

AUDIENCE DIVERSITY AND WELL-BEING AT UK DRAG EVENTS

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Over the last 15 years, there has been a significant increase in the promotion and integration of drag culture into mainstream society. Drag events have the ability to create a safe place for people from diverse backgrounds to celebrate and gather. What were once underground expressions of gender and political protest for the LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, plus other identities) community, drag events have now transcended into a modern-day phenomenon, bringing people together to participate and feel a sense of enjoyment and well-being. The current literature on drag culture focuses on the performers' perspective rather than the audiences. This study aims to explore the diverse nature of attendees at UK drag events and to demonstrate how these events create a sense of inclusivity and impact the well-being of those attending. An online qualitative survey of respondents ($N = 248$) who had attended at least one drag event in the UK was carried out. This was a UK study that encompassed experiences from across the country. This focus on the UK is justified due to the dearth of literature in this geographical area. The results indicate that drag events in the UK have become more mainstream, with the audience demographic becoming more diverse and inclusive. Drag events were considered by the attendees as a safe space, where they seek escapism from everyday life by immersing themselves in the drag experience. This enhanced their mental and emotional well-being. The study demonstrated that drag events provide an exciting, stimulating, and novel experience where individuals have a place for self-expression, can socialize, have fun, be accepted, and feel a sense of freedom and happiness in a nonjudgmental environment.

Key words: Drag; Drag events; Diversity; Inclusivity; Well-being

Introduction

The once taboo and underground concept of drag (Moncrieff & Lienard, 2017; Santone, 2019; Waltz, 2020), initially celebrated in the underground

culture of the LGBTQ+ community has, over the last 10 years, become more conspicuously mainstream and has seen growth in worldwide popularity (Deron, 2018). The concept is now considered more of an art form for entertainment (Brennan

& Gudelunas, 2017). Drag queens, traditionally defined as female impersonators, “differ from transsexuals and individuals with transvestite fetishisms in that they are gay individuals who don female clothing with the explicit goal of performing in front of audiences” (Schacht, 2000, as cited in Moncrieff & Lienard, 2017, p. 2). Drag is a performance that seeks to entertain audiences through comedy and an exaggerated male to female illusion. Drag culture has permeated mainstream society (Montgomery, 2019), making it less taboo and an acceptable art form. There has been a considerable growth in drag events celebrated across Western societies.

Events have the ability to create a sense of place and escapism for those choosing to experience them (Hemmatinezhad et al., 2010; Lee et al., 2004; Nicholson & Pearce, 2001; Park et al., 2008). This can enhance their well-being, which is an area of research that has recently emerged in more depth (Filo & Coghlan, 2016). Events are enormously successful in bringing communities of like-minded people together to celebrate societal constructs in which they are committed. This affords those in attendance the opportunity to realize they are not alone in their beliefs, showing that others share the same views. Thus, the audiences themselves play an important role in their communal well-being.

The concept of well-being has transcended its once physical understanding, to the wider consideration that it is also closely associated with mental well-being (Kim, 2012). Well-being is a complex term and it affects many facets of our everyday life. Research has demonstrated that events can play an important role in supporting and exploring well-being within society (Brajša-Žganec et al., 2011; Filep et al., 2015; Filo & Coghlan, 2016; Packer & Ballantyne, 2011). As such, events are seen as an appropriate and effective tool to enhance the well-being of those participating, as they can create a space for communities to celebrate, escape the normalities of everyday life, and indulge in experiences that others may consider taboo.

The majority of existing research focuses on the perspectives of the drag performers and is predominantly based in the US. These studies have looked at drag performers (Moreman & McIntosh, 2010), drag events and gender (Brown, 2001; Dougherty, 2017; Rupp et al., 2010), and drag events and sexuality (Rupp, 2016; Sandoval, 2018). However, there

are no empirical studies that seek to understand the role that drag events can have on the well-being of those attending. This study will seek to address this, looking at how drag event communities impact audience well-being, and whether the increased diversity of the demographic has also affected this.

Literature Review

Drag, What Is It?

The art of female impersonation, also known as “drag,” is a concept that lacks presence in academic literature. Although the literature associated with drag is somewhat limited, Mann (2011) discussed that it is not absent and the culture dates back to 1972. Grassroots drag has been fundamental in breaking down gender stereotypes (Bridges, 2010). It continues to create a network of support for the LGBTQ+ community, allowing them to advocate for gender equality and needs through the medium of art and performance (Levitt et al., 2018). The research that is readily available explores the ability that drag has on blurring the lines of gender (Mann, 2011); the power it has to communicate key societal issues such as gender discrimination (Berkowitz & Belgrave, 2010) and finally, how it is used as a voice to highlight LGBTQ+ marginalization within society (Mann, 2011). Hopkins (2004) discussed that drag, as a concept, is considered perverse and brings with it negative acceptability to those involved in this subset of society. Mann (2011) highlighted that there is a concerted need to continue to explore drag and drag culture in order to better understand the impact that it has on addressing issues with the current ideologies associated with gender, sexuality, and race. Thus, this can extend also to the impact that it can have on the mental well-being of those attending drag events.

Exploring the Commercialization of Drag

Drag would once have been identified as the type of event that was underground, taboo, and mainly attended by gay males. The 1990’s was when drag first made an impact in the mainstream media, beginning with the award-winning documentary film *Paris is Burning*, which explored the Harlem ballroom scene. Due to its success, it was referenced

in Madonna's hit single "Vogue," which featured the integration of the famous ballroom dance technique "Voguing" (Lawrence, 2013). This was a style first popularized by drag and queer artists in 1980 & 90's Harlem and was notable for its use of highly-stylized hand gestures and dramatic poses. There have also been other references to drag in various blockbuster films including *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* and *Mrs Doubtfire* (Kacala, 2020).

Over the last decade, the art form has exploded and gained undeniable acceptance and popularity, mainly due to RuPaul (D. Jordan, 2018). It is recognized that RuPaul's Drag Race (RPDR) has been the catalyst that created an opportunity to somewhat "proliferate" and "professionalize" drag (LeMaster, 2015). Although this is not an article directly discussing the influence that RPDR has had on drag culture in mainstream society, it is important to demonstrate that it has acted as a platform for addressing the archetype and negative perceptions of drag. Based on the TV show "America's Next Top Model," RPDR first aired in 2009 and sees drag performers compete to be the best in the USA and win the title of America's Next Drag Superstar (LeMaster, 2015). This award-winning show is available to worldwide audiences, with 49% of the audience for the ninth series being female (D. Jordan, 2018). This success led to the launch of a UK series in 2019, a Canadian and Dutch series in 2020, a US and UK convention, and international tours for many of the contestants. Other production companies have adapted the format Drag Race into their own TV shows, such as "Dragula," which also airs internationally. This has caused the careers of drag queens to transcend the Atlantic and gain celebrity status around the world, with regular TV and media appearances making this a viable professional career option in entertainment (Feldman & Hakim, 2020; Kravitz, 2018). International recording artists, such as Taylor Swift and Little Mix, have even recruited the services of previous RPDR contestants to feature in their music videos as a way to symbolize female empowerment. Some RuPaul stars have been given Netflix spin-off shows; for example, "Dancing Queen" with Alyssa Edwards.

Since its commencement, RPDR has allowed for the integration of drag into contemporary Western society (Nilles, 2018) and drag is now a queer phenomenon that is marketable and commercially

viable. This shift has led to drag events becoming more professionalized and engaging audiences with varying demographics. Prior to this, drag art had limited reference in mainstream culture (Montgomery, 2019). Now, performances range from full theatre-based "one woman" comedy shows to carefully choreographed high-end productions in Las Vegas, with multiple costume changes and polished dance routines. This has given these drag queens a platform to promote their art form and engage with new audiences, which has been fostered in the growth and demand for local, national, and international drag events across the UK. Although this is in part due to RPDR, there are some who are critical of the impact that the show has had on drag culture, believing these performance slots are now reserved largely for the highly conspicuous performers from the show and have thus created a barrier to local drag communities (Kelaidis, 2018; Oliver, 2018). Despite this criticism, RPDR has been the platform that has allowed people to celebrate this art around the world, while still providing a popular outlet for the LGBTQ+ community and, more widely, their supporters (Parslow, 2019). With drag breaking boundaries becoming a global phenomenon and being adopted by mainstream society, there has been an increase in live drag events across the UK.

As drag has become an art form celebrated in popular culture, it has created a heightened awareness for those who may never have been exposed to it previously. RPDR, movies and music videos have portrayed the art form in a more positive light and in doing so, it has permeated consumer culture. Companies such as MAC, Ikea, Lush, and Absolut have all used drag queens in key advertising campaigns. Global fashion magazine *Vogue* in the US, Canada, and Italy have had drag queens grace their front covers and some drag queens have taken on roles on Broadway, with others breaking into the music industry, becoming recognizable household names. As such, this has created an opportunity to make drag events in the UK more accessible, encouraging a more diverse audience, beyond the traditional LGBTQ+ community.

Diversity of Drag Events

Diversity, in its simplest form, means how we differ, and anything that makes us unique is part of

this definition (T. H. Jordan, 2011). According to Finkel et al. (2018) diversity can mean “individual and community diversity, such as those relating to gender, sexualities, ethnicity, age, religion, and so forth” (p. 2). Drag events now bring together people from different genders and sexualities. The terms diversity and inclusion have become intertwined. Inclusion involves bringing diverse groups of people together in a way that is beneficial by “creating an environment of involvement, respect, and connection” (T. H. Jordan, 2011, p. 1). In the events sector diversity and inclusion are emerging research themes (Dashper & Finkel, 2020) and event organizers must consider gender and diversity when planning events to ensure they appeal to diverse audiences and communities (Platt & Finkel, 2018). Although the TV shows have created a pop culture to connect LGBTQ+ people and their allies, Bardwell (2018) argued that events play a prominent role in facilitating a sense of community for LGBTQ+ people.

Events and Well-Being

Events promote the visibility of marginalized communities, providing a space for social interaction as well as more generally challenging societal norms (Ong & Goh, 2018). They provide people with space and reason to celebrate and can support the establishment of social networks within a community (Arcodia & Whitford, 2007; Laing & Mair 2015; Wilks, 2011). The use of the term “community” here does not refer to a geographical location but represents a group of like-minded individuals (Laing & Mair, 2015). Event organizers can create a sense of community by designing events that celebrate difference and provide a sense of belonging and shared identity (Duffy et al., 2019). It could be argued that drag events create “an intense community spirit, resulting from a shared experience associated with an atmosphere of social equality, sharing, intimacy and togetherness” (Stone, 2009, p. 215). Events can act as agents of social positive change, bringing together previously marginalized communities and creating a sense of identity (Walters & Jepson, 2019). Vorobjovas-Pinta and Hardy (2020) argued that LGBTQ+ communities, which are viewed as being marginalized, have developed platforms to engage with wider society

and contribute to both the individual and collective well-being of those communities.

Providing a safe place to relax, feel comfortable and not fear being interrogated (Shapiro, 2016) allows LGBTQ+ people to look out for each other and protect themselves from the threats from “other” people (Adams, 2018). LGBTQ+ spaces, where drag performances were associated, have historically provided an environment where people could experience comfort, pride, and security without the fear of being harmed by others (Adams, 2018; Fox & Ore, 2010; Jugănar, 2018). The diverse audience at these inclusive events enables a safe space for sexual minorities and their allies to express themselves in a nonthreatening environment (Johnston, 2016). It is argued that a safe space could influence one’s well-being and that drag events can provide a friendly place to publicly show emotional and physical affection (Formby, 2012). Visser (2008) stated that these spaces can include gay and straight people simultaneously. This is a reflection of the mixed-audience profile at drag events, creating a more inclusive environment.

Mental well-being can be defined as a “dynamic state, in which someone is able to develop their potential, work productively and creatively, build strong and positive relationships with others, and contribute to their community” (All Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing [APPG], 2017, p. 17). Good mental health is related to mental and psychological well-being (World Health Organization [WHO], 2019). The arts sector, which includes events, is increasingly recognized as having the potential to support health and well-being (Health Education Authority [HEA], 2016). There is growing interest and evidence that music events and festivals have social, emotional, physical, and mental well-being benefits that transcend drag events (Ballantyne et al., 2014; Laing & Mair, 2015; Packer & Ballantyne, 2011). Drag events provide ample opportunities to develop positive emotions, such as, fun, love, and interest. Positive emotions can shield people from stress and may create an “upward spiral” that enhances resilience and well-being in the long term (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000; Fredrickson, 2000). Socializing has proven links with positive emotion and is associated with short- and long-term mental and physical well-being (Livingstone & Srivastava, 2012; Srivastava et al., 2009).

People tend to go to drag events with friends, thus helping to develop strong social relationships (Brajša-Žganec et al., 2011). The event itself could be described as providing an opportunity for attendees to gain a sense of purpose and meaning (Filo & Coghlan, 2016). Achievement, or a sense of accomplishment, can enable an individual to satisfy their needs and thus improve their well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Methodology

In order to explore diversity and well-being at UK drag events, it was essential to understand the lived experience of those attending. Various qualitative research methods were considered, including interviews and focus groups. These methods were discounted due to the small number of respondents involved and because it was difficult to gain physical access to the audience. Previous drag studies have tended to be conceptual articles (Feldman & Hakim, 2020) or visual-method approaches (Brown, 2001). Other studies that have applied primary data qualitative approaches have had relatively smaller samples from 12–50 respondents (Rupp et al., 2010). A mono-method (Saunders et al., 2009), qualitative online questionnaire was chosen to reach a high number of respondents from a diverse range of sexualities and gender identities. Heidegger's approach to phenomenological research, hermeneutics, was applied (Steiner, 1978). This approach draws on the interpretation of the findings, moving beyond the descriptive

approach to one that seeks to apply meaning to everyday occurrences (Lavery, 2003). The research utilized qualitative methodological approaches. It was important that the data collected were representative of the general population attending drag events in the UK, but also that the data sample collected would demonstrate the diversity of attendees (Fig. 1).

Vasileiou et al. (2018) stated that the sample sizes for studies based on qualitative methodologies tend to be small and without justification. The use of the online qualitative questionnaire meant that the number of respondents for this study was larger, and as such, a more comprehensive representation of those having attended drag events in the UK were sampled. This anonymous qualitative online questionnaire drew 248 respondents ($N = 248$) who had attended at least one UK drag event.

The online questionnaire and information about the study were distributed through popular social media platforms (Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and Instagram). The basic eligibility criteria were that all respondents had to be over 18 years of age and had to have attended a drag event in the UK. All questions in the survey had to be answered before respondents could move onto the next, leading to 248 complete data sets. Although this can be addressed as a limitation of the data collection tool, it did mean that those completing the questionnaire had invested somewhat in this research by contributing to it.

The questionnaire consisted of four closed and 11 open-ended questions, allowing for expansive and emotive responses. The open-ended questions

	n (%)	Gender			Sexuality	
		Male	Female	Non-binary	LGBTQ+	Heterosexual
All ages		80 (32.3%)	156 (62.9%)	12 (4.8%)	182 (73.4%)	66 (26.6%)
18-21	39 (15.7%)	7	27	5	32	7
22-25	78 (31.4%)	34	41	3	66	12
26-30	75 (30.2%)	20	51	4	52	23
31-40	41 (16.5%)	17	24	0	25	16
41-50	12 (5.2%)	2	11	0	6	7
51-60	2 (0.8%)	0	2	0	1	1

Figure 1. Demographic of study respondents (sexuality LGBTQ+ includes all other nonheterosexual sexualities).

included “What effect have drag events had on you?” “Do you feel the type of people attending these events has changed?” and “Tell me about some of the experiences you have had at a drag event.”

Respondents could either select their gender identity from one of the multiple choice options (male, female, trans man, trans woman, nonbinary) or state their identity through an open-format “other” option. For sexuality, respondents could select one of the following: heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, pansexual, or “other,” where they had the option of inputting their identity. There is a broader debate as to whether labeling sexuality in this way is helpful, and if binary identities are truly reflective of an increasingly diverse society. However, it was deemed important to categorize respondents in this way to evaluate trends around a changing demographic.

As the study sought to gain insight into well-being and diversity at drag events, the researchers needed to be able to identify these themes within the data from the open-ended questions. Thematic analysis, as established by Saunders et al. (2007) was applied to analyze the data collected, allowing the authors to identify key themes, characterize them, and align them to the overall aim of the research. Sharp and Finkel (2018) recognized the value of thematic analysis in qualitative studies when there is a prevailing lack of research. Therefore, the thematic analysis, which underpinned the analysis in this research proved valuable as it presented emerging relationships within the findings and contributed to the conclusions of this research.

At a basic level coding each of the respondents by classifying their gender, age, and sexuality (e.g., Male, 18–21, Gay) demonstrated the diversity of the audience at drag events in the UK. Furthermore, while none of the questions explicitly asked about diversity, inclusivity, or well-being, through the coding of responses to the open-ended questions, three themes were consistent throughout: drag event diversity, inclusivity, and the impact on attendee well-being.

Results

Drag Event Diversity

The literature has demonstrated that the visibility of drag in mainstream culture has always been

present. However, until the last decade it has been limited and tended to focus on its comedic value in movies and television. The initial analysis of this study sets the changing context, demonstrating the rise of drag culture in mainstream society. The literature establishes that this growth is attributed to RPDR (LeMaster, 2015). Our results support the view that RuPaul has had an influence on drag events becoming more mainstream. The majority of respondents attributed their knowledge of drag to RPDR. An example of this stating:

I know the basic history of drag from Stonewall 50 years ago through the underground ball culture and into modern-day with shows such as RuPaul’s Drag Race. (Female, 22–25, Heterosexual)

Similarly, another respondent, while always being absorbed in gay culture, credited their interest in drag to RPDR:

I was always into gay culture as a musician alongside many gay men. But I must admit it is RuPaul’s Drag Race that has brought it to the main focus. (Female, 26–30, Heterosexual)

In this study, the majority of respondents were introduced to drag culture through RPDR. Furthermore, the younger the respondent, the more likely they were to cite RPDR as their first contact with drag. Additionally, many of the older respondents (ages 41–60) stated that it was their son or daughter persuading them to watch RPDR that exposed them to drag culture and in turn sparked their interest in attending drag events. Those who were introduced to drag via local events were predominantly from the LGBTQ+ community, and many mentioned that these were also headlined by RPDR stars. Heterosexual respondents, on the other hand, were far more likely to be introduced to drag through RPDR.

The popularity of RDPR has created greater awareness and interest in drag as a wider art form and as a legitimate form of entertainment. Although local drag queens have performed at LGBTQ+ venues for decades, RPDR has created a widespread awareness:

My friend at school was obsessed with RuPaul, and I wanted to buy them a present that related to Ru. So I decided to watch an episode or two, so I’d

know what I was buying them. I quickly became besotted with drag race. (Male, 18–21, Gay)

Members of the LGBTQ+ community now have world-famous drag queens to idolize, who have been accepted and adopted into mainstream popular culture, and this has created a fandom culture that has engaged new audiences in the process.

Nilles (2018) postulated that RPDR had propelled drag onto the world stage and that drag is a queer phenomenon marketable in today's society. Our findings suggest that this phenomenon has reenergized the local drag scene. One respondent highlighted this by stating:

I've gathered more awareness of drag culture and the history behind it, I have also managed to get my mum and sister to enjoy Ru Paul's drag race, and this has led them to attend a couple of events with me. This is time together we might not have had, and has been a good excuse to get together and do something out with the norm. (Female, 22–25, Heterosexual)

This was common with the findings that RPDR had piqued interest and, as such, acted as a catalyst for attending drag shows. However, Kelaidis (2018) discussed that although RPDR has paved the way for drag becoming acceptable in everyday society, this has also harmed the local drag communities. One respondent echoed this:

At times it does feel a bit commercialised now with the popularity of drag at the moment in mainstream culture . . . they aren't following drag show etiquette. (Female, 26–30, Lesbian)

This etiquette is a “code of conduct” of sorts regarding how attendees should behave at these drag events. The exact rules of this seem to be largely open to interpretation but generally, center around showing the performers respect, such as listening respectfully when the performer is talking between songs and not having private conversations during these moments. Some attendees feel this new wave of drag fans are not familiar with this code and instead behave how they would at any other performance-based event.

These events are now appealing to a wider mainstream audience and, as such, the attendees are more diverse than they have previously been.

This research established that almost two thirds of respondents were female, which corresponds with the RPDR TV audience profile, where 49% were female (D. Jordan, 2018). Furthermore, a quarter of respondents identified as heterosexual women. This is indicative of the perception among respondents that the events have increasingly attracted women, primarily due to RPDR:

It has become more mainstream due to the likes of RuPaul, so has a larger straight female following than previously. (Female, 26–30, Lesbian)

Drag events are also appealing to a younger audience. Although this observation repeatedly featured throughout, older respondents were more aware of the shift:

I'm a straight woman in my 40s. Lots of drag events are now attended by teenage girls. (Female, 41–50, Heterosexual)

However, with it now being more polarized, the demographics of those attending drag events has shifted and, consequently, the audience has become more diversified.

Drag events were formerly identified as being part of the underground LGBTQ+ communities, and previous research has demonstrated that they were traditionally attended by gay males (Mann, 2011) or, more generally, the LGBTQ+ community (Deron, 2018). Although Figure 1 demonstrates that gay males still form a large part of the audience, there are also more significant numbers of the wider LGBTQ+ community attending, including nonbinary, bisexual, and pansexual. Although LGBTQ+ people still form the majority of respondents, over a quarter identified as heterosexual. Thus, the research indicates that there is a more diverse audience attending drag events in the UK. Reactions to this new diverse audience varied among LGBTQ+ respondents. Some welcomed non-LGBTQ+ “allies,” referred to as cis (cis: when someone's gender identity matches that which they were assigned at birth), but only under certain conditions:

I know some people have an issue with certain cis stereotypes encroaching in queer culture but I think that as long as you're respecting the art

and its history and contributing to its growth and development then keep ‘em coming!! (Female, 22–25, Queer)

However, this vexes some of the audience, with one gay male respondent sharing:

The audience is getting younger and straighter. I don’t want to discriminate against straight people, but they attend the events without appreciating the culture and where it originated and why it’s important. (Male, 22–25, Gay)

This links back to a previous discussion in the literature, stating that drag events were considered taboo within society and they tended to be closed off to wider society and only celebrated by those associated with the culture (Mann, 2011). It was interesting to find that as drag has become more mainstream, there is some resentment within the LGBTQ+ community prevalent today. Furthermore, there was even an acknowledgement of this potential “invasion” of an LGBTQ+ space among a large part of the heterosexual audience:

I sometimes feel like I’m intruding as a straight white female but I want to show my support to the LGBTQ+ community. (Female, 18–21, Heterosexual)

However, the volume of negative perceptions of the diversification at drag events in our study was relatively low. Respondents highlighted the diversifying demographic, but most celebrated that these events were becoming more inclusive. Respondents felt that it was now more acceptable to attend the events and support the development of drag culture.

Inclusivity

It has been established that events are recognized as being able to create safe spaces for people from like-minded communities to come together and celebrate (Kline & Oliver, 2015). Ong and Goh (2018) supported this view and emphasized that it also creates visibility for communities that are marginalized, such as the LGBTQ+ community. In their study, they identified that events act as a mediator for change through participation and creating inclusive environments. This section of our

findings demonstrates that drag events in the UK are successful in promoting inclusivity:

It encourages inclusivity and allows people to express themselves however they choose without judgement, and brings people together who might not have met otherwise. (Female, 26–50, Heterosexual)

For many respondents, drag events are an extremely welcoming and inclusive space for all:

The feeling of being welcome no matter size, gender or lifestyle choices. (Female, aged 26–30, Bisexual)

This was a common theme in the findings, and many of the respondents credited drag events for promoting inclusivity. This demonstrates that UK drag events are allowing attendees with the same ideological beliefs (Moufakkir & Pernecky, 2014) to feel welcomed and valued.

A few respondents were particularly scathing of drag event attendees whose behavior does not align with this sense of community and belonging. Even some heterosexual respondents had issues with younger event-goers—of any sexuality—whose motivations for attending were not in keeping with the inclusive and nonjudgmental vibe of drag shows:

I feel like other people (teenagers mainly) attend the events and can be very narrow minded towards what drag is. They only see drag as “fishy” or beauty queens and seem to turn their nose up at queens whose aesthetic or style is different to that. And they’re only interested in the big famous queens. (Female, 26–30, Heterosexual)

These views present the concept of inclusivity in this context as somewhat of a double-edged sword. They also alluded to the success of RPD, as a catalyst in diluting formerly LGBTQ+ dominated safe spaces by attracting a more diverse crowd.

The extant literature has expressed how events create a safe space where people can relax, not worry, and express themselves freely in a nonjudgmental, friendly environment (Johnston, 2016; Jugănar, 2018; Shapiro, 2016). The majority of respondents in this study felt comfortable, liberated, and nonjudged at drag events, which boosted

their confidence, thus having a positive impact on their mental well-being. This was attributed to the attendees feeling included and ultimately feeling a sense of belonging:

The events encourage safe spaces to exist and give me a sense of community in a very isolating world. (Female, 26–30, Heterosexual)

This sense of belonging and inclusiveness was commonly cited by younger respondents, especially those who identify as nonbinary and LGBTQ+:

They certainly make me feel liberated and celebrated. Comfortable in my own skin and proud of our community (Male, 22–25, Gay)

The inclusive nature of drag events demonstrated to respondents that there were others who shared the same values and beliefs:

Suddenly, it dawned on me that there were others like me and it was a euphoric moment in my life. I went out in drag with aforementioned LGBT society before attending my first events! (Male, 22–25, Gay)

Many other respondents highlighted the fact that there is a network of people like them and that these events created an opportunity to come together and celebrate this.

There is also overwhelming evidence to support the feeling that attending these events allow individuals to be their “true selves.” It is apparent that those attending such events feel that it is due to the inclusive nature that this is possible. Ong and Goh (2018) explored this idea that creating a safe space for marginalized communities and their allies is important in making them feel heard. In doing so, it will give them purpose and meaning. By celebrating the once taboo art of drag, supporters and performers alike are able to come together and express in a setting that accepts it (Burdsey, 2008):

It’s a place for me to dress, act and look how I like without fear of rejection or abuse and to act queer in a safe space without fear! (Nonbinary, 18–21, Queer)

They portray a pride in accepting who you are, they provide a supportive community to those around them. (Female, 26–30, Pansexual)

The drag community seems to be such a loving one, championing people who don’t feel like they belong; I think everyone feels a bit like a weirdo on the inside! (Female, 18–21, Heterosexual)

The respondents referred explicitly to drag events being an essential part of the LGBTQ+ community. They alluded to the community creating an atmosphere of acceptance and openness, and, in turn, creating a safe space for attendees. They suggest that the audiences of drag events do, themselves, create a supportive community of their own, one that transcends sexuality. Therefore, this is highlighting that these events can break down barriers and bring attendees together (Derrett, 2003), thus supporting the mental well-being of those event-goers.

Impact on Attendee Well-Being

The rise in interest of drag can be attributed to its commercialization into mainstream society. Furthermore, the growth of support for drag culture has seen the audiences visiting drag events diversify and become more inclusive. A recurring theme in this study is the positive and, in some cases, profound impact that drag events have on people’s mental health and well-being. Finkel (2010) discussed that events can support and tackle well-being, and this was prevalent in the findings of this research. Well-being is associated with happiness (WHO, 2019), and events are recognized as having the potential to support health and well-being (HEA, 2016). The findings demonstrate that events can enhance social, emotional, physical, and mental well-being (Ballantyne et al., 2014; Laing & Mair, 2015; Packer & Ballantyne, 2011). In the case of this research, drag events are creating this opportunity:

Profound. I came out myself after being introduced to drag culture. I also find that as an ally it helps me understand the areas of life I’ve never experienced. For example: being male and gay, being of a race other than Caucasian and gay, being transgender or being shunned or rejected by family and friends. I am lucky enough to know that I will never know exactly how this feels. But through drag events, drag shows, and drag race, I have listened to the stories of the performers, or the people I’ve met there. I understand a lot more

how it feels, I can empathize, and I can be so much more supportive to those in need because I understand the issues better. Drag events don't allow room for ignorance and turning a blind eye, which is another reason I adore the culture. (Female, 26–39, Pansexual)

The response alluded to the role of drag events in creating acceptance, allowing attendees to feel safe in celebrating who they are. This linked to Jugānaru (2018), who postulated that the aspect of feeling safe in the event space contributes to well-being. This was further evidenced by a gay male respondent stating:

(It has) allowed me to express myself in a way I never had before, opening my eyes to a new world where I don't feel like I have to fit as much into the hetero-normative narrative—and boosting my confidence with regard to my sexuality which I felt awkward about while a teenager. (Male, 22–25, Gay)

The findings suggest that being able to express oneself at drag events, without the fear of harm or abuse, created a feeling of confidence and, in some cases, “liberation.” The terminology of the respondents began to show the power implicit in attending drag events. Although it was not clearly supporting the physical well-being of the attendees, it was having a wider effect on their mental well-being.

We felt it important to understand what people's motivations were for attending drag events. In doing so, the most frequent responses were that they attended for “fun” and because it made them “happy”:

I attend to see my friends, I attend for my own enjoyment, I attend because it makes me happy. (Female, 22–25, Bisexual)

Although the primary motivator for many respondents was the “fun factor,” which is established as being a catalyst for positive mental well-being (WHO, 2019), these events had a more profound and more lasting impact on many. Some respondents explicitly stated that attending drag events had been life changing:

They've changed me for life and the way I carry myself as a gay man. . . . I take myself too seriously and drag events have changed that and let

me cut loose a bit and be more authentically me, whether that's in heels or in boy clothes. (Male, 26–30, Gay)

It's completely changed my life and saved me from a very dark place. Seeing drag has allowed me to see the world in color again and this is why I continue to attend drag events. (Male, 22–25, Heterosexual)

The positive effect on mental health was reiterated by several respondents and they emphasized how drag events have helped ease anxiety and depression:

I suffer with bipolar disorder and depression/anxiety generally. Drag in some ways has kept me going and the loving community I have found through going to drag events has honestly saved my life in more ways than anyone could ever imagine. (Nonbinary, 26–30, Bisexual)

These findings support the view that drag events have a significant impact on mental health, happiness, and well-being (Ballantyne et al., 2014; Laing & Mair, 2015; Packer & Ballantyne, 2011). It has been established that many of the respondents were satisfying their own needs in attending drag events and in doing so, improving their well-being. The level of positive mental well-being varied. For some, they felt elated, excited, and happy, giving them an experience of escapism from everyday life. For others, it was deeper; these events had created a sense of community and in doing so, allowed them to become a true representation of themselves, building social relationships (Brajša-Žganec et al., 2011). This research has demonstrated that drag events in the UK have become more diverse and inclusive and, as a result, have positively affected the well-being of those in attendance.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to demonstrate the changing demographics of those attending drag events in the UK and to understand the impact on the well-being of attendees. It is evident that drag events have become an accepted form of entertainment and a part of mainstream society and popular culture in the UK. RPDR has been a catalyst for this change, attracting audience members from

outside the LGBTQ+ community (the RuPaul's Drag Race effect). This has provided a platform for dispelling the taboo perceptions of drag. Drag events have become a legitimate, professional, and popular form of entertainment. Due to the more commercial nature of drag as an art form, there has been an increase in events to celebrate this.

This popularization has created a more diverse audience attending these events allowing attendees to feel part of a community. Once exclusively attended by the LGBTQ+ community, particularly gay men, drag events now attract a large number of women, younger people, and heterosexuals. Although there is evidence that demonstrates that not all respondents are in support of the commercialization and inclusive nature of this change, most are accepting of it. The audiences of drag events do, themselves, create a supportive community of their own, one that transcends sexuality and gender. This community creates an atmosphere of acceptance and openness, creating a safe space for attendees that is nonjudgmental. This inclusive environment encourages liberation and self-expression, which boosts attendees' confidence, thus having a positive impact on happiness and mental well-being. This is attributed to the attendees feeling included and ultimately creating a sense of belonging.

With drag events becoming more popular and the continued need to create inclusive spaces to celebrate this art form, the findings of our research identified various practical applications for those developing and delivering these types of events in the UK. From a commercial perspective, it has become apparent that organizers of drag events need to consider their target market, as our research demonstrates that the audience is becoming more diverse. Mainstream drag acts attract a pop culture crowd who may not understand or respect the history of drag, thus potentially alienating a core LGBTQ+ audience. Thus, there is a need for event managers to consider supporting the local drag community by also booking local drag artists on the lineup. This will help build subcommunities that last beyond the duration of the event itself and allow the events to become more inclusive and diverse.

Performers at drag events have an opportunity to educate attendees on both the historical and current plight of LGBTQ+ communities around the world. This message can help create a sense of unity and

community that connects those in attendance. This can reinforce the events as a safe space while also educating people on the social implications of drag in grassroots LGBTQ+ communities. Appropriate diversity and inclusivity training for venue and event staff would ensure attendees are not misgendered or treated differently because of their identity.

Limitations of this research are that it is restricted to the views of audience members at UK drag events and that the demographics of the respondents may be skewed towards a younger profile as the qualitative survey was promoted online via social media channels.

Although our article has focused on the well-being and diversity of those attending UK drag events, far more work is needed in this area of event management. One such area is exploring the motivations of the increasing number of heterosexual women who are attending drag events. Furthermore, additional research could explore the role that performers have in creating safe spaces and how these events impact the drag artists' own well-being. Our article highlights the need to continue to explore the impact of drag events within society.

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