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Drag, Family, and Cultural Transformation: How Drag Reality TV Influences Belonging and Identity in the Filipino LGBTQ+ Community

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Abstract

Background: Drag has transitioned from a subcultural performance to a mainstream phenomenon, reshaping discourses on identity, family, and belonging. In the Philippines, global drag formats intersect with collectivist cultural values, raising questions about empowerment, community, and tensions in representation.

Methods: Guided by Moscovici's Social Representations Theory, this study employed a qualitative transcendental phenomenological design. Six drag performers and five audience members from diverse Philippine regions participated through semi-structured interviews and online focus group discussions. Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method).

Results: Findings reveal that drag's visibility fosters empowerment, familial acceptance, and solidarity through alternative kinship structures and community support. Audiences described drag as a source of representation and inspiration. However, tensions emerged as Western competition formats emphasizing individualism conflicted with Filipino collectivist values. Performers also reported challenges linked to public scrutiny and heightened visibility.

Conclusion: Drag in the Philippine context functions as both an empowering and contested cultural force. While it cultivates belonging, advocacy, and resilience, it also exposes contradictions between local cultural values and globalized representations. These insights underscore drag's evolving role in advancing acceptance while negotiating its complexities in society.

Keywords: Drag culture, Mainstreaming, Community and belonging, Social Representations Theory, LGBTQ+ visibility

Introduction

Drag is a multifaceted phenomenon that has been theorized as an artistic expression, a political act, and a profession. Early studies positioned it as a form of female impersonation (Newton, 1972), while Butler (1990) described it as a parody of gender that destabilizes binary logics. Beyond performance, drag has emerged as a transformative cultural practice that shapes identities, relationships, and social belonging. Its global mainstreaming, most prominently through *RuPaul's Drag Race* (RPDR) and local adaptations such as *Drag Race Philippines* and *Drag Den*, has moved drag from exclusive nightclubs to widely accessible media platforms. This transition underscores drag's capacity to redefine social norms, not only in public discourse but also in the intimate terrains of community and kinship.

In the Philippine context, the globalization of drag has introduced both opportunities and tensions. Studies show that drag is often an individual's first exposure to queer artistry (Madrangca, 2021), with its appeal rooted in creativity, humor, and spectacle. Filipino drag has flourished in diverse forms, from local barangay pageants (Lopez, 2023; Roman-Tamesis, 2023) to mainstream entertainment (Leon & Jinatalan, 2018; Ramirez, 2023). Yet, its heavy borrowing from Western competition formats emphasizes individualism and rivalry (LeMaster, 2015), which may conflict with the collectivist values that characterize Filipino communities. At the same time, drag's visibility has fostered new avenues of acceptance, with families and audiences beginning to recognize drag not only as performance but also as a site of advocacy, identity affirmation, and relational transformation (Sopitarchasak, 2023).

Despite its positive reception and growing cultural presence, drag in the Philippines remains subject to contested meanings. Public controversies—such as reactions to performances by Pura Luka Vega (CNN, 2023)—highlight the persistent struggles of drag performers to negotiate authenticity, advocacy, and acceptance within a society strongly shaped by religious and traditional values. These conflicts reveal that drag is more than an aesthetic act; it is inherently relational, shaping how performers and audiences navigate belonging within families, peer networks, and broader communities. This study therefore examines how the mainstreaming of drag through media influences experiences of community and belonging among Filipino drag artists and audiences. By attending to these dynamics, it contributes to understanding drag not only as an art form, but as a cultural force that builds solidarity, fosters acceptance, and challenges entrenched social norms in the Philippine context.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative transcendental phenomenological (TPh) approach, drawing on Husserl's framework as outlined by Moustakas (1994). TPh was chosen for its capacity to capture the meanings of lived experiences while setting aside researcher bias through *epoché*. This design was appropriate for examining how drag performers and audiences in the Philippines perceive the mainstreaming of drag culture as a social representation.

A total of eleven participants were recruited through purposive sampling: six drag performers (aged 21-39, $M = 26.7$; drag experience 1-8 years) and five audience members (aged 20-25, $M = 22$; drag viewing experience 3-9 years). Participants were drawn from various regions across the Philippines to capture diverse perspectives. Inclusion criteria required performers to have at least one year of experience in drag and audiences to have regularly watched drag shows for at least one year.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with performers and online focus group discussions with audiences, allowing participants to elaborate on their experiences and perceptions of drag's increasing visibility. All interviews were conducted online or in person, depending on participant preference. Questions addressed exposure to drag, perceptions of mainstreaming (e.g., *RuPaul's Drag Race*, *Drag Race Philippines*), and its impact on identity, relationships, and cultural acceptance. Ethical approval was secured, informed consent was obtained, and confidentiality was ensured throughout.

Analysis followed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) using the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method (Moustakas, 1994), which involved identifying significant statements, developing textural ("what") and structural ("how") descriptions, and constructing composite themes. Rigor was established through Lincoln and Guba's (1985) trustworthiness framework, employing triangulation, member checking, peer debriefing, reflexivity, and thick description.

Given the sensitive nature of gender and sexuality research, additional ethical safeguards were observed, including participant anonymity, voluntary participation, and provision of mental health support resources. Incentives were provided to drag performers to recognize their professional time. The researchers declare no conflict of interest.

Findings

Drag queens believed that the impact of drag TV shows is not limited to diversification and popularity, as it may also influence attitudes, especially in interpersonal relationships and the perceived value of drag, which may be altered by drag shows to become less of a responsibility and more of a need to be validated. LeMaster (2015) has noted that the show promotes individualization and

competition as primary logics of liberation, potentially reinforcing patriarchal domination and failing to address the needs of queer bodies that don't conform to mainstream expectations. This suggests that in order to liberate oneself from the bonds of society (i.e., norms and values), one has to incentivize one's self-expression and confidence to penetrate the barrier.

MH points to *RPDR* as a factor as to why many drag artists, particularly young drag queens who favor competition, or an individualistic attitude, are in contrast to what used to be a close-knit family; this is perhaps since Western-based drag shows highly revere these individualistic attitudes which may not be applicable in a predominantly collectivistic culture like the Philippines.

***H:** Dati kapag nahihirapan ang isang drag queen tutulungan mo. Ngayon, competition, hindi ka p'wedeng magkaroon ng dull moments. Nag-start 'yan nung nag-trend ang RuPaul's, like these baby queens really empowers yung culture ng America na I am this, I am that. You're just that. [Before, if a drag queen was struggling, you would help them. Now, competition, you can't have dull moments. It started when RuPaul became trendy, like these baby queens really empower the [culture]. The American culture of 'I am this, I am that.' You're just that.]*

The unique structures of drag shows offer volatility for their highly competitive environment, which fosters a culture of hate and resentment where drag queens may face judgment based on a perceived scene in drag shows.

***HR:** At the same time, ayoko lang talaga ang competition format is that some people would actually drag you based on your slip in your TV show. Like you can be a great drag queen pero if you fail during that show, sa shows parang 'yun na 'yung takot ko sa lahat na ang hirap nung redemption after. [At the same time, what I don't really like about the competition format is that some people will really tear you down based on a slip-up you have on the TV show. Like, you can be a great drag queen, but if you fail during that show, in those shows, that's my biggest fear – how hard the redemption is afterward.]*

However, for drag audiences, they pointed out the positive implications of the show's format, emphasizing how it can be a space for artists to celebrate with their families and advocate their beliefs.

JV: Parang everytime na may mga challenge din sila, nagbibigay din sila ng statement. Hindi lang siya challenge na magsuot ng ganyan. Parang they create an impactful na experience. Doon nila ginagamit yung art nila. Hindi lang dahil drag queen sila, parang you know they are there to fight something, siguro na pati ikaw na audience is parang "Ay kailangan ko 'tong ipaglaban," mga ganung moments ba. [It's like every time they have challenges, too, they also give a statement. It's not just a challenge to wear this. It's like they create an impactful experience. That's where they use their art. It's not just because they're drag queens, it's like you know they are there to fight something, maybe that even you as the audience are like, "Oh, I need to fight for this too," those kinds of moments.]

J: Yes, kasi naman diba 'yung like minsan sa mga member ng LGBTQ hindi masyadong accepted ng family ganun, which medyo relatable din ako dun kasi hindi pa 100% sure na ano "ay accepted ako" ganun. Heartfelt moment talaga na napa teary-eye pa talaga ako kapag nangyayari sa TV ganun. I love that. [Yes, because you know, like sometimes members of the LGBTQ aren't really accepted by their family, like that, which I can also kind of relate to because I'm not 100% sure if "oh, I'm accepted," like that. It's really a heartfelt moment that even makes me teary-eyed when it happens on TV, like that. I love that.]

Advocacy within drag often extends beyond public platforms and into the intimate realms of family and loved ones. While drag artists may struggle to assert power and visibility in broader society, they also frequently face challenges in being accepted within their households. Sopitarchasak (2023) has noted how drag queens are often ostracized by their families due to their lifestyle and sexuality, but later reconcile. While no distinguishable causal factor can be attributed to this shift, the results of the study offered a certain degree of clarity. It seems that the political and advocative role of drag is reflected not just in the social milieus, but among the families of drag performers themselves, underscoring how understanding and awareness are transmitted to parents and relatives who, because of mainstreaming, have begun to accept them for who they are. In a sense, drag is inherently relational—it cultivates openness, not only in public expression but also in personal relationships. The social spaces it creates allow individuals to feel seen, accepted, and loved. **MT** describes the visibility and growing discourse of queer art were key factors in her family's acceptance, in a way that reflects on her experiences as both a human and a drag queen.

MT: *With the visibility of Drag Reality TV, my family understood, at least, or heard my story, the end of my story even though, just a certain chunk of it, that they're more open into conversations of my queerness, my art itself. Kasi parang before, they don't get it, the drag, they don't get the drag. Parang nung pandemic lang nila bahagyang na-gets na " Ah okay, nagli-livestream siya, tapos nagbibihis siya ng ganito nagbibihis siya ng ganyan" na it's fun, it looks fun, it looks interesting, tapos parang you make money out of something that's interesting, parang ganun yun, yun yung unang vision nila to it . Tapos parang later on, mas nagegets nila na ah okay, ganito ganyan, tapos parang yung mga pinsan ko ngayon, drag fans na, nakakatuwa lang, so parang ganun siya na it brought me to my family closer per se. [With the visibility that drag reality TV brought, my family at least heard my story, or a part of it, and became more open to conversations about my queerness and my art. Before, they didn't really understand drag. It was only during the pandemic that they started to get a glimpse - "ah, okay, he's livestreaming, dressing up like this and that, it looks fun, interesting, and he's making money from it." That was their initial understanding. Later on, they grasped it more, and now even my cousins are drag fans, which is heartwarming. So, in a way, it brought me closer to my family.]*

Evidently, with family becoming part of the discussion, it can be said that the politics of drag is deeply personal in that it entails the experiences of individuals towards societal dynamics. Another area of concern is to understand the experiences of systemic issues of prejudice and discrimination. As such, drag queens have described their experience as dwelling into the narrative of drag as an assertion of their rights. Calderon (2021) posits that drag performances often serve as a platform for political commentary and advocacy, disrupting binary gender expressions and eliciting collective memory within marginalized communities. This collective memory serves to guide drag queens as they take on the heavy and crucial role of dismantling discriminatory social norms that continue to oppress them.

Consequently, drag's increased visibility strengthened the bravery of the younger generations in pursuing what they truly love. With parents who understand the nature of their art, these young people are further supported in feeling there's nothing wrong with their actions, such as their drag acts.

HR: *I love that a lot of people have their especially the community kasi hindi lang naman LGBT ang nag dra-drag. Pero for the young LGBT members, parang I'm so happy na meron silang representation, I mean, unlike us na we try to discover and we try to hide whatever we are feeling. That we have*

kumot na ginagamit namin and it's always inside the bedrooms lang and for a young queer to see us, to see the mainstream drag queens in their televisions, in their cellphones na "Uy, I'm inspired by this, maybe I can do it and I will tell my parents about it." Even the parents are more open, because thank you to Vice, diba? Si Vice Ganda naman and Paolo na nagpakita sa mainstream, sila 'yung unang nagpakita nung sa mainstream na ano eh na it's okay to be gay, there's nothing wrong about being gay [I love that a lot of people are involved, especially within the community, because it's not just LGBT people who do drag. But for young LGBT members, I'm so happy they have representation. I mean, unlike us, who had to discover ourselves and hide our feelings, using blankets as cover in our bedrooms, young queer people now see mainstream drag queens on TV and their phones and think, "Wow, I'm inspired by this, maybe I can do it, and I'll tell my parents." Even parents are more open now, thanks to people like Vice Ganda and Paolo, who showed the mainstream that it's okay to be gay, and there's nothing wrong with it.]

A participant also emphasizes the importance of the relationship they have within the community. These social networks, often formed through shared performance spaces and events, functioned as alternative families or support systems. Within these communities, individuals experienced collective empowerment, as they could engage in mutual affirmation, mentorship, and collaborative growth.

MH: *Ta's 'yun, before hindi talaga uso ang drag family, walang drag house, nung nagi-start kami. Tapos parang na realized namin na kami-kami na lang din 'yung nagtutulungan, kapag may raket 'yung isa raket na din ng lahat ganun. Hindi p'wede 'yung solo ka lang kasi nga kapag may kailangan ka naman 'yung circle mo na 'yun sila din 'yung malalapitan mo parang ganyan. So, "ma, top gown kailangan ko ng ganito ganyan" "oh, eto nak hiram mo". Tapos pag 'yung momshie mo naman, 'yung mother mother namin noon, "nak, kailangan ko dalawa para sa ano, mag back-up sa akin ganyan sa raket ganyan" "ay, go ma!" ganun. Parang ano lang din give and take 'yung process. [Yeah, back when we were starting out, drag families, houses, and all that weren't really a thing. We soon realized we only had each other to rely on. If one of us got a gig, we all did, in a way. You couldn't really go solo because if you needed something, that circle of people was who you'd approach. It was like, 'Ma, I need a top gown,' and they'd say, 'Oh, here you go, child, you can borrow it.' Then, if our 'momshie,' our mother figure back then, needed two people to back her up for a gig, we'd say, 'Oh, go, Ma!' It was very much a give-and-take process.]*

For drag audiences, the visibility of drag helps improve their relationship with their family and friends as they gain a comprehensive perception of the culture itself. In turn, they get to establish themselves within their immediate relationships that "who they are" is *normal*, enabling them to feel seen and to gain more confidence in the process:

R: *Sa ibang tao naman, siguro ito 'yung ano sa family ko since natutunan na rin nila ako i-accept ganun. Sinasabi ko pa sakanila "Ma, ganito 'yung drag race. Ganito 'yung ginagawa nila." And with that na-open 'yung mind nila na it's also normal na ganito ako.* [For other people, maybe this is what my family does since they've learned to accept me like that. I even tell them "Mom, this is how drag race is. This is how they do it." And with that, their minds were opened that it's also normal for me to be like that.]

JV: *Mas nagiging open ako, mas naging open na ako sa mga kaibigan ko, sa mga family ko ganun. Just like them kasi yung iba kasi parang naiiyak ka sa mga episode na mag-ooout pa lang sila as a drag queen.* [I'm becoming more open, I've become more open with my friends, with my family, like that. Just like them because there are some episodes that would make you want to cry because they were just about to come out as a drag queen.]

An audience also emphasized how drag fosters visibility and a sense of belongingness. Knowing that others are "aware that there's someone like you" affirms one's presence in social spaces, reducing feelings of isolation and empowering individuals to walk with greater self-assurance in public. In this way, drag becomes a mirror through which viewers see themselves reflected, validated, and uplifted. As **JL** recounts:

JL: *I think after nag-watch kami ng drag, alam mo yung nakakaboost ng confidence sa sarili ko kasi lalakad ka sa may siguro, sa may crowd ng tao, confident kang lumakad dun kasi aware sila na may isang katulad mo ganun.* [I think after we started watching drag, it boosts my self-confidence because you can walk in, say, a crowd of people, and you feel confident walk in there because they're aware that there's someone like you, like that.]

Drag, particularly through TV shows, has profoundly shaped the landscape of the community and belonging among Filipino drag artists and audiences. While it introduces tensions between the collectivist values and individualistic portrayals of drag, it simultaneously creates visibility, fosters familial understanding, and cultivates social spaces where queer individuals not only feel seen but are affirmed as well. Drag, in this context, is a cultural force that challenges societal norms, bridges

generational gaps, and strengthens relational ties. Through shared stories, lived experiences, and collective affirmation, drag becomes a powerful medium for both cultural and personal transformation.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the mainstreaming of drag in the Philippines has profoundly influenced experiences of community and belonging among performers and audiences. Increased visibility through media has fostered familial acceptance, strengthened queer kinship networks, and empowered younger generations to embrace their identities with pride. At the same time, tensions remain, as Western drag's competitive and individualistic frameworks often clash with collectivist Filipino values, and performers continue to face scrutiny, discrimination, and the risk of being reduced to entertainment.

Anchored in Moscovici's Social Representations Theory, the findings reveal that while shared representations of drag are largely positive; centered on empowerment, advocacy, and cultural visibility; they also contain contradictions between collectivism and individualism, empowerment and commodification. Despite these challenges, drag continues to function as a powerful medium for cultural transformation, cultivating spaces of acceptance and belonging that extend beyond performance into family and community life.

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