Room but with the tables moved and replaced with couches—the queens are given a can of Bubly water. This is different from other seasons of *Untucked*, where the queens are generally given at least one cocktail unless they are sober. There is never any discussion of the drink either which way. It does seem, however, that when the queens place the drink down on the table, that they present the brand logo to the camera. Likewise, there are boxes of Bubly around the set. Occasionally the cans of Bubly will be covered up with koozies with the *RuPaul's Drag Race: Untucked* logo. Again, subtle.



Figure 22: Contestants GotMik (left) and Symone (Right) in the Untucked Lounge with Bubly boxes behind them (Charles, 2021).

The integration into the main show, however, is a bit more complicated. The season 13 finale coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, the show's finale, which is usually filmed in front of a live audience, followed social distancing protocols. The top four filmed their sections in a theater, while fans watched from what RuPaul calls the "*Drag Race* Drive-In" (Charles 2021). The at-home audience then sees fans, wearing face masks, in their cars, supporting the top four queens. The season 12 winner Jaida Essence Hall is the correspondent reporting from the drive-in and states, "Bubly Bounce Sparkling Water is kicking things up a notch with this sickening drive-in" (Charles, 2021). A couple things to note here. Sickening is a good thing in queer vernacular. It means something along the lines of amazing or excellent. Hence, Jaida is stating that it is an excellent drive-in. Another thing to note is Bubly Bounce

which is another Bubly but features caffeine. There is no sign that mentions Bubly's association with this drive-in. Occasionally there are cutaway shots to people holding up cans of the product, but that's about it. Jaida does call out the product in another segment, noting that one person has a lot of energy thanks in part to Bubly Bounce. There are shots of fans holding the product throughout these segments. However, they only exist within the confines of the drive-in.

The season 14 finale, however, was filmed live at the Flamingo Casino and Hotel in Las Vegas with a live audience. It was the first finale since the COVID-19 pandemic. The finale was filmed at the casino because the casino is the home of *RuPaul's Drag Race*: *Live*!, a residency variety show that features former contestants. The episode, therefore, works not only as a finale, but also as marketing for the Vegas show. While season twelve did also feature songs from the Vegas show, the season fourteen finale features the set and performers. There was also a short-lived associated spin-off in 2020 that followed the day-to-day lives of the performers in the Live! show called *RuPaul's Drag Race: Vegas Revue*. However, the show was never renewed for a second season.



Figure 23: A promotional shot for the RuPaul's Drag Race Live! show at the Flamingo Casino.

However, the season fourteen finale also worked as an advertisement for the Flamingo Casino, which is part of Caesar's Entertainment. The episode starts off with Michelle Visage reading copy: "Coming to you from the legendary Flamingo Las Vegas, the home of *RuPaul's Drag Race* Live!, it's the grand finale of *RuPaul's Drag Race*" (Charles, 2022). As she reads this, the at-home audience sees B-roll of the Las Vegas Strip and the outside of the Flamingo Casino.

Here we have a clear example of two different brands synergizing with each other. Synergy here allows the two brands to maximize their reach of their respective properties—either the show or the hotel and casino (Denison, 2022). While this is not the only drag show on the Vegas Strip—Señor Frogs at Treasure Island hosts a drag brunch that also features former *Drag Race* contestants—Flamingo is able to situate itself with the *RuPaul's Drag Race* brand. As such, it is imperative for Caesar's Entertainment to have a clear and distinct connection with *Drag Race* to draw in as many fans as possible. At the same time, it also positions the hotel and casino as queer-friendly.

Bubly, once again, sponsored a short segment of the finale that highlights a portion of the *RuPaul's Drag Race: Live!* show and cast. Before the previous segment goes to commercial, the announcer—judge Michelle Visage—states that the next segment is brought to us by Bubly Sparkling Water, then the camera cuts to a season 14 contestant, DeJa Skye, who is drinking the beverage and states, "cherry is my favorite flavor" (Charles, 2022). It is unclear why DeJa was selected for this section, as she was not one of the season's finalists. We also see other contestants around her clap and laugh.

When we return from commercial, we see a the stage has been darkened. The announcer states, "Bubly Sparkling Water presents the cast of Drag Race Live! as they see the Bubly side with "Losing is the New Winning" (Charles, 2022). The camera then pans to a screen with the Bubly logo and then moves to three White twinks drinking from three different colored cans of the product: orange, green, and a dark red. The twink in the foreground holds his can so that the logo is cheated out to the camera and it is clear that this is the lime-flavored Bubly. The middle twink's can is less visible, but it is noticeable that this is the cherry flavor. The background twink's can, however, is not as clear. The musical number the *Drag Race Live!* contestants

perform, “Losing is the New Winning,” is the last song of the show which has the queens realizing that winning the show isn’t important because they are still “that bitch.” The up-tempo number features multiple non-winners of the show, but also includes Jaida Essence Hall. As the number ends, the season 14 contestants walk on stage, except for the top five. That’s the extent of Bubly’s sponsorship of the finale.

Procter and Gamble

Prior the finale, the contestants get to select a Miss Congeniality for their season. Miss Congeniality is a title bestowed upon a contestant thought as the most helpful and kind queen on her season as voted by her other competitors. RuPaul reveals who is Miss Congeniality during the finale or the reunion episode. Since the seventh season, the queen generally wins money. During season seven through nine, the queen won five thousand dollars. However, starting season eleven the queen was awarded ten thousand dollars thanks in part to a Procter and Gamble product. So far, the products featured on the show are the Brilliance Crest 3D White Strips, Pantene Nutrient Blends, and Olay Body. While these are three different brands, they all fall under the Procter and Gamble umbrella.

Each time the award is given away, the previous season’s Miss Congeniality comes out and reads mostly the same copy. For example, Nina West, season eleven’s Miss Congeniality, tells the season twelve queens “the winner will receive 10,000 dollars, presented by Pantene Nutrient Blends” (Charles, 2020). While a queen might throw in a catch phrase prior to the copy, they state the same thing, except they swap out the product. Season fourteen, however, was a little different, as Olay Body also gave each of the other contestants two thousand dollars for “keeping the world entertained all season long” (Charles, 2022).

The inclusion of Procter and Gamble is perhaps the culmination of *Drag Race* reaching the mainstream. Much like with Caesar's Entertainment, we see two different brands synergizing to attempt to reach a wider audience. However, beyond the name of the product, there is no real mention of Procter and Gamble. No company representative steps out to give the queens the award, nor is there a giant check with the corporation's name. By now, the phantom sponsor is a running trend in the show.

Conclusion

This chapter, however disparate it may seem at first, shows us a pattern. While the show initially starts off with two major brands—Absolut and MAC cosmetics—the advertisers shift as the seasons progress. Instead, we get relatively smaller brands sponsoring the show. In a sense, the show becomes a vehicle for these smaller advertisers to showcase their brands to a queer audience. In the early seasons, given the show's position on Logo TV, brands sponsoring the show could access a larger, national queer consumer. Yet as the show changes to VH1, and presumably a larger, less queer audience, the brands stay relatively niche, with some notable exceptions.

Yet, these advertisers do not stay with the show for very long. As noted, only Absolut and Anastasia Beverly Hills are the sponsors who stayed with the show the longest. Bubly, owned by the Coca-Cola Company, and Procter and Gamble seems to have stayed with *RuPaul's Drag Race* for at least three seasons. But for the most part, most brands just sponsor the show once. This opens the floodgates to speculation. Perhaps the brands are not seeing a return on investment, which would help explain why they rarely support a second time. For example, we have never seen Pretty Litter sponsor another mini-challenge. Nor Squatty Potty. But further, do these brands' consumers match up with the show's audience?

As stated, the brand discussed in this chapter never directly judged the queens. There was never an official from the brands present within the show. And, aside from Hello Kitty, there was never even a corresponding challenge. As such, most of these sponsors were able to build repour with the audience just through name association. Because the queens were never critiqued by any representative of the advertisers discussed in this chapter, there was never a negative association to be made with the brand. As a counter example, some fans disliked Absolut's Jeffrey Moran because he "focused too much on the business side and not the drag side" (Park, 2022). Any of the fans ire for Moran, therefore, could also transfer onto the product. However, much of this annoyance with Moran appeared on social media posts, and not the show. Therefore, casual viewers of the show would have positive correlations with the brand depending on their feeling towards Moran. The same could be said about Hamburger Mary's. In a way, it would was better for a brand to support the show, and by extension the queens, without providing direct feedback to the contestants. This way, the brand gets to support a queer television show and artform without alienating any fans of a specific queen.

Of course, I haven't discussed every sponsor the show has had. That would make this project too large and unruly frankly. These are the brands that have stood out to me as a long-time fan of the show. And yet, while not a complete least of sponsors, it does show the change of sponsors from niche to mainstream, which coincides with the growth of the show. As the show's audience grows, and changes networks, so too do the companies and brands that sponsor the show. What is lost, however, is the opportunity for smaller, queer brands to sponsor the show, as they might not be able to compete monetarily with a Coca Cola Company or Procter and Gamble. As such, the sponsors of the show present products that are consumable to a wider

audience than just queer people. This begs the question about who is, in fact, the audience of *RuPaul's Drag Race*.

CHAPTER 5: TEA WITH THE QUEENS- CASE STUDY 3: DRAG CON 2022 LA

Say what you want but I saw 0 beauty at this year's dragcon…what happened to the glamour?
Gia Gunn, 2022

Making My Way Downtown: Prelude to Drag Con

I was shocked by how quickly I made my way to the convention center even though I overslept. The entire trip was 30 minutes from just south of LAX to Downtown, the urban center of Los Angeles, about a 17 mile trip. As I make my way past the disgustingly hideous USC campus, I know I am close to the Los Angeles Convention Center. If memory served me correctly, the bus I was riding would drop me off right in front of where I needed to be. And if not, I figured it would not be difficult to find where I needed to go. I was going to a drag queen convention after all. Some flamboyancy would be expected from those attending. Even though I had never gone to Drag Con before, I had already made some assumptions, some based on what I had read and others on my own preconceived stereotypes. I was not mistaken. The bus dropped me right across the street and I knew I was in the right place because I saw several drag queens walking up to the convention center. I also saw a shirtless White man in skimpy shorts and massive white angel wings. Flamboyancy was to be expected.

This chapter is a participant observation of RuPaul's Drag Con 2022 in Los Angeles, California over the course of three days. What follows are my observations of the convention as they relate to the commercialization of drag. Drag Con is an important arena since this is the space where the contestants themselves become products for the viewers, now turned convention goers, to financially consume. The convention grounds become a new retail field where fans can financially support their favorite queens and other queer—or queer aligned—commodities. These are mostly my observations as I experienced the convention, paired alongside some insights from

other scholars and writers. This chapter explores how fans interact with the contestants of the show, how bodies are regulated in space, how drag queens are utilized by vendors, and how commercial logic impacts fan interactions. Further, these meet-and-greet are also a great way to gage social capital amongst the queens. Drag Con can also function as a great guide to see Bourdieu's theory of practice in practice. While there are some guiding themes throughout the chapter, this is mostly written from how I experienced the event.

What is Drag Con?

RuPaul's Drag Con is a convention for fans of *RuPaul's Drag Race.* In an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, RuPaul notes that Drag Con is "the first convention celebrating drag, queer culture, and self-expression" (Anderson, 2015). RuPaul's Drag Con started in 2015 in Los Angeles. Matthew Poe for IndieWire (2015) compared the event to Burning Man "if Burning man was in a convention center, and everyone was wearing heels, charging money for a picture." The convention further spawned itself in New York in 2017 and London in 2020. Drag Con functions as an event where fans from all over and of all ages can meet their favorite contestants from the show in one convenient setting outside of the nightclub or bar. Ginger Minj—runner up of Season 7 and a contestant on *All Stars* 2—claims that meeting fans helps humanize the drag queen that fans have seen on television (Voss, 2017). Fans not only get the chance to meet their favorite queen. They can also buy the queen's merchandise, as well as support other artists and vendors, be they related to drag or not.

Traditionally, Drag Con was two days: Saturday and Sunday. However, this year it would be a three-day event, starting on Friday. Throughout the three-day weekend I would be attending, there would be panels with the queens, as well as performances on the "House of Love" stage, named after a canned cocktail that World of Wonder sells. This is on top of, of course, the meet

and greet opportunities with gaymous (gay famous) celebrities, drag queens from RuPaul's Drag Race and the many international franchises, and other drag queens not associated with the show. This year would be the first Drag Con since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Around 150 drag queens were scheduled to appear this year, including casts of the US seasons 12, 13, and 14, all of which had their seasons air throughout the pandemic. While there was a Digital Drag Con in 2020, it was mostly an digital drag show, which was popular at that time. Drag Con 2022, however, would be a return to the normal setting. For many of the queens and fans—and myself—this would be their first time at Drag Con.

The first Drag Con coincided with the then airing seventh season of *RuPaul's Drag Race*. According to Matthew Rodriguez and Kevin O'Keeffe's identification of the growing audience demographics, season seven is where the show's audience changes from predominately gay White men to underage White women (O'Keeffe, 2018). They note that Drag Con solved one of the show's central problems: how do capitalize off of the 21 and under demographic. Since drag shows traditionally occurred in gay bars, patrons legally had to be over the age of 21. However, that alienates the growing number of fans under the age of 21. Therefore Drag Con, created a space where fans regardless of age could meet their favorite queens.

Presumably, as the show goes more mainstream, especially after the show moved from Logo to VH1, we would see a more normative audience attending the convention. Rodriguez' and O'Keeffe's observation are slightly backed up by the demographics. According to a 2018 demographic study, about 40% of attendees are straight, and 60% of the audience identified was women (Creed, 2019). The demographics suggest that more women attend Drag Con. There is no racial breakdown provided though to support that it is predominately White women who attended the convention. Further, age demographics seem to suggest that the event's demographic seems

to be the 18-34 age bracket. However, I could not find any evidence to support Rodriguez' and O'Keefe's claims that it solved the specific problem for World of Wonder.

When asked why RuPaul started the convention, RuPaul states, "we have fans of the show from all over the world. The social media experience is great, but to have a place or town hall where all these people—who are not just drag queens, but people who dance to the beat of a different drummer—can gather" (Anderson, 2015). RuPaul sees Drag Con as a place where members of the queer community can gather and connect with each other in person to a establish a connection that is not possible via social media. While all well and good, absent from RuPaul's interview is the commercial element of the convention itself. Although there is a note at the end of the interview that tickets can be purchased online, RuPaul himself does not address the price of the tickets nor the price of any of the merchandising within the convention. He also does not acknowledge that in order to engage with queens, fans must pay a fee. Community can be attained, but only after you have paid for it.

RuPaul imagines a community environment, but he diminishes the fact that the convention is about financial profit for the three major stakeholders: World of Wonder, Voss Events, and the queens themselves. These three groups invest a lot of capital into the event and therefore also have a lot to lose. World of Wonder is perhaps the largest stakeholder for the event, as the convention promotes not only *RuPaul's Drag Race*, but also most of their digital content on their streaming platform Wow Presents Plus. Further, the production company also films the panels to release as digital content for fans on their streaming platform. Voss Events, on the other hand, is a management company that represents a lot of the queens from the show. They are also responsible for a lot of the management and production for tours, such as "Werq the World," and also for the *Vegas Live!* revue show. The queens themselves are last major stakeholders. While

they might get some financial support from the previous two stakeholders, the queens are the ones who mostly do the advertising for the convention as they are the main draw.

I should note here that not every queen goes to Drag Con. While many have gone before, some do not see value in going, either because they do not get enough return on their investment, or because they deem it too much work. *Drag Race* queens do get a "heavy discount" for their booths, unless they have a sponsorship with a brand, in which case the brand will have to pay the 1,250 dollars for the 10 by 10 booth (*Exhibiting Details - Drag Race Queens - RuPaul's DragCon*, 2024.) Some of the less popular queens, for example, do not go because they do not have enough fans to justify the expense. Some do not go because they have tours during that same time. RuPaul only appears as a DJ at the event and does not engage in meet-and-greets. Hence, it is important for a queen to heavily promote their presence at the convention in an attempt to get a return on their investment.

Marketing

The marketing for Drag Con was mostly done via social media. A lot of the marketing that I saw prior to the event was done through the social media, either through the official RuPaul's Drag Con Instagram or Twitter, or through the social media of the queens who would attending. Drag Con's official Instagram featured at first promotional images of the queens who were set to appear. These images usually were promotional images used for the queens' respective season, but some queens did have updated images. Generally, the caption had a small note about the queen featured, followed by the call to action to go to Drag Con. For example, Jiggly Caliente's—who was on Season 4 of the US franchise and is set to be a judge for the upcoming Philippines' seasons— promo on the 2022 *RuPaul's Drag Race* Drag Con post reads:

> Swerve for your nerve! 💘Don't miss your chance to see @jigglycalienteofficial and the rest of your #DragRace favs at #DragCon 2022! @rupaulsdragcon returns on May 13-15, 2022 for three FULL days of performances, panels, shopping, and interacting with your #DragRace franchise faves ✨Go to (Denison, 2022) to snatch your tickets and see which 145+ Drag Race queens are already attending, link in bio 🫶

The post is also cross posted with RuPaul's Drag Con and World of Wonder's Instagram page. Usually, the first line is edited to match the highlighted drag queen. That is to say, they try to use a catchphrase of the queen. The queen's Instagram handle is also changed, but other than that, the language remains the same for almost all the queens in attendance. While there is reference to shopping, the use of the word "interaction" in the caption suggests that the meet-and-greets will happen organically on the floor. That is to say, it implies that the queens will be walking the floor of the convention center and fans will get to bump into them randomly, similar to characters walking around the Disney parks. The only language of monetary exchange in the caption is the "shopping," which implies that it is an option, but not mandatory.

It is also imperative that the queens promote the event on their own social media. Jiggly, on the other hand, posted the same promo picture with the caption, "It's back and better than ever! See you at @rupaulsdragcon in Los Angeles this May 2022, snatch your #DragCon tickets today! #jigglycaliente #dragcon2022" (Jiggy Caliente, 2022). Both of these posts reference a return to Drag Con, noting that the event has not occurred in two years. However, the language seems to be mandated from Drag Con. Crystal Methyd's—a contestant from Season 12—Drag Con promo post similarly reads, "It's back and better than ever….because I'll be there. 😜💁🏁 See you at @rupaulsdragcon in Los Angeles this May 2022. Tickets are available today! #DragCon @DragConLA" (Crystal Methyd, 2022). Of course, not all queens followed the

same language, but a majority of them did. In order for a queen to get a decent showing at their booth, and therefore make more money, at Drag Con, they must promote the event. While we do see synergy between both the drag queens and the event, it is unclear to what extent the promotion is contractual given the repetition of the copy amongst the queens. In either example presented here, there is no discussion of how much a meet-and-greet will cost with that queen, or where they will be on the convention floor. The posts by these queens are broad at best.

The official Instagram page also highlights some of the vendors that will be at the con. There are nine carrousel posts that feature the different vendors that will be present at Drag Con that year. All of these posts are captioned the same way:

> The retail therapy you deserve 🖌Shop til you pop off with some of the fabulous vendors heading to #DragCon 2022! 🤩 @rupaulsdragcon is BACK in L.A. this May 13, 14, and 15 for three FULL days of performances, panels, shopping and interacting with your #DragRace franchise faves ✨Go to rupaulsdragcon.com to snatch your tickets and see which 150+ Drag Race queens are already attending, link in bio 🫶 (RuPaul's Drag Con, 2022).

Much like we saw with the queens' posts, there is again a reminder that the event has not occurred in a couple years, particularly with the emphasis on "back." This post also positions the queens outside of the economics of the convention. "Retail therapy" is placed upon the specific vendors, as if the queens themselves are not selling their own merchandise or meet and greets. This further pushes the narrative that the only economic transactions that will occur during the convention are through the vendors and not the queens.

These posts, also emphasizes the secondary nature of these vendors, however. While each queen gets their own unique post that announces their presence at the event, and each different panel also gets their own post, vendors get a carrousel post. This post, as mentioned, places nine different vendors in one post. In order to know which vendor is going to be present, a fan must scroll through the post as not even the text beneath describes who will be there. Each vendor post is generic copy that reiterates that Drag Con is back. There is also no connective thread between who is in promoted in these posts. These types of posts highlight that the vendors are not the primary draw for Drag Con, but rather the queens.

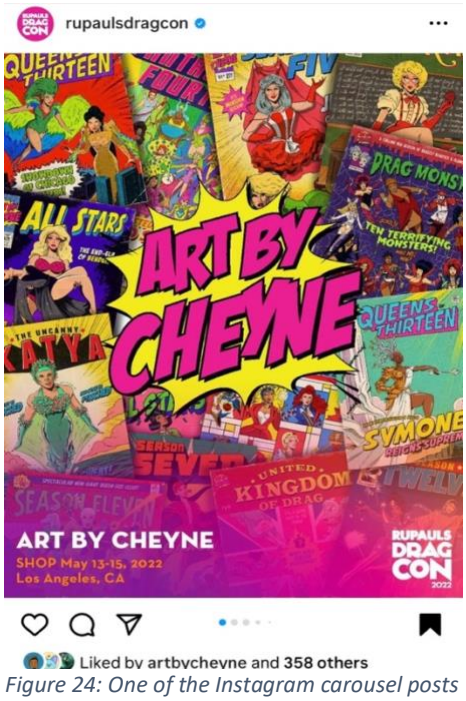


Figure 24: One of the Instagram carousel posts for the vendors (RuPaul's Drag Con, 2022).

The closer that Drag Con weekend came, the official social media started posting videos of the queens talking directly to the fans. A lot of the videos are of the queens out of drag, but there are also some queens in either partial or full drag. Further, a lot of the queens seem to be filming the videos themselves. For example, Jiggly Caliente's video is shot in the back of a moving car while she is in daytime glam makeup. This is also the first time that promotional materials mention the booths that each queens will be at. Since the post is once again a carousel, each queen's individual is booth is mentioned only in their video, and not the caption, which reads,

> "Come through, icons! 🎟 Swipe to see where you can meet some of your #DragRace favs at #DragCon this weekend! @rupaulsdragcon is BACK in L.A. this May 13, 14, and 15 for

three FULL days of performances, panels, shopping and interacting with your #DragRace franchise faves ✨Go to rupaulsdragcon.com to snatch your tickets and see which 150+ Drag Race queens are already attending, link in bio 👀 (RuPaul's Drag Con, 2022).

The onus is on the fan to swipe and try to find what booth their favorite queen will be at. Generally, each queen will mention their booth number, but not where in the convention hall they will be. For example, Jiggly lets us know she will be at booth 551. However, in her video she does not mention any minimum spend to meet her, or what her merchandise will cost. While there is a reference to getting tickets, there is no direct mention of what it costs to meet that individual queen.

There was also a small opportunity to get free tickets. A week prior, on May 6, 2022, fans could go to Joann Fabrics close to West Hollywood, about six miles away from the convention center, and meet Mo Heart, a former contestant. The event was free for the public. This meet and greet functioned to promote several happenings. First and foremost, the meet and greet functioned as a way to promote Drag Con 2022, as Mo told fans what to except at Drag Con. Further, the first 30 fans that arrived at Joann Fabric would receive a free Saturday May 14 ticket for Drag Con. Such, it would be an inexpensive way to enter Drag Con. Secondly, the event also functioned as a way



Figure 25: RuPaul's Drag Con post about Mo Heart's event at Joann Fabrics (RuPaul's Drag Con, 2022).

for Joann to preview their Pride 2022 collection (Wheeler, 2022). And lastly, Mo's meet and greet also functioned as a way to promote the *UK vs the World*, which ended a month prior to this event. I say this particularly because the advertising images used for the event featured Mo's UK vs the World promotional picture.

I was only able to find out about this event because I already followed Mo on social media. Mo posted about the event on Instagram. Since the account for the convention kept posting several images and videos a day, this post quickly got buried. Further, scrolling through Joann's Instagram, I could not find anything about the event. The only other place that I could find that discusses the meet and greet were community channels on KTLA, a Los Angeles local news network, and Patch, a community events board. Both of these postings use the exact same words. I am unsure where the copy was received for this event. Because of timing, I was not able to go to this meet and greet. However, I did not see much more about this during the day of or after. In fact, searching through Mo's Instagram account after this event, I was unable to find the original post that I had saved.

Tickets and other Costs

The most important thing, as told by all the social media captions, is to buy tickets for the event. Ticket prices vary depending on what one wants or needs. A single day ticket for Friday or Saturday cost 50 dollars, while a Sunday ticket was only 40. A weekend pass was 80 dollars. An "All Star" or VIP ticket for a single day cost 150 dollars for each day, or 250 dollars for the entire weekend. There were some benefits to the All Star pass. VIP guests had access to a special, designated entrance, early access to the venue, exclusive badge registration area, priority lines to meet queens, a VIP only lounge with access to a dedicated bar and bathroom, a VIP viewing area for the House of Love main stage, an exclusive merchandise bundle, and 15% off official Drag

Con merchandise at the World of Wonder booth. While I was not able to find out what the merchandise bundle consisted of, I did see people walking around with a light pink canvas backpack that read “All Star” in red letters. While I did want to get the All Star weekend pass, they were sold out, so I opted for the regular weekend pass. There were also other tickets the “Official Drag Con After Party” held at the convention center. General admission tickets, and even VIP tickets, did not grant entry to the After Party events, instead that was an extra cost.

However, for some fans, buying tickets is not the only financial barrier. Fans who fly to Los Angeles for the event have to also pay for their flights to the city, transportation, and a hotel. There are hotels near the Los Angeles Convention Center at the L.A. Live entertainment complex, about a five minute walk. However, they can be cost prohibitive because of their proximity to both both the Crypot.Com Arena—where the basketball team the Los Angeles Lakers and the hockey team the Los Angeles Kings play—and the Peacock Theater—a concert venue that seats 7,100 people. For example, there are two Marriott owned properties in the L.A. Live complex: The JW Marriott and the Ritz-Carlton. These are two luxury hotels. While there are other hotels in Downtown Los Angeles, they can also be cost prohibitive mostly due to their proximity to Los Angeles’ urban core. When I went to Drag Con, there were no packages provided for fans, although it does seem like for Drag Con 2024 they have discounted rates at local hotels, including the Ritz-Carlton. That said, the nightly prices for hotels vary from 100 dollars a night—if you stay 11 miles away in Inglewood—to 2000 dollars a night at an upscale Beverly Hills Hotel, about 12 miles away from the convention.

As for myself, I flew down from Eugene to Los Angeles, about a 300 dollar flight roundtrip. From LAX, I made my way down my mother’s house in Carson. I sneakily took a shuttle from the airport to the Greenline Station—one of the urban rail systems in Los Angeles—to order my

Lyft that way I did not have to pay any extra LAX fees. However, I did not only need to prepare financially. I had already set aside money for the convention, figuring I would end up buying at least food or merchandise from some of the queens. But I also needed goals for this weekend. These goals would help me make sense of what I was about to experience, and also keep me academically and financially in check. While I am also a major fan of the series, I was going to Drag Con as a researcher. I wanted to be open to naturally exploring the convention as a fan, but I also wanted to have the central questions of my dissertation guide me through my experience. I wanted to see how market logic was applied to the convention and how that guided interactions between fans and contestants. I also wanted to see how space was set up for fans and contestants. How were things organized? How is space organized and policed?

And Where is the Body?: Spatial Organization

The South Hall is part of the overall Los Angeles Convention Center. As mentioned before, it is in Downtown Los Angeles, next to the Crypto.Com Arena, and L.A. Live, a self-described sports and entertainment district (About L.A. Live, 2022). The South Hall where the vendors and queens were for Drag Con is comprised of 4 different halls that can each be closed off to form their own hall. However, for Drag Con, all four halls were left open for a total of 346, 890 square feet of space (Los Angeles Convention Center, 2022). Other events that occur in that same space according to the Los Angeles Convention Center website are Anime Expo, KCon, and L.A. Comic Con. Only the latter had their previous year's attendance public. Looking at the numbers of attendees, it seems that Comic Con hosted about 94, 900 people in 2021, down from 123, 400 in 2019 (Exhibitor Inquiries, 2022). It is likely that the numbers for Drag Con this year would be down given the pandemic and perhaps caution on the general audiences' part.

Per the numbers provided on an infographic for possible vendors, attendance at Drag Con has grown 500% since 2015, with more than 100,000 attendees in 2019 (Drag Con, 2021). However, per their updated information for Drag Con U.K. 2023, it seems that their attendance in Los Angeles was only 50,000 people. That said, it seems that spending power was still roughly the same between the two years. A majority of the attendees purchase merchandise, spending 200 dollars in an average purchase, for a total of 8.2 million spent at Drag Con. These purchases are made by attendants between the ages of 18 and 30, with about 60% of them identifying as heterosexual (Drag Con, 2021). Further, according to their statistics, 60% of the attendees are female. These numbers changed from the 2018 numbers cited earlier. It seems that as drag has gotten more mainstream, there are more heterosexual attendees at Drag Con.

It is interesting that despite being a queer event, they only present two genders in their infographic. Even the Comic Con guest information presented a non-binary option. The infographic presented is geared for potential exhibitors. Given the venue that they would be at, it would seem that they might be open to other gender identities. Given the binary gender, and the predominately heterosexual audience, it would seem that Drag Con is a predominately for straight women. I will be curious to see how these numbers have changed after the two year shut down due to the global pandemic.

To my surprise, there was no massive line outside when I got there shortly before 10AM. I waited behind three groups and outside of the convention center, staff security checks my ID and vaccine card. Inside, the convention center security checks my vaccine card and my backpack. Again, I am surprised by the lack of people. While sure, it was Friday at 10AM and most people have work, I expected more people to be here, especially since the Queens Walk happens Friday morning. However, I am happy I don’t have to wait in lines. I make my way through to the left

side of the conference hall. I show my printed ticket to the woman behind the counter and she hands me an acrylic badge. The badge has an image of RuPaul striking a pose, breast out, staring down the barrel of the camera. She wears a black dress which contrasts with her white wig. She stands on a black background and serves as the center for the eight chevron stripes. Beneath her bosom are the words "RuPaul's DragCon LA 2022" in a pink text. The lower third of the badge is a similar shade of pink as the chevron lines and the previous text, and reads "WKND" in a black san-serif font. I assumed that whatever lanyard we would be given to hang our badge on would be equally theatrical. I imagined a hot pink, or maybe a light pink; either way I was thinking pink. I walk over to the other side of the table and I am given the lanyard: it's black. I am told to wear my badge at all times in the convention center. Absent from the materials given is a program book. I figured I might be able to get one inside. Such, I make peace with the rather straight forward lanyard and move further into the convention.



Figure 26: My Drag Con badge. From my personal collection.

I then look up. "Hello Hello Hello" a white banner reads, echoing the words that RuPaul says when entering the Werk Room. The letters are in shades of pink, orange, and purple. Underneath that, another banner reads, "thanks to our sick'ning [sic] sponsors" listing out their sponsors: Wow Presents Plus, RuPaul's Drag Race Superstar,



Figure 27: Image of the banner with sponsors. From my personal collection.

Paramount Plus, *The Golden Girls*, Singer, Out Here Sexual Health, House of Love, Joann, Anastasia Beverly Hills, The Los Angeles Public Library, Pretty Little Things, Micky's West Hollywood, and the movie *Fire Island*. Out of all these sponsors, I mostly ask how *Golden Girls* is a sponsor, considering the show is no longer running new episodes. I make a note to myself to look into when the last episode of *The Golden Girls* aired (1992) and why they would be sponsoring the show. With that in mind, I make my way up to the escalators where Drag Con awaits.

The convention hall is arranged in 16 rows. Entering the exposition hall, I am greeted with a long pink carpet called Glamazon Boulevard. Each of the different streets are in show references, such as Henny Lane, Porkchop Boulevard, and Death Drop Alley. There were also numbers associated with each lane. For example, Glamazon Boulevard was labeled 1300 Glamazon Boulevard on the banner. These numbers are associated booth numbers, very much like street numbering works. The only place that did not follow this numbering system was a section toward the back that I informally named Artist Alley, since many of these vendors were small, independent artists. This section of vendors towards the back of the convention center has four small rows. As mentioned before, Artist Alley does not have booths, but rather tables. These tables follow a different numbering convention to differentiate them, starting from C01 to E26, depending on where the table is placed.

As I walk up Glamazon Boulevard, people line either side, eager for the Queen's Walk to begin. Even though vendors were already selling merchandise, it seemed to me that everyone was centered toward the pink carpet. The South Exhibition Hall of the Los Angeles Convention Center looked massive. The room was split by the pink carpet and the only thing in the center was the House of Love Main Stage. Along the path of the pink carpet was also the name of one

of the sponsors, “Pretty Little Things,” whose booth I could see toward the front. The first booth I could see walking into the room was the Drag Con Official Merchandise Booth. On the other side of the pink carpet was the House Of Love Booth, where people could get their hands on one of the House of Love Hard Seltzers. As it was still 10 in the morning, I decided to wait before trying it.

I make my way over to the left side of the carpet (which I later found out was called Sickening Street), hoping to get a good spot. That hope was quickly dashed as I realized that I was too short to see over the people in front of me. The drag queen working the glitter booth next to where I was standing (because of course there was a glitter booth), also couldn’t see the queens walk even in her heels. She ended up stepping up on a box to get a better view. I almost asked her if I could step on it, but I remember that I am there to observe, so as long as I do that, I won’t miss anything. Plus, I could watch the Queen’s Walk later that day on YouTube via the



Figure 28: Map of the convention center as posted on the Drag Con Instagram account (RuPaul’s Drag Con, 2022).

Wow Presents page. The people immediately in front of me were talking to each other, or as might be more appropriate to say given the space, having a "kiki." Because of how friendly they seemed to be with each other I assumed they came as a group, but as I continued to eavesdrop I realized that they had just met each other that very morning at this very spot.

As I waited, a woman in a wheelchair pulled up next to me. Once the group in front of me saw her, they told everyone to move aside to let the woman through to the front. Everyone did and she thanked everyone for their kindness. This moment resonated with me for a couple of reasons. First, there was no hesitation from anyone to allow the woman to move to the front. They wanted her to enjoy the Queen's Walk just as much as anyone else. She did not ask if they could move, instead the makeshift community in front of me accommodated her. And in that moment, that's what it felt like: a community. But also, it presented an interesting insight and one I would encounter a couple of times over the course of the weekend; there was a lack of accessibility options. While there was an ADA Viewing Deck, it wasn't near the pink carpet. If a person with accessibility issues wanted to view the Queen's Walk, then they would have to watch it on the screen on the main stage, but they could not interact with the queens like the people standing next to Glamazon Boulevard.

Fifteen minutes after the dedicated starting time (the walk was supposed to start at 10:30), the announcer starts the Queen's Walk. Each queen is presented in order of what season they were on, starting with the American season one. Further, the queens were called out based on when they first appeared in the series, regardless if they had competed in a more recent All Stars season. It was at this time that you can easily identify crowd favorite queens based on crowd cheering. A majority of the time, a queen's popularity is determined by the show's edit. If a contestant gets a favorable edit, then they are prone to have more fans than another queen. If a

queen gets a villain's edit, then they are usually not liked by the fans. Some of the former contestants got big cheers, like Eureka, Crystal Methyd, and Pangina Heals to name a few. It did not surprise me that these queens got such big cheers. Eureka and Crystal both were in the top four of their respective seasons, while Pangina was a front-runner in *UK vs. the World*. Other queens, like Madame La Queer, Aiden Zhane, and The Vixen got less applause. These queens were in earlier seasons of the show, or they got a villain edit. No one got no applause (at least none that I could hear), but it is very telling to see how queens respond to the contestants.

As the queens walked, they made their way to the end of the runway where there were photographers. Every four of five seconds the announcer would go "give it up for" and introduce a new queen. As previously mentioned, the queens were presented in chronological order, sort of. They started with the first 13 seasons of the US franchise, then moved to present the Thai queens, then the UK queens in order of their respective seasons, then Canada once again in order of their season, then the Australian queens (no New Zealand queens from the Down Under season were there), then Holland, and then it went to the US Season 14 girls, then the winners of different seasons, and closed out with the *All Stars* Season 7 contestants. The Vivienne—winner of the first season of *Drag Race UK* and a contestant on *All Stars 7*—was the last queen to walk.

And so Drag Con officially begins.

Strolling the event is overwhelming. There is a lot to look at. Not only are there a lot of things for sale to look at, there are also a lot of people. There are a lot of independent vendors present. At this point I remembered that I needed a program book, so I decided to walk over to the information desk close to Sickenin' Street. I ask the attendant for a program book, but I am told it is all online. They point at the link. I would much rather prefer a physical copy, but, thanks in part to my partner who is in event planning, I understand that they cost money. I do believe a

QR code might have been better than a link, but I digress. The link sends you to Drag Con's website, which just lists names and booth numbers. Overall, the program book link isn't very helpful. The map is mostly black and white, with some hints of pink for the names of the streets, some blue for the information desk, and green for ATM. In theory, the colors for the information desk and ATM make sense and are easily understood without the titles. However, the map only shows booths as numbers, except for the sponsor which were titled by name and in yellow. Because most of the map is black and white, the yellow does draw the eye. But, because I needed to conserve my phone's battery life, I decide to stroll through the event sans map, overwhelmed and underguided.

Most of the floor seems to be booths, while a small portion toward the rear of the space were tables. Booths tended to be more elaborately decorated, as they were open to the public, but closed off from each other. These booths were able to have a backdrop for either their company name or to hang other merchandise. Multiple booths were sometimes bought together to make one singular, giant booth, as was the case with Symone (winner of *Drag Race* Season 13) and her booth called SYMoMA. Similarly, queens could use the booths to make a private space for meet-and-greets, away from the public, providing an intimate moment for fans.

A note about accessibility and booths. I noticed throughout the event that the lines were narrow, and did not take wheelchair or other mobility device access in mind. As I mentioned before, there was an ADA viewing platform near the House of Love stage, but it was far from the Queen's Walk. Unless a queen went directly up to the platform, people in mobility assistance devices would be unable to get a close encounter. Further, if someone was in a wheelchair and waiting in line to meet a queen, often the short, 90 degree turns, would be difficult. While I waited in line to meet Michelle Visage, one of the judges of the show (whose daughter happens

to attend UO), a person in a wheelchair was unable to wait in line because of the narrowness of the lane, but also because of the turns. Eventually, they moved to the front, where a stanchion was moved to allow them to cut the line. As the person cut in front of me, I was asked by the sales person if it was okay if they went ahead of me.

There was also some time spent rearranging Michelle's booth to make room for the wheelchair. It was closed off from the public, except for the line. The best description I have for the booth is that it reminded me of a dark room. There was one curtain that the audience passed through while in line, and then another that only the person who was going to meet Michelle got to pass through. But, these lanes were too narrow for the person in the wheelchair to pass through. Instead, Michelle's team made an opening behind where Michelle was seated so that the fan could pull in directly. It seemed to me that accessibility was up to each individual booth, and not mandatory.

It should also be noted that Michelle was the only person requiring face masks during her meet and greet. While you did not have to wear them in line, once you passed the second curtain, you had to put the mask on. Also, there was a thin sheet of plexiglass that separated her from the fan. The mask could only be removed for a quick picture. Other than that, there were some people in masks, but for the most part most were maskless. Personally, I felt better knowing that the venue checked vaccination status at the door. But further, one of the benefits of going to Drag Con is physically interacting with a favorite queen and, usually, that means some sort of physical interaction like a hug. Reflecting on this now, after the event, I could see how not having the vaccine requirement might put a damper on the event.

Consuming the Queens

The main purpose of Drag Con is for fans to meet and interact with their favorite queens from *RPDR*. Part of the meet-and-greet experience is taking a picture with the queen. This, of course, comes at a price. Prices, for the most part, were set by the queens. Most queens had similar merchandise such as enamel pins, shirts, sweaters, tank tops, stickers and tote bags. Some queens also had portraits of themselves. Some queens also had more unique items on sale that usually corresponded with their brand: for example Serena ChaCha from the show's fifth season was selling her custom designed wigs. Generally, buying a queen's merch granted you access to a meet-and-greet with them.

For example, when I met Pangina Heals, host of *Drag Race: Thailand* there was a wall behind the merchandise table that blocked the public's view of Pangina. In order to meet and take a picture with Pangina, fans (me) had to spend a minimum of 15 dollars. The merch table had shirts, large folding fans, stickers, hats, and enamel pins, all of course with her imagery on then, varying in prices from five to thirty dollars. I didn't want to buy anything too big or that might get dented as I was travelling, so I bought an enamel pin of Pangina. Interestingly, you could not just pay for the meet-and-greet. After I purchased my pin, I waited in a line to the side of the merch table to meet Pangina where I filled out a bit of paperwork with my name and email, so they could email my picture to me later. After she finished with the previous fan, I walked into a small closed off room. This created a small, intimate space for the fan and the queen. The private space was useful not only for a more personalized meet-and-greet-experience, but also prevented non-paying fans from taking pictures of the queens. Inside, I got to talk to Pangina about how much I liked *Drag Race: Thailand*, and how we both went to UCLA. After a small bit of chat, a professional photographer took a picture of us. I said thank you and was escorted out.

While waiting in line to meet Pangina, I also saw how the VIP access pass worked. Essentially, people with the VIP pass could skip the general access line, buy what they wanted to get the meet-and-greet minimum, and then wait for their moment with Pangina. Generally, I found this odd, as a lot of times fans got to talk to each other while waiting in line. Waiting in line added to the sense of community of the event. Skipping these lines, while time saving, seemed like also missing out on talking about your favorite queen with other fans.

Not all queens had this private set up. Some queens, generally those either that were less popular or from international franchises, did have open booths, where fans could come up and take pictures of them. Of course, these were not meet and greet opportunities, but they could at least take a picture of their favorite queen. For example, when I met Cheryl Hole from the UK series, she was standing in an open booth with her merchandise in front. Meet-and-greets were 30 dollars. While some queens had a per person rate, to meet Cheryl and take a picture with her, fans had to meet a $30 minimum. This meant that up to two people could take a picture with her for $30. She had much of the same merchandise that other queens had, with one unique option: a polaroid. She had some that she had taken solo available to purchase, or you could pay $25 to take one with her. I ended up taking a polaroid picture with her, and I also bought a sticker of her trademark “mediocre” for $5. For this experience, while Cheryl’s photographer prepared the polaroid, her and I took selfies on my cell phone. After the polaroid, the photographer also took



Figure 29: My picture with Cheryl Hole taken at Drag Con. From my personal collection.

some pictures with my cell phone. I ended buying a sticker and a polaroid with her. The polaroid was a separate charge, while the picture I took with her was taken on my phone by her partner.

This provides an interesting moment to reflect on what exactly fans are buying at Drag Con from their favorite queens. For some queens, fans are buying their time. This time is an opportunity for the fans to talk to their favorite drag queen and feel seen and heard by them. For example, Kylie Sonique Love, winner of All Stars: 6, had a 50 dollar merchandise purchase minimum. Or, if a fan just wanted a meet and greet, they could pay 40 dollars. Some fans like having the material proof that they met their favorite queen, such a sweater or a shirt that can the queen can then sign. However, for some fans, they only care about the opportunity to engage with the queen. Further, if a fan is flying and has limited baggage space, like myself, a picture is significantly better. A reddit fan noted that, while the line moved slowly, it was because Kylie took her time with each fan and "made them feel special" (TheFabHatter, 2022). Although meaningful to the fan, meet-and-greets at Drag Con are about symbolic interactions between the fan and the queen. While there are physical tokens of the event, such as pins or sweaters, they are mostly symbolic objects that show the fan's support for that queen. People who are not fans of *Drag Race* would not be able to identify what that token means nor what it means to the fan. These items become emotionally charged because of the connection between the fan and the queen.

There were some, but not many, queens who were doing free meet-and-greets. There were some queens who were mostly there visiting and, if you caught them in a good moment, you could get a picture with them. For example, I managed to get a free picture with season nine queen Jaymes Mansfield as she walked by me. She stopped, posed for a selfie, and moved along. I did see fans take advantage of moments where queens who were charging to take a picture were

on their way to either the stage or restroom to ask for a picture. I saw many people manage to take pictures with queens after the Queen's Walk this way. However, there were queens at booths who did not charge for pictures or meet-and-greets. For example, Brita Filter from Season 12 did not charge fans for interaction or a picture. In the five minutes I spent talking to Brita, I asked her why she didn't charge. She stated that she grew up in a single parent household without much money, so she knows what it is like wanting to meet someone, but not being able to because of money. To her, this is a small way of giving back.

There was one major distinction in the meet-and-greets, however. While most queens, regardless of their franchise, were distributed across the convention floor, the season 14 queens were all segregated and placed in the same area of the convention. The Voss Girls, as I called them, were all each in identical white booths with the queen's name in neon lights. The booths were provided to them by Voss Events, the management agency who works with World of Wonder. In order to meet one of the queens, fans had to line up at a separate merchandise booth. At the booth, they had to buy merchandise for each queen they wanted to meet, unless they were the top five. If fans wanted to meet the top 5, they had to spend a minimum of $45 on that queen's merchandise. Further, if they wanted to meet the season 14 winner Willow Pill, they had to spend $75 dollars on her merchandise. Fans would get the merchandise and a sheet with the names of all the Voss girls with stamps next to the queens who they could meet. Fans then moved over to the lines for the respective queens for the meet-and-greet.

Voss also set the prices for all of the queens' merchandise. The lowest price item was a sticker at four dollars. The most expensive items were the sweaters or hoodies at sixty. The odd pricing of the $4 sticker stands out to me because if you wanted to meet the minimum to meet a queen, the price of the sticker makes it so that a fan has to buy two, and thereby spend $8, to reach the price point. For example, if a queen wanted to meet one of the top five queens, the way to get to the price point would be to buy a shirt at $40 and two stickers for $8. That would place the fan at $48 dollars, three dollars over the minimum. This encourages fans to buy the bigger items, such as a tote bag or pins.



Figure 30: Prices for the merchandise for the season 14 queens. From my personal collection.

However, this was also a unique tactic that I only saw at the Voss Girls merch area. Most of the other queens had products that could easily meet their minimum without going over. Since Voss works so directly with WOW Presents, I wonder how having the sales for all the season 14 queens in one place will impact next year's sales numbers for prospective vendors.

Most booths accepted debit or credits cards with their square reader, and a couple other vendors also accepted other digital payments like Venmo or PayPal. I only encountered one booth were neither were an option. Carmen Farala, the winner of the first season of *Drag Race España*, only accepted cash. I didn't get the chance to ask why, but I think it might have had something to do with foreign transaction fees. There were some fans in line cajoling her about the cash only policy. One person in line ran to the nearest ATM inside of the convention hall to

withdraw cash. I, like a good millennial, did not have cash on me. Another fan in line did offer to pay so we could both be in the picture, but I declined their offer. I should also note while on the topic of Carmen, she was the only queen who, to my knowledge, did not know English. She only spoke European Spanish. Such, the fans in line all spoke Spanish. The group in front of me was from Mexico and did question if I knew Spanish. Carmen was the only queen from Spain there, and while there were other international queens (like Pangina and Cheryl), the cash only policy might have been for her own ease of travel.

There were also queens who were there are brand ambassadors or working with specific brands. For example, season 13 contestant Joey Jay partnered with Sally's Beauty. They had a promotion going on, so people at the booth would give you fake eyelashes for free and even apply them. Any purchase would then count toward a meet-and-greet with Joey. Similarly, Blair St. Clair partnered with Drag Con 2022 sponsor Pretty Little Thing. The company is a UK-based fashion retailer, aimed at 16-42 year old women. Since there is considerable overlap between Pretty Little Thing's market and the people attending Drag Con, it makes sense for them to be a sponsor. While Blair did not have a meet-and-greet, she was going around recording interviews with other queens for Pretty Little Thing's YouTube page. I did not see her interact with fans, however, nor do I get the sense that she did.

The only other sponsors that I did see use drag queens were *The Golden Girls*, Micky's (a gay bar in West Hollywood), Singer, and House of Love, but each in a very different capacity. For example, *The Golden Girls* booth was mostly a recreation of the show's kitchen. Fans could wait in line to take a picture in the iconic set. However, on the Sunday of the event, four queens—Pandora Boxx, Tempest DuJour, Mrs. Kasha Davis, and Kennedy Davenport—dressed up as one of the four characters and interacted with fans. The experience with the queens

ran from 11 AM to 2 PM, which also meant that the queens were not at their booth for those four hours. Micky's, on the other hand, is a popular bar in West Hollywood that hosts many *Drag Race* viewing parties and drag shows. I do not remember seeing a drag queen at their booth, but they did have go-go dancers. They also deejayed the music at the House of Love mainstage. However, they did host the unofficial Drag Con after party with former contestant Mariah Paris Balenciaga. If they had a drag queen at their booth, I cannot remember.

Impersonal Sponsorships

Singer and House of Love, on the other hand, were mostly associated with drag queens through panels. There was no Singer booth. They only sponsored panels. There was one each day, focusing on sewing. For example, the Friday panel focused on queens who knew how to sew, while the Sunday panel featured queens who did not know how to. The Saturday panel featured queens and their designers. In the Sunday panel, one of the people attending did win a free Singer sewing machine. Unfortunately, I was not able to attend any of the panels because the rooms filled up. Once again, the VIP pass would have been useful as those with the pass had priority access to all the panels as well. First those with I did see a man carrying a sewing machine box. Eventually, highlights of panels are uploaded to YouTube via the Wow Presents page, but as of time of writing, they have not gone up.

House of Love is a unique sponsor. House of Love is a collection of canned alcoholic cocktails and mocktails. According to their website, "the global phenomenon, *RuPaul's Drag Race*, is extending their message of love, light, and laughter with the launch of House of Love. In partnership with the iconic RuPaul, this extra-special collection of mouthwatering RTD (ready to drink) canned cocktails and mocktails celebrates those who proudly march to their own beat" (House Of Love). These drinks can only be purchased online, however, and are not available in

stores. However, further research reveals that the House of Love trademark is owned by World Of Wonder, the same production company who produces the show. So, while it might be its own stand-alone brand, it is still very much tied to World of Wonder. While there was a booth for House of Love, there were no queens present shilling the drink. Instead, it was more of a club setting, with a bar top and some tables where guests could enjoy their drinks. You could also purchase the drinks throughout the convention center's vendors. Admittedly, I had two. The tangerine margarita had a strong, fake citrus flavor. I frankly do not remember what the other one I had was. I do remember hearing people saying that they enjoyed them, and several people saying that it got them pretty inebriated, which honestly, work.

House of Love also had the main performance stage. Every 30 minutes or so, a new drag queen from the show would come up and perform. Usually it was either a memorable lip sync from the show, or sometimes they would do their own mix, but it was a way for the people at Drag Con to see their favorite queen perform in person. After their performance, a queen would generally talk for a bit, announce their booth number, and then bid their fans come see them there. They also had a panel room where mostly all the "Bring Back My Girls" panels took place. These panels were reunions of the seasons that occurred during the two years that Drag Con had not occurred. From what I could tell, the platform where the queens sat was decorated with the House of Love artwork, which is a heart with this 60s throwback font. The theme could be described as mod, but updated with bright colors. Admittedly, I thought the stage looked cluttered. I was unfortunately not able to get any pictures as I was not able to enter the panel room. Once again, having a VIP pass would have been greatly beneficial.

There are two sponsorships that leave me with some questions: *Golden Girls* and *Fire Island*. The Golden Girls is a popular television series amongst gay men. However, the show has

been off the air since 1992. I found it odd that *The Golden Girls* would sponsor the event, and even have a presence at the Con through a set piece. The Sunday of Drag Con, the set piece was used by four different queens who were dressed as the four Golden Girls. *Fire Island*, however, came out that year. They also had a physical presence at the Con, a booth that was mostly for picture moments, much like the Golden Girls set piece. *Fire Island*, however, did have a panel. I was unable to attend to attend the panel—once again the VIP badge would have been useful. The reason I question these two sponsorships is because they are both streaming on Hulu. Even though Hulu did not directly have a presence there, these two media properties suggest that Hulu did have a presence.

There were two sponsors that were aimed more at public outreach rather than financial benefit: Out Here Sexual Health and the Los Angeles Public Library. Out Here Sexual Health was, shockingly, promoting sexual health through pamphlets and providing sexual contraceptives like condoms. The Public Library booth had a wheel that people could spin to win a small prize. At the booth, as well, they were helping people sign up for a local library card. When I went up to the booth, I was asked if I had a library membership. I explained that I was not a Los Angeles resident (sad), but I was just there for Drag Con. Even though I could not sign up for the card, I was still told I could spin the wheel. I won a hand fan. But the library also presented a kid's fashion show and a drag queen story hour. I believe that there was no fee to participate, you just had to be a child. I did not manage to catch the kid's story hour.

The major sponsor presence, however, was World of Wonder. There were standee boards that presented other World of Wonder productions that were set the premier over the summer. These boards were pretty colorful and slightly taller than me. The boards were also all relegated near the front of the convention hall. Specifically, they were next to the House of Love cocktail

bar booth, which was next to the Pink Carpet. These boards promoted such shows as *Vanjie: 24 Hours of Love*, a matchmaking show that stars a former Drag Race contestant; *Painted with Raven*, a makeup competition show that is hosted by former contestant and RuPaul's current makeup artist Raven; *All the Queens' Men*, a show that follows the husbands and partners of former contestants; and Sketchy Queens, a comedy sketch show that features Jinkx Monsoon, winner of the fifth season of *Drag Race* and *All Stars 7*. There were also some boards that featured other shows on the network, such as *UNHhhh,* their popular show hosted by Trixie Mattel and Katya, and *Tartan Around: With Lawrence Chaney*, a comedy web series that follows Drag Race: UK's season two winner Lawrence Chaney around Los Angeles. It seems to me, that generally, most of the shows featured at Drag Con were shows that featured Drag Queens.



Figure 31: Sign promoting Tartan Around at DragCon. From my personal collection.

Another major World of Wonder advertisement present at the event was for RuPaul's Drag Race Superstars, a mobile phone game. The game is done in partnership with Eastside Games, an east Vancouver based company. The developer describes the game thusly: "Enter the iconic Werk Room and experience the world of RuPaul's Drag Race. Werk your way to the top by selecting from hundreds of fashion pieces and create the fiercest look to slay the runway" (RuPaul's Drag Race Superstar). You play as an original character, which you can customize, as

you compete to the next drag superstar. The game itself is free, but there are in game purchases with real money that help move the game along faster. In a way, the game is mostly an idle game with a few runway challenges. Playing the game is rather monotonous, since you are mostly collecting coins, lipstick, and gems, which allow you to level characters up. The game features RuPaul as the main judge, and also has some other popular figures from the show, such as Latrice Royale, Jimbo, and Raven, to name a few.

Non-Drag Queen Vendors

Throughout the floor, mixed in between the drag queen booths, were also people selling their wares. A majority of these booths sold items related to drag in one way shape or form, such as makeup, wigs, or costumes. There were some bigger brands, such as Trixie Cosmetics—an independent makeup company founded and owned by winner Trixie Mattel—and KimChi Chic Cosmetics—owned by former contestant Kim Chi and former owner of Nyx Cosmetics Toni Ko. While Trixie did not show up to the event, Kim Chi did show up for two hours at the KimChi Chic booth on Sunday to take pictures with fans for free. While waiting in line to take a picture with Kim Chi, I got a free hand fan and handkerchief. There were also larger companies present like The Crème Shop, a Korean-inspired beauty brand based in Los Angeles. The Crème Shop was actively trying to get people to follow their social media accounts. If a potential customer followed their Instagram, they would be able to spin a giant wheel and get a reward, such as free hand sanitizer. However, most stores that catered to drag queens were significantly smaller than these three brands. For example, Greñas Wigs is a small wig store ran by Los Angeles-based drag queen Mari Macha.

There were, of course, vendors that had nothing to do with drag, but were either queer-owned or queer-friendly. For example, there was a woman with a brand called Teal Tea Cup in

the area toward the back that I called the Artists' Alley that was selling anime products. I ended up getting some enamel pins from her. There was also a brand called Aliens of Brooklyn that was selling shirts and hats with fun phrases like "Dumb Bitch Energy" and "Puta." There were also smaller vendors mixed throughout the booths. The "artist alley" however, was not as well separated as the booths, and instead was just a series of tabled placed next to each other. This area was, at least for me, a better shopping experience because it felt less overwhelming than some of the booths. While the tables were crowded with people, there was less visual clutter for me. It is unclear to me how well the tables in the back did compared to the booths, but when talking to the sales person at the Aliens of Brooklyn booth, he did mention he did sell out of some of the shirts.

Con-clusion

At last, it was Sunday afternoon. After an exhaustive three days (and a shooting nearby), I have to depart Drag Con. Before I leave the con, I sit down at a table and take down some final notes, trying to focus on details I might have forgotten. I go down that escalator one last time and make my way outside. There is one homeless man outside panhandling. When no one gives him money, he begins to yell out homophobic obscenities. I see the street food vendors outside selling their bacon-wrapped hot dogs, churros, and water. There is also one person selling clothes. I had not seen this White woman selling clothes even when I came out here for lunch. I do not stop to look at her clothes.

I draw attention to the outside vendors for a couple different reasons. These vendors were not the only food option at the convention, albeit perhaps they were the most delicious options. There were food options inside the convention center, they were either food trucks, which were more than likely vetted by Drag Con's event managers, or there was also a cafeteria run by the

Los Angeles Convention Center. But this scene shows the discrepancies in who has access to formal and informal marketplaces. The street food vendors outside the event were all Latino. The people going to Drag Con were either queer or queer-friendly. As such, there are two different marginalized groups congregating in the same area. Yet only the queer or queer adjacent people had access to the formal economy inside. The food vendors outside only accepted cash, which is non-taxable. Generally, most of the people coming out of Drag Con ignored the vendors. In many ways, this scene showed me how far the queer economy had come, and yet how exclusionary the market is.

The price of Drag Con alone is exclusionary, regardless of whether you are a vendor or a fan. While there were some vendors that were not from Los Angeles, a lot of the smaller vendors were local to the event. If they were from out-of-state, then the booths tended to be smaller, or just be tables. Likewise, the same could be said for the drag queens who chose to be at the event. While the season 14 contestants had to contractually be there, maybe of the other queens who are present at Drag Con Los Angeles tend to be predominately from the US franchise. There were a couple British, Canadian, and Australian queens, some queens from *Drag Race: Thailand* and only one contestant from *España* in the mix. These queens were usually popular in their seasons that they got more American attention. Part of Drag Con, therefore, is monopolizing on a queen's popularity, turning her social capital to economic capital.

Frankly, I had already spent way more money than I intended and I did not want to tempt myself. With hands full of merchandise and an emptier wallet than I started with, I make my way down to the bus stop home. While waiting, a drag queen comes up to me and asks if I can zip up her dress. Before she turns around, she asks me to zip her dress back down and stuff her phone in the back. I do as told. She jumps on a Lime electric scooter and zooms away onto Sunset.

CHAPTER 6: WHAT DOES THAT HAVE TO DO WITH ANYTHING?!: DISCUSSION

RuPaul's Drag Race has fucked up drag.

Jasmine Masters

In a now iconic YouTube video, former contestant Jasmine Masters states that "RuPaul's Drag Race has fucked up drag" (Masters, 2016). She states that while she did compete on the show, she went on because she needed a pay raise. She claims that after eight years of the show the drag scene has deteriorated. Her particular issue seems to be that drag started shifting from what she use to know, to something new. She takes umbrage to queens who go on stage with only "bras and panties," stating that to her, that is not drag. What Jasmine Masters addresses is the shifting climate of drag that she associates thanks in part to *RuPaul's Drag Race*. The show introduced many people to the artform and thus, introduced new voices and ideas about drag that were not present prior. However, in introducing the world to drag, the show has also complicated the field of drag. While I do not agree with Jasmine Masters' claim that the show "fucked up" drag, I do agree that the show has unsettled drag and in doing so, shaped it in the show's image.

As I started writing this project, another season of the main show aired. I don't even know how many international seasons aired while I was writing this project. But what I do know is that *RuPaul's Drag Race* and *Drag Race*—RuPaul's name is dropped when he does not host the show—is now an international phenomenon, and advertisers are noticing. The show is now a full of business that can launch the careers of queens, taking them from relative obscurity to name-brand recognition. National brands like Pepsi have started using drag artists in their ads. For example, Pepsi used former contestant and All-Star winner Monet X Change in 2019 in an ad that also featured singer Cardi B. The ad aired during the 2019 Grammy awards. What makes

Monet's inclusion in the ad the more interesting is that the ad did not come out during Pride Month. Drag, at least for a time, is now a tool in advertiser's arsenal.

After five chapters of reading my writing, you are probably asking yourself, "what does that have to do with anything?" I hope this chapter will put those questions to rest. This chapter functions not only as the discussion and conclusion of my project, but also questions the extent which drag in *RuPaul's Drag Race*'s image can be subversive. As you might remember from all the way in chapter one, the central theory I am using to examine the show is Bourdieu's Theory of Practice. This chapter will therefore tie in all my rantings from the previous chapters and tie them all in a nice little package. Then, I close out the chapter, and thus the project, with a few concluding thoughts.

***Drag Race* as a Space for Commodification**

Prior to the introduction of *Drag Race*, the field of drag was pretty autonomous. It had its own regulatory structures in place. While it engaged within the economy of nightclubs, it was, by and large, an autonomous field. The habitus of the field was regulated internally. While influences leaked through to the field and changed tastes—for example what music to perform, what to wear, changing trends in makeup, etc.—those tastes were internally regulated. However, the introduction of *Drag Race* began to break down the autonomous field, allowing outside players more access and changing the habitus in accordance to their own tastes and desires. As the show progressed and gained more popularity, the field of drag became much more heteronomous, being shaped not only by new fans of the show, but also by new commercial interests.

Bourdieu identifies three types of capital: economic, social, and cultural. All three are at play within *RuPaul's Drag Race*, and all three are relevant to all players involved. Starting with

economic capital, which within this conversation would be the wherewithal to sponsor the show, air the show, and to compete in the show. Strictly speaking, this would be the issue of money: who has it, how is being used, who wins the final prize? As such, the support of brands like Absolut and MAC cosmetics in the first season was highly beneficial for the show to launch. Producer Randy Barbato states that Logo could not fully finance the show. While World of Wonder was able to partially finance production, without the financial support of these two companies, it might have been impossible to air the show (Fernandez, 2023). As was present in the first season, the show already had a shoestring budget, so the support of two major companies would benefit not only the show, but also the contestants. But equally, these Absolut and MAC cosmetics took a gamble by sponsoring the show. Tom Campbell—a producer of the show—notes that while they were pitching the show to several networks, executives were concerned about ad sales.

Investing money in this type of show, which was new at the time, had to be beneficial for all parties involved. There is thus an incentive for these brands in the earlier seasons to shape drag according to market values. Absolut does a lot of the heavy lifting shaping drag into a commodity. They are the most present sponsor throughout the show's run, and one of the few sponsors to have representatives sit and judge the contestants. Their presence is especially important in the early seasons as it helps shape the show's expectations. As such, queens know that competing on the show means that they will also have to be able to sell a product and function as a spokesperson. Jeffery Moran's presence within the first five seasons of the show is testament to how Absolut looked over their investment. Absolut did not merely give the show money, but they also had a brand representative sit on the judge's panel. While he was just a guest judge, his presence was more or less expected each season. His feedback was aligned with

corporate sponsorship—how do these queens present themselves to potential consumers? Since major, international brands, at that time, had not worked with drag queens before, they were unfamiliar with how to handle camp and flamboyancy. As such, Moran's first steps in judging are to minimize these elements, like Shannel's camp presentation or Alexis Mateo's over-the-top breast plate.

Absolut therefore had the biggest hand in shaping the show because of their presence on the judge's panel. Not only where they providing money for the competition and the winner, but they also provided the contestants alcoholic cocktails for the queens during *Untucked*. However, after one contestant got drunk before the second season's Absolut challenge, the rules regarding alcoholic beverages changed. During the second season, the contestants were being given cocktails as a form of liquid courage since they had to go on stage and sing live. One contestant, Jujubee, drank too much, resulting in her doing poorly in the challenge (Fernandez, 2023). Campbell acknowledges the precarious position they were in. While drunk Jujubee made for good television and showed how the other contestants rallied around her and helped her reapply her makeup, Absolut was still a sponsor: "we had an alcohol sponsor so we wanted to make sure we weren't disrespecting that agreement and the laws that go along with that" (Fernandez, 2023, p.107). Thus, in this way, we see how Absolut's sponsorship dictated what we, the audience, saw at home. During the second season, queens were allowed to have as many cocktails as they liked, akin to the normality they were presented with at their home bars. However, starting in the third season, the contestants could only have one cocktail per episode to prevent another Jujubee-style incident.

As the show progresses, however, there is less attention paid to economic capital—at least to the audience—and a lot more attention paid to cultural capital. Bourdieu argues that

cultural capital has a lower exchange rate to economic capital, but this show shows the weakness of that argument (Bourdieu, 1977). The brands stop sending a representative to be on the show and judge the queens. Long gone are the days of Jeffery Moran telling the queens that they would be fired for their presentation. Instead, brands seem to prefer having a light-hearted mini-challenge where there is no real repercussion on the game itself, like challenges presented by Anastasia Beverly Hills or Fab Fit Fun. While these challenges are amusing to the casual viewer, they create joyous associations with the brand. For example, as Zdravkovic and Till (2015) identify, "sponsoring a well-liked sports team presents an opportunity for positive associations to be transferred from the team to the sponsoring brand" (p.116). The same is true for brands on *Drag Race*. Sponsoring the show can create positive associations between the brand and queer and queer-friendly viewers. Brands can position themselves as queer-friendly by sponsoring the show, without having to spend money on elaborate marketing. These brands therefore gain cultural capital by sponsoring the show.

However, to me their passive support of the show is rather concerning. For instance, if we examine Anastasia Beverly Hills or Fab Fit Fun, we find that they do not otherwise support other queer causes. They do not have strong connections to the queer community outside of their sponsorship of the show. Therefore, these brands can support this singular show, and are deemed as queer-friendly brands by consumers. While, for example, Anastasia Beverly Hills did collaborate with drag queen Alyssa Edwards on an eyeshadow palette in 2019, there has been no other investment into queer artists, companies, or charities. Sponsoring the show and only the show, therefore, is akin to rainbow-washing, defined as "a brand's use of LGBTQ symbols to only signal their support through advertising, without engaging in further support of this community or their rights," (Champlin and Li, 2020, p 162). In this case, the "LGBTQ symbols"

are the show and drag queens. Given their lack of support for other queer causes, it seems that it is better to appear queer-friendly than not.

Because the show sets a precedent that sponsoring their drag competition makes a brand queer-friendly, other brands can likewise use drag queens for the same affect. For example, Sabra Hummus' 2020 Super Bowl ad featured two former contestants from the show, Kim Chi and Miz Cracker. On some level, these two queens make sense for the ad; they are both named after food. They were, according to The Advocate, the first two drag queens to appear in a Super Bowl ad (Reynolds, 2020). A statement by Sabra's chief marketing officer states that "hummus is for everyone […] whatever your passion, however, you live, love, eat, and enjoy life, this plant-based food is a winner" (Multivu, 2020). While seemingly positive for gay representation, the use of drag queens here is complicated by the fact that particularly Sabra is an Israeli company. Sabra is an Israeli product that has donated money to the Israeli Defense Force. This ad, alongside it's copy, can be read as a form of pinkwashing, defined as "a deliberate strategy to conceal the continuing violations of Palestinians human rights behind an image of modernity signified by Israeli gay life" (Schulman, 2011, p.2). Even though this is an advertisement aimed at Americans, this ad continues the Israeli's state pinkwashing, using Israel's alleged positive stance on LGBT folks as



Figure 32: Miz Cracker (left) and Kim Chi (right) for Sabra Hummus. Imaged sourced from Reynolds (2020).

a way to deflect from their ongoing violence on Palestinians. Yet, despite their alleged progressive natures, same-sex marriage is still not legal in Israel. In the same ways that advertisers and sponsors can sponsor the show to appear queer-friendly without doing any other actionable steps, so too does Sabra use these queens to try to paint their company—and state by association—as queer-friendly.

Performance of Drag

The sponsoring brands, therefore, no longer have a say in what form drag takes. There is a noticeable change in the working relationship between the brands and the show. Where at first, both the brands and show would help shape what commercially-viable drag looked like, the sponsors' hand is seen less and less each season. There is no brand representative that sits on the judges panel and critiques the queen. The main entity shaping drag, as it were, is RuPaul, the judges, and World of Wonder through the show and their expectations. To connect two different spheres, this is what I would call the habitus of the show. Per Bourdieu, habitus refers to the "subjective but not individual system of internalized structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action common to all members of the same group or class" (p.86, 1977). The structures of the show test queens not only on intangible assets such as their charisma, uniqueness, nerve, and talent, but also and very practical skills, such as sewing and marketing. Skills such as sewing might be useful for some queens, if only to mend an outfit, but the show demands that they be able to make an entire outfit. However, generally construction is not judged on the show; rather, the judges look at the final product and judge it based on their preferred aesthetics. Both the intangible and tangible skills that the show tests the queens on are based on the tastes of people outside of the field of drag.

These external critiques of drag, therefore, can have real consequences on how drag is performed. There are some skills are more personalized to each drag queen. These skills would include the ability to do your own makeup, have passing knowledge on how to style a wig, sewing an outfit, and make pads to shape out the body. A queen's aesthetic choices, who their character is, is reflected in these skills. However, some of these abilities are shaped and changed within the show to better correspond with the judges' tastes, while other skills are not. For example, Michelle Visage will "challenge" contestants to change their signature makeup to "soften" their appearance. An example of this "challenging" occurs with season ten contestant Dusty Ray Bottoms. Dusty's makeup included several dots drawn on her face, as seen in figure one. Yet, in the first episode of the season, Visage critiqued Dusty's makeup asking the contestant to walk them through the dots on their face. Visage ends the conversation with "looking forward to a dot-free face, Dusty" (Charles, 2018). Visage is clearly not a fan of this particular queen's makeup, and challenges her to change their signature look. While the dots on the face could be part of Dusty's branding, after all it sets her apart from all the other queens, it does not fit within the preferred aesthetic of one of the main judges. Dusty therefore has to change their makeup to match what the show looks for, which Dusty does. She does not wear her signature makeup for her run on the show.



Figure 33: Dusty Ray Bottom's promotional shot for season ten. Sourced from Hereford (2018).

This isn't a singular incident either. Visage challenges several queens to change their makeup. Generally, Visage's claim is that she wants to see the queens be versatile when it comes

to their makeup. However, as many fans have pointed out, this creates a double standard within the show. Queens with more conventional and standard beauty makeup are not challenged in the same way that queens like Dusty Ray Bottoms or season twelve contestant Crystal Methyd are. As such, queens with alternative looks are generally already at a disadvantage with the judges and need to show their "versatility" in ways that other queens with softer, more "passable" aesthetics do not.

This isn't just a comment that occurs when the show moves from Logo to VH1, either. It happens in earlier seasons as well, for example with season six winner Bianca del Rio. Bianca is an example of what happens when drag changes where it is performed. Bianca, a seasoned New York and New Orleans queen, was use to painting her face for stages. As such, the makeup needs to be bigger so that it can read to an audience. It also needs to be bigger because stage lights tend to wash out features. As such, dramatic makeup reads better on stage. Part of the way Bianca made her makeup bigger was my drawing a white line near her waterline. This trick makes the eyes look bigger. However, in the first episode, guest judge Khloe Kardashian tells Bianca that her eye makeup is "a little too heavy 'cause I don't feel like I could see your eyes," which is then reaffirmed by Visage who states, "it's just a softening of the edges" (Charles, 2014). There is a sweet irony in this statement by Kardashian, as their family helped mainstream drag-style makeup, such as full-coverage foundation and contouring, to the general masses. However, within the context of the show, the relative tricks that worked on stage no longer work for camera, let alone HD cameras.

The audience gets a payoff on this narrative later in the sixth episode of the season. Visage tells Bianca, "this is probably the most beautiful I've seen you yet. Your eye makeup—you didn't put that harsh white line" (Charles, 2014). Bianca had removed the white waterline,

instead just lining her eyes in black. Once Bianca's makeup was more in line with beauty makeup trends, she gets complimented. While she did not win the challenge, she showed the judges that she was listening to their feedback and implementing their critiques.

There are, of course, exceptions to the aesthetics of drag that the show prefers. Trixie Mattel has been able to succeed both within and outside of the show despite her over-the-top makeup. Trixie states of her makeup, "drag queens always say paint for the back row, I paint for the check cashing place down the street" (Charles, 2015). The adage of "paint for the back row" means to paint as dramatically as possible so that people in the back row of the audience can see the makeup. However, Trixie's is more dramatic than that. Of her own look, she claims "I don't even care about looking human. I like to look like I'm from Fraggle Rock" (Del Mar, 2015). She draws inspiration from 1960s Barbie dolls, with bright colors and a distinct contour. Despite her makeup, the judges never bring it up on the show. However, after her elimination in season seven, fans started a "Justice for Trixie" online campaign, feeling that her elimination was unfair. She was brought back—although considering the show had filmed the year prior the fan campaign had nothing to do with the decision—but ultimately was eliminated again, placing in sixth place.



Figure 34.": Trixie Mattel's cover for her 2022 "The Blonde & Pink Albums.

Trixie came back to compete in *All Stars* season 3. However, by the time she came back, she had established a name for herself, and perhaps more importantly, had an active fanbase. For example, she had a successful YouTube series with former contestant Katya Zamolodchikova

called *UNHhhh* which then lead a series on Vice called the *Trixie and Katya Show*. Likewise, she had released a successful folk album named *Two Birds*. She also managed to win a James Beard Foundation Award for a GQ magazine video called "Trixie Mattel Makes a PB&J (and More Importantly, a Cocktail). Considering her relative success after the show, Trixie ended up winning the season of *All Stars*. It could be argued that her success provided a shield against the critique of her makeup, especially since it was easily recognizable and part of the brand. Different drag aesthetic choices are valid insofar as they are marketable to a mass audience. Trixie is now, perhaps, one of the most successful queens to have been on the show. Yet for how different Trixie Mattel's style might be, it is ultimately still approved by RuPaul. After all, Trixie won the show, so therefore has met the expectations set by Ru.

We likewise see changes in the show in performance styles, especially in the lip-sync numbers. Generally, drag performers would lip-sync a song that fits their character or style. Not every queen will want to perform the latest popular song, or even a song at all in some cases. Some queens, like New York-based performer Lypsinka perform spoken-word pieces. However, not all drag queens lip-sync numbers. For example, Bianca del Rio did not generally lip-sync; instead, she was a host and comedian. Her job was getting the crowd ready for other queens. However, since one of the main features of *Drag Race* is the "lip-sync for your life," queens have to at least know the basics of "[mashing] your mouth around to other people's music" (Thunderfuck, 2018). Coincidentally, this is the one part of the show that is mostly free from advertisers and sponsors. Since this is the last segment of the show, RuPaul gets to say who wins and loses the lip-sync. RuPaul is positioned as the authority on lip-syncing. Advertisers have no say in the matter. But this mostly makes sense considering advertisers have not been able to

utilize this part of drag culture. To my current knowledge, there have been to advertisements that feature drag queens lip-syncing.

But in context of the show, lip-syncing is an ever important skill. Doing well in the lip-sync can keep you in the show, or even winning the crown. Lip-syncing can decide if a queen leaves that week, or if they win the entire season. There are thus two different types of lip-syncs for the show: lip-sync for your life and the lip-sync for the crown. Each has their own variant performance styles, but the judge's appreciate spectacles. This desire for stunts starts in the first season, most notably when Shannel was in the bottom two after being told she did not show any vulnerability in the challenge. RuPaul told Shannel that she was trying too hard to be perfect and needed to show some vulnerability. As such, when she performs the lip-sync number "The Greatest Love of All" by Whitney Houston, Shannel jumps in the air, making sure her wig fell off. This moment showed the judges that Shannel was not afraid to not seem perfect. While the wig falling off was planned by Shannel, it still read to the judges as her being vulnerable as she was not afraid to not seem put together at all times. Shannel wins that lip-sync and stays another week.

These types of stunts were pretty commonplace throughout the first four seasons of *Drag Race* as they seemingly showed the judges how desperate the queens were to stay on the show. However, it was seemingly overused by contestants. This comes to a head in season four, episode ten, when Latrice Royale and Kenya Michaels lip-synced against each other. As part of the runway challenge, both contestants had to wear pregnancy bellies, so both of the contestants appeared pregnant on stage. The song the two contestants had to perform to was Aretha Franklin's "(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman." Kenya moves all over the stage to the song while not wearing shoes, while Latrice stays in the same spot and sings to her baby bump.

At a certain point, Kenya removes her wig. The camera then cuts to judge Santino Rice who makes a dissatisfied face. Latrice's performance is centered on the interpretation of the song, while Kenya's is based on what the judges had previously liked. However, it can be argued that this was the moment that lip-syncing within the context of the show changed. A stunt had to line up with the song and could not just be done for the sake of a spectacle.

These thematic spectacles are more apparent in the lip-sync for the crown. This format to decide the show's winner has been in place since season nine, the first season to be on VH1. Prior to this season, winners were usually selected based on the number of wins they had throughout the season. That said, season nine had some memorable lip-syncs, some notably for being bad. For example, one contestant, Charlie Hides, did not move while performing an upbeat Britney Spears song, arguing that she was not a lip-sync performer. In another episode, fan-favorite Valentina lip-synced with a mask over her mouth. RuPaul then stops the lip-sync and tell Valentina, "Valentina, this is a lip-sync for your life we need to see your lips. Take that thing off of your mouth" (Charles, 2017). Valentina was using the mask as a cover for her not knowing the words to the song, or as another contestant points out "the seven word chorus" (Charles, 2017). Since these two notable lip-syncs were so bad, there was precedent to show how important lip-syncing is to being a drag queen.

Thus, the lip-sync for the crown was born. As RuPaul states at the start of the finale, "this season the lip syncs were on everybody's lips. […] So tonight for the first time in *Drag Race* Herstory, on this stage, our top four queens are going to have to lip sync for the crown" (Charles, 2017). This new challenge recentered the importance of lip-syncing to the audience and the contestants since now, it is how a winner is selected. While generally, the final queens always did have to lip-sync as part of the final episode, it was unclear to audiences to what extent the lip-

sync was important. However, this new format was very clear about the importance of lip-syncing and performance and the role it plays in RuPaul's vision of drag. However, what production failed to realize was that Sasha Velour was there to weaponize her MFA.

The audience saw a change in the lip-sync styles in the first performances. The first two contestants, Peppermint and Trinity the Tuck nee Taylor, select between two boxes to see what song they will perform. That means each contestant knows the songs ahead of time and must be prepared to lip-sync any of them. When the two start lip-syncing, the two do reveals, with Trinity revealing a body suit underneath her skirt, and Peppermint's outfit changes into a floor length dress and does a wig-reveal. These, however, are the amuse-bouche for the lip-sync to come. Sasha, who is famously a bald queen, walks on stage with a red wig and a red rose in hand. As the song starts, she starts to tear the rose apart. As the chorus starts, she starts, she removes a glove to reveal more rose petals. Then she takes the other glove off to reveal more rose petals. The second time the chorus starts, she removes her wig and rose petals stream out. The reveals are each timed with a moment of the song. She uses the reveals as a way of telling the story of the song.



Figure 35: Sasha Velour reveals the rose petals under her wig (Charles, 2017).

This moment, arguably, broke the show. As for each following lip-sync for the crown, each person tries to do a reveal. The train of thought is simple: since RuPaul appreciated the rose petal reveals, reveals must be the way to win. Even further, however, Sasha's reveal also meant that fans expected these types of reveals, not only within the show, but at their local drag bar. Fans expect drag queens to perform

to the caliber of the show. They expect to see the dips, also known as death drops, because the girls from *RuPaul's Drag Race* do them. Thus, the "common actions" of the minority of queens on the show, are expected from all queens throughout the country.

Ultimately, the show changes the habitus of the field. While it can accommodate difference, the show is more invested in a particular aesthetic and performance style. In many ways, *RuPaul's Drag Race* has restricted drag's potentiality. In making the artform more marketable, it has also narrowed the scope into what fans and marketers think good drag looks like. And yet in narrowing its own particular vision of drag, it has allowed an ecosystem of drag to start growing. *Drag Race* is no longer the singular reality competition series about drag queens. Competing properties, such as *Dragula* or *Camp Wannakiki*, can take advantage of *Drag Race'*s narrow view of drag and differentiate themselves by being more diverse. *Dragula* focuses more on alternative or underground drag, while *Camp Wannakiki* focuses more on camp. For example, both shows allowed trans-women to openly compete on the show before *Drag Race* did. Likewise, both streaming shows allow drag kings to compete, something that *RuPaul's Drag Race* does not allow. However, both these shows have a significantly smaller reach than *Drag Race*.

Gatekeepers

Thus, in a post-*Drag Race* world, the show restructures the field of drag. According to Bourdieu, the field is a space where a group shares the same interests and are all attempting to capture part of a specific capital. While each field has specific rules, Bourdieu observes that there is usually a struggle between dominators and new entrants. However, we do not see that at play within *RuPaul's Drag Race*. While previous research suggests that this dance was once at play (Newton, 1979), the show has restructured the field. Prior to the show, the field consisted of drag

queens competing with each other for economic capital, through wages and tips. While cultural capital did come into play, most of that capital was regional. Very few drag queens managed to get a national—let alone international—name for themselves. Yet, once the show was introduced, it added new players to the field, namely producers and advertisers.

New commercial logic was added to the field. To go back to the anecdote at the start of the chapter, Jasmine states that she went on the show to "get a goddamn pay raise" (Masters, 2016). There is thus economic incentive to get on the show. Fan favorite Latrice Royale states in an interview that before appearing on the show, she charge 125-250 dollars for a show; however, after appearing on the show she charged 800-1,500 (Aron, 2023). Even then she notes, now she charges more for appearances. Winning the show is no longer as important. Rather, queens want to win the hearts of the fans watching at home. By winning their hearts, queens can also win their dollars. The cultural capital garnered from being on the show does translate to an economic gain for these contestants.

However, these gains are only possible should they bow down to their new cultural overlord. The demands and internalized structures of the show impacts drag as a whole. Some queens, including former contestants have spoken out about the conformity the show demands. For example, Lady Bunny—a New York icon and friend of RuPaul—states in an interview "there is practically a uniform now, where your nose has to have the hieroglyphics painted on it to make it look absolute as small as possible, there has to be highlighter here, you have to be padded a certain way" (Sasson, 2018). Lady Bunny addresses the similarity in drag makeup trends. The shadow and light has to hit in just the right place to make the illusion work, not only for RuPaul, but also for the fans at home. In the same article, Dusty Ray Bottoms likewise comments on the uniformity noting that "if anything, *Drag Race* has created a uniform, it would be the fans that

have created a negative attitude with how they handle us and other fans" (Sasson, 2018). However, while both Lady Bunny and Dusty point at fans as the source of the conformity, fans merely echo what they hear on the show. For many audience members, *RuPaul's Drag Race* is their only stepping stone into drag. As such, the show functions as a gatekeeper for what is considered viable drag.

Drag Race functions as a gatekeeper for drag in multiple ways. *RuPaul's Drag Race* is a cultural gatekeeper in the most traditional definition; they are a one-way line of communication to the audience that tells them what good drag is supposed to look like. In calling the show the "Olympics of drag," the audience is meant to think that each batch of queens is the best in the nation. These queens are worthy enough to be on the show, and therefore must be good at drag. There are three main ways the show highlights their authority over drag. First, it makes the queens go through the audition process. By the very nature of the genre, there can only be so many queens on any given season. The show creates a scarcity of this resource. Thus, if a queen is able to get on the show, they must be good at drag. Then, it defines good drag as a queen who can meet the show's challenges and impress the judges. But perhaps the stronger form of identifying good drag is RuPaul's presence. RuPaul's social capital, as the most successful drag queen of all time, or as he said in a 2023 interview with Jimmy Fallon "the queen of drag," gives credence that he knows what good drag is. RuPaul's tastes and preferences for drag are strategically used throughout the series. Even though fans state that production chooses who wins, within the context of the show, RuPaul always reminds us that while he might take the judges' critiques into consideration, he alone makes the final decision. Even in the bottom two lip-sync, he states, "this is your last chance to impress me." RuPaul is positioned as the ultimate arbiter of drag. RuPaul is the ultimate gatekeeper.

The show as a whole, however, is yet another gatekeeper. World of Wonder and the show are gatekeepers that tells advertisers what queens are safe to work with. The show has vetted their queens and shaped them for advertisers to use. This explains why advertisers only utilize *Drag Race* queens in their campaigns. For example, the two previous national campaigns I mentioned earlier in this chapter—Pepsi and Sabra—used former *Drag Race* contestants. Likewise, Lush, an international cosmetics company, featured three former contestants in their 2018 Christmas campaign: Detox, Kim Chi, and Shea Couleé. Interestingly, most of the queens utilized in these campaigns were on *Drag Race* after the show switched from Logo to VH1. Kim Chi is the notable exception, as she was on the last Logo season. However, at this point, the show was considered a cultural success and was wildly successful, so that means that these queens come with an added bonus of a built in national audience.



Figure 36: Shea Couleé for Lush Cosmetics.

Cultural and Political Stakes

"There's a line from [RuPaul] that haunts me, a single line from [season three]:" "but is she too regional" (Logan, 2014; Charles, 2011). In the finale of the third season, RuPaul voices her concern over Alexis Matteo's "regional" drag. She is too Florida. What did RuPaul mean by this? What was too Florida about Alexis' drag? All I can gather is that she was too "cha-cha," as Santino puts it, but that was more about Alexis Puerto Rican-ness. Alexis' "reginal" drag, ultimately, cost her the crown, over her more cosmopolitan competitors, who were from New York and Los Angeles.

A reddit post from about seven years ago identifies seven distinct regions of drag, each with their own unique take on the artform. For example, they identify New York as a place where the quick-witted queens come from, whereas Los Angeles features polished queens. The South produces pageant queens, and artsy queens come from Chicago (lukendyer, 2016). This taxonomy is of course limiting, but it does highlight how each different region of the United States has their own take on the artform based around the constraints of the region. For example, New York queens have stated in interviews that because there is generally no dressing room in clubs, they get ready at home and only wear one outfit for their numbers. Queens from Los Angeles do get dressing rooms, so they get ready at the bar, if possible, and bring multiple outfits and accessories, including wigs. While some of these constraints might not be lost, *Drag Race* sets the expectation that queens—regardless if they have been on the show or not—must have multiple outfits throughout the night. This therefore creates an economic burden on some queens, especially newer queens, as they might not be able to afford multiple, new outfits.

What is lost is the unique sense of self-expression of drag. If newer generations think that getting on the show is the ultimate goal of drag, then they are more likely to conform to the show's standards. As journalist E. Alex Jung notes, "To become a successful drag queen on the show requires adhering to certain principles: a budget and an eye for high fashion, a dexterity with stan culture, a broad sense of humor, telegenic timing, and an embrace of RuPaul's self-help gospel" (2016). The show's ultimate goal is to, after all, find the next drag superstar, or, to put it another way, the next RuPaul. What the show seeks then, is the essence of RuPaul, but within the contestants. Thus, drag, therefore, has to fit in the image of Ru. The show in many ways a vehicle for reproduction.

While drag has never been outside of capitalist constraints, the show draws the two worlds closer than they have ever been. The new demands of a seemingly more tolerant market demand that visible symbols of queerness to be accessible to use. The desire to do drag no longer comes from a sense of political stakes or artistic vision, but rather because one wants to be financially successful. Instead of drag being a tool for self-fulfillment, it is a method of economic security.

In order to fulfill this economic security, however, drag has to be visible, but not too risqué or out there. Drag needs its political teeth pulled out. As mentioned in earlier chapters, there have been political challenges, but they are usually are comedic. Generally, these political challenges—seen in seasons four (2012), eight (2016), and twelve (2020)—occur in election years. Season eleven (2019), also featured a semi-political challenge with "Trump: the Rusical," a musical about Donald Trump and his administration. Seasons four and twelve challenged the queens to debate each other in a fake presidential campaign for the Wig Party. Season eight had the queens create smear campaigns. And while discussions of AIDS and LGBTQ+ rights are discussed within the werk-room, they do not make their way to the final challenge. The Rusical was written and performed by producers, so the queens mostly just need to lip-sync and dance. These challenges are not about politics, but rather are about being comedic.

This tendency to de-politicize drag also extends to the show's own political stakes. The show is left-leaning by nature of being a queer show, but the show takes a centrist position to a lot of political points. For example, the end of the Trump Rusical ends with a general call to get more women in politics. In season 12 (2020), Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez sat on the judges panel for "Madonna: the Unauthorized Rusical." RuPaul introduces her as a "ray of light in the US Congress," with the "ray of light" being an allusion to Madonna's song. When Ru

asks her what her favorite song is Ocasio-Cortez responds with “why ‘True Blue’ of course,” which is again another reference to a Madonna song (Charles, 2020). RuPaul just laughs, but does not respond. This is the most political she gets on the show. Interestingly, she was not there to judge the presidential debate challenge only two episodes later. It is unclear if the reason she did not judge that episode is because of scheduling issues or she just didn’t want to.

Likewise, Nancy Pelosi has made two short appearances on the show. She was first in the werk-room in 2018 for *All Stars* 3. She walks in to the werk-room with RuPaul who introduces her as a “Democratic leader” and then tells the contestants about her long history with the LGBTQ community. She tells the queens that they “an inspiration” and to “remember their power” (Charles, 2018). She then reminds the queens, although arguably she is telling the audience at home, about the importance of voting. After Pelosi’s pep-talk, we get a cut to Trixie Mattel who states that every time anyone gets in drag, it is a political statement. She then states that she feels hopeful because Nancy Pelosi came to the show. Pelosi made another surprise appearance on *All Stars* season 7 (2022). After the judges’ critiques, RuPaul introduces Pelosi on the mainstage. Once again, she encouraged audiences to register to vote. Pelosi also did also praise the contestants of the season for being positive representations of the LGBTQ+ community.

The show's main political stake is relatively safe For example, starting in season twelve, each episode ends with at least one contestant holding a sign that says "register to vote" with the website "vote.gov" underneath. The show never tells the audience who to vote for, or what campaigns to support. It is just a call to register to vote. This is arguably a centrists take to have for a show about the queer-community. Likewise, any actual commentary, as we saw with Trixie Mattel, is generally subsumed under a hopeful or upbeat tone about the power of drag. What exactly that power is, however, is generally more individualistic than it is political. The show never argues how drag can be political. It can help you overcome your "inner saboteur" as RuPaul likes to preach. Drag, in that sense, is not political, but rather a tool for self-improvement. In a way, the show removed drag from the local community and makes it an individual activity. But this is a safe way to present politics without alienating any possible advertiser.



Figure 37: Crystal Methyd with the voting sign (Charles, 2020).

While outside of the scope of this project, during my time writing, there were calls from right-wing politicians to ban drag. Republican politicians claimed that drag kings and queens were grooming children through their performances. Even events like Drag Story Hours, in which drag queens read books to children, were labeled as sexual. However, most activists were quick to point out that these drag bans had little to do with drag, but about trans people, and right-wing politicians were purposefully conflating the two (Gabbatt, 2023). While there are some trans people who do drag, not all drag performers are trans. These drag bans are, in my opinion, an attempt at a moral panic. These attempted bans merely point to an ever growing

anxiety on the right about trans people and their existence. But they also speak to the deep cultural divide in this country.

To their credit, *RuPaul's Drag Race*, World of Wonder, and MTV did donate to the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) Drag Defense Fund. Likewise, during the season 15 finale, which was outside the corpus for this study, the show RuPaul highlighted some gay clubs in states where drag bans were being pushed, such as Tennessee, Texas, and Florida. Likewise, the show had a QR code that would show up periodically to get viewers at home to donate to the Defense Fund.

The future of drag?

What does this all mean for the future of drag? There are still, of course, queens who are political. For example, Los Angeles performer Maebe A. Girl became the first drag queen elected to public office in 2019. She is currently the Representative-At-Large and Treasurer for the Silver Lake Neighborhood Council. Likewise, queens who have been on the show are also politically active. Former season five contestant Honey Mahogany became the first transgender person to serve on the San Francisco Democratic County Central Commission, and also ran for district supervisor. Season eight winner Bob the Drag Queen is also politically active. They, alongside former season nine contestant Peppermint, started the Black Queer Town Hall non-profit, which "is committed to celebrating black [sic] queer excellence by supporting and cultivating community, sharing knowledge, and uplifting voices" (BQTH, 2023). The inaugural event featured speakers like Laverne Cox and Dr. Angela Davis, and raised over 150,000 dollars.

However, these events all happen outside the show and only after the queens have already competed. On the show, Bob had previously discussed being arrested in drag for protesting for LGBTQ+ rights and, thus, did make it part of their brand. However, politics therefore is

something that can be part of a drag queen's brand, but not intrinsic to the field. This separation makes it easier to identify a queen who is interested in activism and politics than someone who is just interested in the fame and money. Likewise, this split also provides advertisers a good sense of who to work with. Each queen will have their own brand, which might lend itself to what audience they want to reach.

As it currently stands, drag is the most visual marker of queerness. A drag queen is a stronger symbol of queerness than two men or women standing next to each other. It makes sense that conservatives might want to attack drag queens as part of the ongoing culture wars because drag queens are meant to be visible. However, because drag queens make a small part of a minority population, really what they are attacking is the growing tolerance and acceptance of the queer community. Not many brands have worked with drag queens outside of *RuPaul's Drag Race*. When brands do work with them, it is usually during Pride Month and maybe Queer History Month. If anything, the show has given the marketers a way to rainbow wash their brands, which again is more about being seen tolerant of the queer community rather than celebrating and embracing a queer audience. Ultimately, both advertisers and conservatives use drag queens as a short hand for queers.

Drag Race might have made drag a global phenomenon, but the future of drag is not within the Werk Room. I agree with Cameron Crookston (2021) when they state, "in an effort to sell a commercially viable and politically simplified version of drag, *Drag Race* has attempted to draw clean, often exclusive lines around what constitutes drag, and in doing so perpetuated transphobic and trans-exclusive elements of drag" (Crookston, p. 3). The show is too narrow-minded in what they define as drag. The other international franchises of the show, namely those without RuPaul hosting them, are more progressive in their interpretations of drag. *Drag Race:*

Holland, for example featured a bearded queen. *Drag Race: Thailand* featured trans contestants and even crowned a plus-sized queen winner before the US version did (the US version has never crowned a plus-sized queen as a winner). And even while I finished writing this chapter, *Drag Race: Germany* just crowned the first, assigned-female-at-birth queen the winner. What holds the tentpole show back is the namesake of the show: RuPaul.

The globalization of drag shows us all that drag is already everywhere. The vestiges of the main show can translate internationally. While it might change languages and judges, the same bones are present. The international aspect of the show, however, raises new questions for research, particularly when it comes to politics. The show can exist in places that are socially conservative and liberal, like *España* and *Mexico* for example. Likewise, they can get unique sponsors for their products that the US franchise might not be able to get. For example, *Drag Race: Mexico* was partly sponsored by Sprite soda. The globalization of drag opens new doors for research.

So, What is the Tea, Christine? Reprise

Let's Go back to the research questions I asked at the start of this project and see how I answered them. My first question asked, "How do economic influences shape the way that drag is performed on RPDR?" Jeffery Moran was perhaps the most important figure in shaping how drag is performed within the show, as his feedback in those early seasons was mostly about how the queens could operate within the market. That then leads to my first sub-question: "Who are the key players in policing how drag is performed?" The key players in policing drag are Absolut for the first five seasons, but then it switches to RuPaul and World of Wonder. Ultimately, these two are the strongest regulating force in the field of drag. In many ways, the show is reminiscent to Michelangelo's Creation of Adam. The queens' ability to impress RuPaul therefore impacts

their ability to succeed within the show. The queens who are best at branding themselves with easily recognizable imagery or style succeed or do the best on the show. Likewise, the show's standardization of drag means those who are capable of replicating the show's preferred aesthetics and performance styles will more than likely win. But infusing the show with market logic, did likewise negatively impact the field. Shifting the show from clubs to television has in many ways depoliticized the artform. While the show might have shown more varied types of drag while it was on a niche network, as it moved to larger networks—and therefore larger audiences—the show narrowed down what it defined as good drag. Likewise, as the rise of social media becomes more important, older queens who are not familiar with these media are not engaged as much by the audience.

But that wasn't my only question. I also was interested in seeing the change in the show's changing audience. I believe Drag Con's attendance statistics are telling. The audience is predominately female. We likewise see that given the sponsorships within the show, advertisers also believe that women are the primary audience. As the audience shifts from predominately queer men to predominately straight women, the show grows to showcase more fashion-forward queens. This then has economic repercussions for the queens. Queens with a larger fan following can translate their social capital to economic capital. They are more likely to do tours (either alone or with a group) and are more likely to do well at Drag Con. On the other hand, queens who are not as popular are not able to benefit from the show's exposure.

Ultimately, this silly little show that started out in a basement in Hollywood has exposed this beautiful artform to the world. No one back in 2009 knew how the show would be received, or perhaps how many lives it would change. How could I have known that in 14 years, I would

be writing this project about drag queens. I guess what I am trying to say is best said by Alaska Thunderfuck 5000: “Anus-thing is possible.”

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