



Dragging up the night: exploring the changing dynamic of audiences at drag events in the UK

Daniel Baxter, Claire Leer & Alannah Graham

To cite this article: Daniel Baxter, Claire Leer & Alannah Graham (2022): Dragging up the night: exploring the changing dynamic of audiences at drag events in the UK, Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events, DOI: [10.1080/19407963.2022.2042816](https://doi.org/10.1080/19407963.2022.2042816)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19407963.2022.2042816>



© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 08 Mar 2022.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Dragging up the night: exploring the changing dynamic of audiences at drag events in the UK

Daniel Baxter^a, Claire Leer^{ib} and Alannah Graham^a

^aGlasgow Caledonian University, Glasgow, United Kingdom; ^bUniversity of Northampton, Northampton, NN1 5PH United Kingdom

ABSTRACT

Herek (2002) states that the LGBTQ+ community travel to LGBTQ+ events to celebrate with like-minded people, free of prejudice and violence. These events create safe spaces where people can escape the realities of everyday life (Pritchard et al., 2000). Drag events, a staple of the LGBTQ+ community, were once identified as underground, taboo, and perverse events attended mainly by gay males. However, this art form has exploded over the last decade and gained undeniable acceptance and popularity, mainly due to RuPaul and RuPaul's Drag Race (Jordan, 2018). RuPaul's Drag Race (RPDR) has been a catalyst that has 'proliferated' and 'professionalised' drag culture globally (LeMaster, 2015). 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. This paper explores this evolving audience dynamic from the perspective of drag performers, utilising a qualitative research approach through an online qualitative questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The data was collected from drag artists who have performed at drag events in the UK. The findings suggest that whilst RPDR has propelled drag culture into mainstream society, it has also narrowed the public perception of what 'drag' is. Drag events reach new audiences, supporting the LGBTQ+ community by creating safe spaces to celebrate all things queer. Performers have varying perceptions on this changing audience and what this might mean for the future of drag artists and drag events.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 25 January 2022
Accepted 31 January 2022

KEYWORDS

Drag events; drag performers; RuPauls Drag Race; drag culture; LGBTQ+

Introduction

Drag culture has long been defined as a creative artform, encompassing the idea of transforming into an alter ego through the application of make-up artistry and fashion, influencing several millennial trends in recent years (Shastri, 2020). Historically drag events, where men impersonate the female form, were regarded as underground, taboo and perverse. Drag events are embedded into the LGBTQ+ community and attended predominantly by gay males (Taylor & Rupp, 2004). The growing

CONTACT Claire Leer  claire.leer@northampton.ac.uk  University of Northampton - Park Campus, Northampton, NN1 5PH United Kingdom

© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

'normalisation' (Ammaturo, 2016) of the LGBTQ+ community has assisted in shaping popular opinion and has plausibly led to an influx of drag events and increased the popularity of drag culture (Rhodebeck, 2018). RuPaul is considered a drag icon throughout the drag community attributable to his role in promoting drag by propelling it into an emerging subcategory of popular culture (Balzer, 2005). In the 1990s RuPaul was considered the most famous drag performer following the release of his single *Supermodel, You Better Work* (Fernandez, 2017). In 2009 he launched an American reality competition TV series called *RuPaul's Drag Race* (RPDR). Currently, in its thirteenth series, the show has won several acclaimed entertainment awards and led to spin-off shows, including a UK show, first aired in 2019. These shows have catapulted the contestants to international stardom and led to an exponential rise in drag events. RuPaul has been the catalyst for this explosion of drag as an art form which has gained undeniable acceptance and popularity in mainstream society (Alexander, 2017; Jordan, 2018). Drag events are no longer attended exclusively by gay males. In recent years, they have become more accessible to the straight community (Waltz, 2020) and now attract a female audience (Baxter et al., 2021).

There is limited research associated with this recent growth in drag events and the evolving diversity of audience members. A study by Baxter et al. (2021) focused on the perceptions of this changing diversity from the audience's viewpoint. There has been minimal investigation into the drag performer perspectives on this evolving audience and how this consequentially affects them artistically. Hence, the main aims of this study are to identify the catalyst for the changing dynamic of drag event audiences, to examine drag performer perspectives and explore the effects that this evolving audience has had on drag performers.

Review of literature

Recent growth of drag events

In Shakespearean times, men would dress as women in the production of plays which is considered as some of the earliest examples of drag within UK culture (Abraham, 2017; Deron, 2018). However, cross-dressing and homosexuality can be viewed by some as 'deviant' behaviour, detracting from the idea of heterosexual norms and typical gender roles (Tewksbury, 1994). Since the 1990s accomplished drag queens have continued to endure the consequences associated with this viewpoint experiencing discrimination, exclusion rejection and, on occasion, violence and hate crimes (Bachmann & Gooch, 2018; Berkowitz & Belgrave, 2010; Divan et al., 2016; Lombardi et al., 2002). Drag encompasses various elements, including theatricality, comedy and gender revolution, and often, performers utilise their drag performance to blur the lines between masculinity and femininity and sexuality through their performance (Taylor & Rupp, 2004). The enactment of a drag queen can be seen to encompass status, self-affirmation and empowerment (Hopkins, 2004), arguably creating confidence and potentially making drag events attractive to people who consider themselves outcasts providing a safe space for them to be their true selves. This blurring of gender stereotypes makes drag accessible to people from all walks of life, regardless of background, sexual preference or gender, which may be an underlying reason for the recent surge in popularity of drag events.

The enactment of a drag queen aligns with the goals of the LGBTQ+ movement as it acts as a political and social protest, challenging the conventional notions of gender and sexuality (Rupp & Taylor, 2015). This viewpoint poses a potential motivation for people attending drag events as it enables them to demonstrate their support for the gay movement and provides an opportunity to challenge societal norms by approving of the enactment of drag queens.

Safe spaces offer people subjected to marginalisation or stigma a sense of comfort and security where they can feel at ease within themselves without fear (Shapiro, 2016). They provide a place where people who consider themselves different can protect one another and meet other like-minded individuals who have been subjected to similar hardships (Adams, 2018). The LGBTQ+ community has long created such spaces to combat the alienation they are subjected to within society and the rates of homophobia and violence they have suffered throughout history (Fox & Ore, 2010). LGBTQ+ spaces have been created to restrict homophobia and enable celebration without judgement. Drag events create a safe place for individuals from diverse backgrounds, allowing people to escape from everyday life, thus enabling them to immerse themselves in the drag experience (Baxter et al., 2021). This offers a potential explanation for the influx in popularity of drag events as they can be seen to offer a safe place for attendees to feel at ease with their identity in an environment that is free of judgement.

Drag is widely considered as an extremely powerful performance act, and an accomplished drag queen can unequivocally captivate an audience (Berkowitz & Belgrave, 2010). Drag has attracted an increasing female audience in recent years (Baxter et al., 2021), who have embraced drag as a means of gender expression (Oliver, 2018). This point is further emphasised by the recent surge in popularity of drag brunches, an event that attracts attendees of all genders and sexual orientations, where they can enjoy brunch whilst watching a drag performance (Siddons, 2019). These types of events have arguably made the art form of drag more accessible to the straight community by expanding drag performances beyond the gay nightlife scene to more mainstream venues (Waltz, 2020), as prior to this, gay men had long been perceived as drag's only true, die-hard audience base (Cracker, 2017). This emphasises the phenomenal growth in popularity of drag events as they continue to expand and reach new audiences.

Drag can be conceptualised as 'transportive', immersing oneself in another world, but also transformative, as drag performances fully captivate an audience (Schechner, 2003). It could be argued that the surge in popularity of drag culture is predominantly attributable to the growth in social media providing drag with the platform to move it from a niche market into the mainstream economy (Jordan, 2018). Social media has influenced the branding of drag as many drag performers create their personal brand via social media platforms, which has resulted in an extremely competitive market which heavily relies on audience engagement (Feldman & Hakim, 2020). This can be attributed to RPDR, as the show has an extensive social media presence across the plethora of social media platforms. This creates a high level of visibility for the show and the performers (Feldman & Hakim, 2020), creating a roadmap for drag queens to follow to achieve higher levels of visibility and interest in their brand.

The growth of drag events is therefore seen to directly correlate with the increased popularity of drag culture and enhanced levels of visibility of the LGBTQ+ community. It could be argued that this newfound awareness of these aspects has created a desire to

attend such events as a driver for learning more about this part of society. The popularity of drag events will undoubtedly grow in sync with increasing levels of awareness.

Commercialisation of drag

Commonly acknowledged as a drag icon, RuPaul propelled drag to prominence as both singular performers and an emerging sub category of popular culture (Balzer, 2005). The telecasting of RPDR since 2009 has aided the promotion of drag as a recognised art form throughout mainstream society (Alexander, 2017). The TV show has established itself as an earnest reality competition series and regularly tackles controversial topics such as homophobia, bigotry, oppression and political issues including equal rights and same-sex marriage (Brennan & Gudelunas, 2017). RuPaul's impact has promoted the normalisation of drag (Baxter et al., 2021). It has created unprecedented mainstream visibility for both drag performance and issues surrounding the LGBTQ+ community (Feldman & Hakim, 2020). RuPaul is unquestionably the catalyst for the rising popularity of drag as his DragCon events attract tens of thousands of fans, generating \$9 m in merchandising sales alone (Jordan, 2018). Interestingly, 60% of the event attendees at these events are women, with 50% classifying as straight, highlighting that the audience is now broader and more diverse.

RPDR has been criticised for favouring queens who portray a conventional level of physical attractiveness, and critics suggest that the show is creating a 'production-line drag aesthetic' (Montgomery, 2019), detracting from the fluidness and creativity of drag performance. Other commentators describe the show as over competitive and fake, argue that it has reduced the LGBTQ+ community to a 'catty' stereotype and that it's become commercialised to the point that it is nothing more than an 'exploitative cash machine' (Santone, 2019). Conversely, the show has alerted the straight community to elements of queer culture that they would not have been exposed to otherwise, creating an appreciation and admiration of LGBTQ+ groups and the challenges they face (Abraham, 2019). The RPDR empire has further been criticised due to the commercialisation of drag as many believe it is detrimental for drag to be commercially dominated by a single brand due to the extensive diversity of drag culture (Kelaidis, 2018). On the contrary, it cannot be disputed that drag has evolved into an industry of its own attributable to both RPDR and DragCon, with previous contestants earning six figures on an annual basis associated with touring, merchandising and contracts offered by the show (Nilles, 2018). Thus, highlighting some of the negative and positive impacts the show has had on the drag event industry.

Diversity and inclusion at events

It is considered that research that explores the concept of identity, has focussed more on the physical forms such as race or gender. Faems et al. (2018) discussed this, stating that there tends to be less emphasis on diversity research associated with culture, values and attitudes or even ideological orientations (Faems et al., 2018). Diversity is a much more complex term that reaches beyond ethnicity and identity, but rather extends into the context of age, sexuality, class, religion, gender, politics and sex (Duffy et al., 2018). Thus, as the construct of diversity becomes more complex within society, so there is a

concerted need to ensure that there are outlets to create connectedness for these communities. Barrera-Fernández and Hernández-Escampa (2018), stress that when events are being developed the inclusion of the communities and societies in which they support are not always considered. It's imperative to examine the diversifying audience of drag events and the subsequent impact on this non-majority community. Finkel et al. (2018) identify that there are issues associated with inclusion and diversity within planned events, and a concerted approach to dealing with this is necessary.

Stokes (2008) discusses that events are a driver for tourism. Planned events are developed to draw communities together, to spaces where they feel safe to celebrate and escape everyday life (Baxter et al., 2021). Kaygalak-Celebi et al. (2019) explored LGBTQ+ festivals, such as pride, which offer safe spaces for the LGBTQ+ community and their allies to celebrate their own culture and identity freely. Pritchard et al. (2000) note that spaces to be able to feel free, and celebrate with like-minded people, while escaping the everyday reality of the heteronormative world, are important for the LGBTQ+ community. Hence the creation of events and festivals that celebrate queer culture are important. Drag events are an integral part of the LGBTQ+ community and the associated events provide spaces that offer this escapism.

Since the growth in popularity of drag culture in society, Jordan (2018) identified that drag is engaging audiences beyond the traditional gay male community, to those within the LGBTQ+ community and their allies. The inclusion of such diverse groups is necessary as explored in the work of Finkel et al. (2018) who examine the need for planned events to consider accessibility, inclusion and diversity. Thus, drag events are creating spaces that empower attendees and allow them to feel involved, respected and connected with others attending (Jordan, 2018). Diversity and inclusion remain an area of event research that needs greater exploration, with event managers needing to consider how gender, equality, and diversity are managed as a legal and moral imperative (Dashper & Finkel, 2020; Platt & Finkel, 2018). This is to ensure that events continue to appeal to the wider communities that relate to them (Platt & Finkel, 2018). With drag culture now popularised in mainstream society, the community wishing to celebrate and attend these events to celebrate this art form will evolve and grow. Not surprisingly then, drag events now attract women, younger people and heterosexuals, a noticeable shift in the historical audience demographic (Baxter et al., 2021). Hence, this research explores this recognisable shift.

Methodology

Interpretivist research is valuable for gathering detailed insights into phenomena's that may be under-researched (Creswell, 2014). The research implemented the interpretivist paradigm, which allowed the aim and objectives of the study to be answered. Data was collected using qualitative methods by engaging with the synergies of the interpretivist paradigm and the inductive research approach. Using non-numerical data allowed for a richness in the descriptions of the changing audience dynamics at drag events from the perspective of the performers. It ensured that the respondents could give detailed accounts, sharing their insights, thoughts and experiences (Denscombe, 2017). The research engaged in a multi-method approach, combining two different qualitative data collection techniques aligned with the interpretivist paradigm.

Stage one of the data collection used an online qualitative survey, an underused tool in qualitative research (Braun et al., 2020). The survey was utilised to harness rich data from 17 respondents while ensuring that the qualitative research values were still embedded. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in stage two with four UK drag artists via Zoom, recorded and transcribed. One of the main challenges of qualitative research is considering the number of respondents necessary for any study (Bryman, 2016). The qualitative survey tends to have smaller sample sizes, which can repute the robustness and representation of the data collected. Nevertheless, the scope of this research was taken into account, as was the extent to which the topic had been explored previously. While the sample size may be considered small, the richness of the data collected and its ability to address the questions asked were deemed substantive.

As this research explored the changing dynamic of audiences at drag events from the performers perspective, the study required respondents who have performed at UK drag events. Thus, a purposive, non-probability approach to sampling was used. The respondents were explicitly selected for their known attributes as drag performers in the UK and their knowledge and expertise on the phenomenon (Denscombe, 2017). Respondents were contacted via online social media platforms including Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. As the research was conducted at the height of the global pandemic and many drag performers were unable to work, this was an opportune means of accessing them during this time.

As the study engaged in a multi-stage approach, it was imperative to ensure that the data were analysed in a way that was easy to understand and to ensure that it represented the voice of the respondents. Thus, to ascertain clarity and consistency, a thematic analysis technique was used. This was a practical approach that enabled the key themes of the data to be identified, analysed and reported (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is a popular approach for qualitative data research and is considered most appropriate for this study. The key themes identified in the study included: RuPaul being a catalyst for drag becoming more mainstream, drag events reaching new diverse audiences, the new diverse audiences are not fully aware of the history of drag and its importance to the LGBTQ+ community, and finally the perception of drag has been narrowed from the performers perspective. These themes were coded from each data collection stage, and key commonalities and links between them were highlighted (Braun & Clarke, 2013). To ensure consistency with the coding, the data was analysed various times to ensure familiarity to support the key findings.

Results

Rupaulisation

RPDR has given visibility to drag culture and drag performers (Alexander, 2017) however, for the drag community this has positive and negative implications. RPDR was mentioned 44 times within the 17 survey responses, with many of the respondents referencing RPDR when asked what they believe to be the main reason for the changing diversity of audience members. This demonstrates the prominence that RuPaul and RPDR have had on drag performance. Furthermore, all interviewees agreed that

RPDR has been the catalyst for drag becoming more mainstream and suggested that it has been a factor for attracting a younger, more heterosexual female audience. This demonstrated the effect RPDR has had in promoting drag as an art form, as suggested by Balzer (2005), Alexander (2017) and Baxter et al. (2021). The findings highlighted that performers were able to identify that RPDR has helped grow their art form.

Respondents of the study identified that RPDR has created unprecedented levels of mainstream visibility for both drag performance and the LGBTQ+ community, echoing the statements made by Feldman and Hakim (2020). Two respondents specifically identified that drag has become increasingly popular due to the competition's broadcasting, suggesting that more people are becoming aware of the drag performers in their local area, again highlighting the visibility RPDR has given drag.

'The change has been due to RuPaul's Drag Race, the show has reached many people, and some people have then noticed what drag they have right at their own doorstep' (Respondent 1)

Furthermore, this connected the popularity of RPDR with the newfound ease of accessibility for new audience members, as one respondent stated that due to the show, there are now drag events that can accommodate children, which '10 years ago would have been unthinkable'. This highlighted that the competitors on RPDR have also been fundamental in the rise of drag events, which many respondents considered to be positive. One respondent suggested that it means they have more opportunities for work due to having a wider audience base and more people wanting to attend such events.

'Because of the exposure of drag race, there is now a light shining on all queens' (Respondent 9)

'Drag Race has broadened people's understanding now, they're more willing to accept more sides of performers' (Respondent 3)

Nevertheless, the findings also suggest that there were some negative connotations associated with this. Respondents noted that many people attend drag shows because of the perception portrayed on RPDR, and the effect of this is not always positive from their perspective. Other respondents mentioned that it has also created some difficulties for drag queens who do not conform to the style of drag which is commonly presented on RPDR. This idea was previously outlined by Montgomery (2019) who argues that the show has been criticised for only showcasing queens who portray a similar type of drag aesthetic, mirroring the responses of the survey and interview respondents.

'many performers have to play into it, with other performers feeling they don't have a place', (Respondent 13)

'When you go to a local club or a local bar that has a drag queen, you should not expect RuPaul's drag race' (Respondent 5)

'analyse what has been done on drag race and work to match it because of the expectations of drag race fans' (Respondent 9)

RPDR has polarised the art form of drag and has been responsible the growth of drag culture in society. Some respondents identified the damaging effects the show has

subsequently had on their performances and their art. When questioned during the interviews, all respondents stated that adapting their performances to meet the needs of audience members restricts their creativity. These findings were compelling as, despite the show regularly highlighting and tackling controversial issues and shining light on the community (Brennan & Gudelunas, 2017), it appears to have detrimental effects on the creativity of performers who now feel pressurised into meeting the demands of the RPDR fan base.

‘Any sort of performance that deviates from the Drag Race genre can sometimes go down like a lead balloon’ (Respondent 10)

One respondent even described the fan base as ‘toxic’ when it comes to nonbinary, trans and gender non-conforming performers, which is harmful to their mental health and can coincidentally impact their career. Others referred to the RPDR fandom as ‘very judgemental’, and ‘cutthroat’ towards drag performers as the audience judge them as though they are part of the competition. This appeared to affect the respondents who have been performing over longer periods, with one explaining that ‘old school drag is dying’ due to RPDR fans constantly expecting more from performers and another stating:

‘The expectations from most audience members that every performance should be judged exactly like an episode of drag race in terms of lip syncs, what a queen wears and more, which is getting out of hand. The fandom of drag race has become very judgemental and cutthroat towards drag performers.’ (Respondent 9)

Although the respondents widely recognised the positive aspects that RPDR has given the drag event industry, many felt that the programme could do more to showcase the full extent of the drag community. One respondent commented on the show’s lack of representation and diversity as ‘unacceptable’. All interviewees reinforced this viewpoint, reconfirming that they felt the show could do more to showcase alternative types of performers, especially drag kings, which encompass the female to male transformation.

‘They should do a season of drag race that’s all drag kings. Even if it’s only once, so that people know that it exists and so they are able to see that talent because they’re extremely talented’ (Interviewee 2)

These findings were noteworthy as despite the visibility RPDR has given performers, it reinforces that the show could do more to educate audiences to different methods of drag transformation. These findings contradict the views of Feldman and Hakim (2020), who argue that the show has created unprecedented levels of mainstream visibility for drag performance and the LGBTQ+ community as the show can only showcase the one type of drag aesthetic as implied by Montgomery (2019). Overall, all respondents and interviewees highlighted that RuPaul and RPDR had been the cause of the growth of drag culture, and without it, their art form would still be considered taboo, misunderstood and unappreciated. Therefore, without ‘RuPaulisation’ drag culture and drag events would still be underground, solely celebrated within the LGBTQ+ community.

Changing audience demographic

Historically, the lack of audience diversity at drag events has been noted in the research, however, this can be seen to have drastically changed as a result of the data collected in

this study. Cracker (2017) identified that drag events used to be attended solely by the gay male community, and the audiences tended to lack any diversity. The findings identified that there is now a ‘wide spectrum’ of people in attendance, aligning with the point made by one respondent who stated:

‘you can never expect a certain demographic’ (Respondent 3)

The respondent’s perspective on the changing dynamics of the audience at drag events was captured. Figure 1 demonstrates that there are more heterosexual crowds attending drag events, misaligning with the previous notion that these events are solely attended by LGBTQ+ groups. Following this, there is a gravitation towards a more female audience and that the audience demographic is getting younger. This has only recently been identified within the academic theory (Baxter et al., 2021) and is a clear example of the audience diversification at these events.

The research demonstrates that drag events in the UK have been attracting audiences with more female representation. Oliver (2018) denotes that those females interested in the art of drag embrace it as a means of gender expression, and one interviewee stated that:

‘I feel like it was the typical cisgender crowd purely because it’s a bigger platform. Even like if someone’s boyfriend had a favourite queen, they could bring them along to see them.’ (Interviewee 4)

Additionally, it highlighted that the audience is gravitating towards a more heterosexual, cis-gender female orientation (cis: when someone’s gender identity matches that which they were assigned at birth). This was supported by another respondent who discussed that there had been a shift towards more heterosexual males as drag moves into the mainstream and grows in popularity.

‘I’ve found a shift towards more heteronormative males as part of the audience. This is great as it shows how drag is becoming more of a recognised mainstream art.’ (Respondent 2)

There has been a shift towards a female heterosexual audience, which was deemed generally positive. Drag has seen something ‘missing in culture’ and ‘pop culture for a long time’, only coming into mainstream visibility in recent years. This viewpoint

DEMOGRAPHICS HIGHLIGHTED IN SURVEY RESPONSES					
	YOUNGER	MATURE	FEMALE	HETEROSEXUAL	STUDENT
Participant 1	X	X			
Participant 2			X	X	
Participant 3			X	X	
Participant 4	X		X		X
Participant 5	X	X			
Participant 6				X	
Participant 7	X			X	
Participant 8				X	
Participant 9					
Participant 10	X		X	X	
Participant 11			X	X	
Participant 12					
Participant 13	X		X		
Participant 14					
Participant 15			X	X	
Participant 16					
Participant 17	X				

Figure 1. Audiences demographics perceptions by respondents.

connects with points raised by Balzer (2005), who claims that the recent visibility of drag has allowed drag acts to come into prominence as both singular performers and an emerging subcategory of popular culture, thus validating this viewpoint.

‘I often find a better reception from the heterosexual crowd.’ (Respondent 6)

Within the findings, it became apparent that members of the LGBTQ+ community can often be more ‘critical’ of drag performances due to their underlying knowledge of the art form and the representation they have seen on RPDR (Baxter et al., 2021). Nevertheless, generally the heterosexual crowds attend to have fun and it was suggested that they are easier to entertain;

‘Maybe there’s psychology in it but there’s something where a drag queen can say anything to a straight audience within reason ... I think with the LGBTQ+ community ... They’re like judging it, critiquing it, like I think it’s kind of weird like the LGBTQ+ community is kind of small and I think because they know quite a few people involved as well, then it’s easier to be critical. but yeah, I think it’s easy to kind of define what I think to a heterosexual audience. Like I find it easier to talk to them and entertain for them.’ (Interviewee 3)

These changing demographics at drag events can partially be attributed to the growth and evolution of drag events, as suggested by Waltz (2020), who highlights that the move from drag events beyond the gay nightlife scene has made drag more accessible to the straight community, providing them with a sense of escape from their daily routine. This is significant, as it demonstrates that drag events have a deeper effect on those attending as it can positively impact the mental wellbeing of attendees (Baxter et al., 2021).

Drag events have always been ‘inclusive spaces’, referencing the safe spaces asserted by Rupp et al. (2010). Younger generations are being ‘exposed to LGBTQ+ education’ through the medium of drag, which is important in helping address the complex issues of gender, sexuality, and politics. The data collected highlighted that drag has become more popular amongst younger audience members. However, with the inclusion of families and a younger audience, it has meant that some performers have had to adapt their sets:

‘When doing those types of shows me and a lot of other queens all keep it PG to make sure no one gets offended or upset or even sees something a bit crude because at the end of the day drag was never targeted at a younger audience but if we perform at these types of events then that’s what we must do’ (Respondent 1)

Drag performers are modifying their performances based on potential target audiences to remove any adult content if anyone under 18 is in attendance. This further emphasises the growth and changing dynamic of audiences and highlights that drag is continuously becoming more accessible. The performers have to continually adapt to accommodate the needs of the new crowds, as highlighted within the research response data.

Drag events as a phenomenon and the effect on the performers

Jordan (2018) argues that the surge in popularity of drag culture is largely due to the growth of RPDR and the social media presence. Drag has become a mainstream phenomenon (Abraham, 2019) and the respondents recognise the mainstream visibility which drag has now captured, subsequently coinciding with the new audiences attending drag events. Thus, drag events have become more frequent and a core experience within the LGBTQ+

community. Drag has been given the platform to move from a niche market into the mainstream economy and created the recent exposure of drag artists and events.

The respondents had differing opinions on whether this exposure was positive or negative for the community. Drag has become more mainstream, and because of this, it has enabled more people to 'appreciate drag performances'. Similarly, another respondent suggested that the mainstream success of drag has helped to open people's minds to drag and drag culture:

'The mainstream success of TV shows like RuPaul's Drag Race has definitely helped to put drag on a bigger platform and open people's minds about a culture that has been existing in the shadows for so long.' (Respondent 11)

In contrast, one respondent claimed that although exposure to a new culture is positive, mainstream visibility means that the culture may be subject to change to 'fit the standard'. Similarly, drag queens are having to alter performances to accommodate new audiences which has created conflicting opinions on the mainstream visibility of drag.

'Positive, because it has opened new doors for us and given us a much wider audience, and therefore more understanding and acceptance from society. Negative, because it commercialised a subversive subculture and polished away its rough edges to fit mainstream expectations.' (Respondent 11)

These findings highlight the struggles of both the singular performers and drag culture itself, which many of the respondents described as a means of self-expression and art. This was a common theme prominent throughout the opinions of the respondents. One stated during their interview that the commercialisation of drag 'can only be a positive thing' for the community as 'queer representation' will subsequently lead to more opportunities. Therefore, it can be assumed based on these findings that the more exposure drag performers receive, the more their fanbase and event bookings will grow. Additionally, the changing dynamic of audiences engaging with drag queens presents the opportunity to enhance appreciation of all bases of the artform. Berkowitz and Belgrave (2010) states that drag queens still suffer discrimination, rejection and potential violence or hate crimes, and in this respect, it could also be deduced that more representation of the drag community will create enhanced levels of acceptance and awareness from prospective audiences at drag events.

Nevertheless, RuPaul has been criticised for commercialising drag, with some believing that what is portrayed on RPDR is only one perspective and not a true representation of the diversity of drag culture (Kelaidis, 2018). One respondent alluded to the fact that they felt they had been put in a box because of the show:

'There's now an expectation to be able to look like a Rugirl straight away and Be a specific type of way.' (Respondent 4)

While RPDR has been a catalyst for the growth of drag events, drag performers feel that their expectations fit the expectations set by RPDR. Effectively this can limit creativity and the representation of drag culture and the very communities that rely on such events to offer a sense of place for escapism them (Hemmatinezhad et al., 2010; Lee et al., 2004; Nicholson & Pearce, 2001; Park et al., 2008):

The lack of representation and diversity in RPDR is not acceptable either. We need more representation of Kings, non-binary performers, trans performers. (Respondent 6)

Thus, whilst RPDR has been fundamental in the growth of drag events and supporting spaces for people to celebrate this art form, there is a view from the respondents that for drag to be truly representative of the communities and audiences it serves, there is still a long way to go.

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to explore the evolving audience dynamic attending drag events in the UK from the perspective of drag performers and its effect on them. RuPaul and RPDR have undoubtedly been the catalyst propelling drag culture and drag events into the mainstream (RuPaulisation). With the growth in popularity of this artistic medium, there has been an increase in events to showcase and allow the communities who support it to celebrate it and feel a sense of place and escapism (Hemmatinezhad et al., 2010; Lee et al., 2004; Nicholson & Pearce, 2001; Park et al., 2008). Drag artists performing at drag events in the UK participated in this study to share their views on the changing audiences at drag events, the effect it has had on them, and their opinions on why this polarisation of drag has occurred.

The study revealed that drag culture has been dominating popular culture in recent years solely due to RuPaul. This was evident in all data collected from the respondents. All respondents credited the rise in drag culture to RPDR in some form, and many expressed that because of this, it had created new opportunities for the art form to be celebrated. Nevertheless, the findings demonstrate that even though many of the drag performers identify RuPaul and RPDR as having a positive impact on drag culture, the performers feel that there are also negative consequences. Some feel that their creativity has been stifled due to RPDR creating certain expectations for fans attending drag events. There is still a lack of diversity among performers themselves, and there is a need to ensure a wider representation of all facets of drag including drag kings. Moreover, the study's findings support the shift in audience demographics attending drag events (Baxter et al., 2021). It has been recognised that drag events have become more diverse, and they are now attended by gay males, the wider LGBTQ+ community, their allies, and fans inspired by RPDR.

The increase in drag events has created more spaces for LGBTQ+ communities to celebrate. These are inclusive spaces for those interested in the phenomenon, and this research has identified practical considerations that event managers should consider when delivering drag events. Commercially, as the audience dynamics change there is a need to ensure that the events are developed and promoted with this in mind. Additionally, event managers need to be more inclusive when considering drag event line-ups, including non-binary, trans, drag kings or cisgender female performers. Moreover, there is a concerted need to embed more diversity and inclusivity into event management education, utilising case studies like this to support teaching. Finally, as drag events are considered as safe spaces for the LGBTQ+ community, as the audiences diversifies, how are event managers ensuring that these safe spaces are not lost, but rather maintained.

It should be noted that there were some limitations when conducting this research. The primary data was collected during the global pandemic when drag events had been cancelled, hence many of the respondents were not performing. Additionally, the research is restricted to the views of drag performers from UK drag events, and consequently the

sample could be considered small. Nevertheless, the data collected was rich and allowed the study to explore the phenomenon of the evolving audiences at UK drag events.

Finally, more research into the effect that drag events have on the communities they serve is needed. It's evident that drag events affect both performers and audiences and continuing to explore how drag events support the lgbtq+ community is necessary. One such area is to explore the worldwide phenomenon of RPDR and explore it from the perspective of other destinations that have also experienced the growth of drag culture and drag events. Furthermore, another area to explore is the implications that drag events have had on the wellbeing of the performers, identifying how they are having to adapt their performances and the affect associated with this. As drag events continue to increase within society, studying the impact they have is important.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Claire Leer  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5615-4792>

References

- Abraham, A. (2017, April 14). *A brief history of drag in the art world*. Artsy. <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-history-drag-art>
- Abraham, A. (2019, August 10). 'Finally! A sport for us gay people!': How drag went mainstream. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2019/aug/10/how-drag-went-mainstream-rupaul-karen-from-finance-drag-sos>
- Adams, T. E. (2018). Looking out: Gay bars, safe spaces, and the pulse massacre. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 24(5), 338–339. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800417741390>
- Alexander, C. (2017). What can drag do for me? The multifaceted influences of RuPaul's drag race on the perth drag scene. In N. Brennan & D. Gudelunas (Eds.), *RuPaul's drag race and the shifting visibility of drag culture* (pp. 245–269). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-50618-0_17
- Ammaturo, F. R. (2016). Spaces of pride: A visual ethnography of gay pride parades in Italy and the United Kingdom. *Social Movement Studies*, 15(1), 19–40. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2015.1060156>
- Bachmann, C. L., & Gooch, B. (2018). *LGBT in Britain; Hate crime and discrimination*. https://www.stonewall.org.uk/system/files/lgbt_in_britain_hate_crime.pdf
- Balzer, C. (2005). The great drag queen hype: Thoughts on cultural globalisation and autochthony. *Paideuma*, 51, 111–131. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40341889>
- Barrera-Fernández, D., & Hernández-Escampa, M. (2018). Inclusion of people with reduced mobility in festivals: Perceptions and challenges at the guelaguetza festival, Mexico. In R. Finkel, B. Sharp, & M. Sweeney (Eds.), *Accessibility, inclusion, and diversity in critical event studies* (pp. 21–32). Routledge.
- Baxter, D., Jones, S., & Leer, C. (2021). Audience diversity and wellbeing at UK drag events. *Event Management*, 127–140. <https://doi.org/10.3727/152599521X16192004803656>
- Berkowitz, D., & Belgrave, L. L. (2010). "She works hard for the money": Drag queens and the management of their contradictory status of celebrity and marginality. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 39(2), 159–186. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241609342193>

- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2013). *Successful qualitative research: A practical guide for beginners*. sage.
- Braun, V., Clarke, V., Boulton, E., Davey, L., & McEvoy, C. (2020). The online survey as a qualitative research tool. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2020.1805550>
- Brennan, N., & Gudelunas, D. (2017). Drag culture, global participation and RuPaul’s drag race. In N. Brennan, & D. Gudelunas (Eds.), *Rupaul’s drag race and the shifting visibility of drag culture* (pp. 1–11). Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-50618-0>
- Bryman, A. (2016). *Social research methods*. Oxford university press.
- Cracker, M. (2017, January 9). *The girls who love queens: Drag’s biggest audience may soon be young women*. Slate. <https://slate.com/human-interest/2017/01/why-drag-queens-biggest-fans-are-increasingly-young-women.html>
- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches*. Sage.
- Dasher, K., & Finkel, R. (2020). Accessibility, diversity, and inclusion in the UK meetings industry. *Journal of Convention & Event Tourism*, 21(4), 283–307. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15470148.2020.1814472>
- Denscombe, M. (2017). *Ebook: The good research guide: For small-scale social research projects*. McGraw-Hill Education (UK).
- Deron, B. (2018). The evolution of the art of drag. In 33 historical stunning images. <https://allthatsinteresting.com/history-of-drag-queens>
- Divan, V., Cortez, C., Smelyanskaya, M., & Keatley, J. (2016). Transgender social inclusion and equality: A pivotal path to development. *Journal of the International AIDS Society*, 19, 20803. <https://doi.org/10.7448/IAS.19.3.20803>
- Duffy, M., Mair, J., & Waitt, G. (2018). Addressing community diversity: 9The role of the festival encounter. In R. Finkel, B. Sharp, & M. Sweeney (Eds.), *Accessibility, inclusion, and diversity in critical event studies* (pp. 9–20). Routledge.
- Faems, D., Muzio, D., Post, C., Prencipe, A., Sarala, R., & Wei, L. Q. (2018). Diversity Perspective on Management: Towards more complex conceptualizations of diversity in management studies. *Journal of Management Studies*.
- Feldman, Z., & Hakim, J. (2020). From *Paris is burning* to #dragrace: Social media and the celebration of drag culture. *Celebrity Studies*, 11(4), 386–401. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2020.1765080>
- Fernandez, M. (2017, August 22). *Behind the rise of ‘RuPaul’s drag race’*. Vulture.com. <https://www.vulture.com/2017/08/behind-the-rise-of-rupauls-drag-race.html>
- Finkel, R., Sharp, B., & Sweeney, M. (Eds.). (2018). *Accessibility, inclusion, and diversity in critical event studies*. Taylor & Francis.
- Fox, C. O., & Ore, T. E. (2010). (Un) covering normalised gender and race subjectivities in LGBT” safe spaces”. *Feminist Studies*, 36(3), 629–649. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27919125>
- Hemmatinezhad, M. A., Nia, F. R., & Kalar, A. M. (2010). The study of effective factors on the motivation of tourists participating in sport events. *Ovidius University Annals, Series Physical Education & Sport/Science, Movement & Health Series*, 10(2), 356–361.
- Herek, G. M. (2002). Gender gaps in public opinion about lesbians and gay men. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 66(1), 40–66. <https://doi.org/10.1086/338409>
- Hopkins, S. J. (2004). “Let the drag race begin” The rewards of becoming a queen. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 46(3–4), 135–149. https://doi.org/10.1300/J082v46n03_08
- Jordan, D. (2018). Why RuPaul’s drag race is big business. *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-44335007>
- Kaygalak-Celebi, S., Kaya, S., Ozeren, E., & Gunlu-Kucukaltan, E. (2019). Pride festivals as a space of self-expression: Tourism, body and place. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 545–566. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JOCM-01-2019-0026>
- Kelaidis, K. (2018, March 27). *Rupaul’s drag race ruined drag. The clyde fitch report*. <https://www.clydefitchreport.com/2018/03/drag-race-rupaul-trans-cis/>

- Lee, C. K., Lee, Y. K., & Wicks, B. E. (2004). Segmentation of festival motivation by nationality and satisfaction. *Tourism Management*, 25(1), 61–70. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0261-5177\(03\)00060-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0261-5177(03)00060-8)
- LeMaster, B. (2015). Discontents of being and becoming fabulous on *RuPaul's drag u*: Queer criticism in neoliberal times. *Women's Studies in Communication*, 38(2), 167–186. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2014.988776>
- Lombardi, E. L., Wilchins, R. A., Priesing, D., & Malouf, D. (2002). Gender violence: Transgender experiences with violence and discrimination. *Journal of homosexuality*, 42(1), 89–101. https://doi.org/10.1300/J082v42n01_05
- Montgomery, H. (2019). Is RuPaul's drag race good for drag? <http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20191002-is-rupauls-drag-race-a-good-thing-for-drag>
- Nicholson, R. E., & Pearce, D. G. (2001). Why do people attend events: A comparative analysis of visitor motivations at four South Island events? *Journal of Travel Research*, 39(4), 449–460. <https://doi.org/10.1177/004728750103900412>
- Nilles, B. (2018). How RuPaul's drag race became mainstream in a way no one ever thought possible. https://www.eonline.com/shows/peoples_choice_awards/news/910697/how-rupaul-s-drag-race-became-mainstream-in-a-way-no-one-ever-thought-possible
- Oliver, I. (2018). Is this the golden age of drag? Yes. and No. *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/17/arts/drag-queens-rupaul-drag-race.html>
- Park, K. S., Reisinger, Y., & Kang, H.-J. (2008). Visitors' motivation for attending the south beach wine and food festival, Miami beach, Florida. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, 25(2), 161–181. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10548400802402883>
- Platt, L., & Finkel, R. (2018). Special issue on equality and diversity in the professional planned events sector. *Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events*, 10(2), 113–116. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19407963.2018.1418707>
- Pritchard, A., Morgan, N. J., Sedgley, D., Khan, E., & Jenkins, A. (2000). Sexuality and holiday choices: Conversations with gay and lesbian tourists. *Leisure Studies*, 19(4), 267–282. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02614360050118832>
- Rhodebeck, L. (2018). Issue-relevant values and opinions about gay rights: Beyond equality and morality. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 65(3), 379–405. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2017.1317476>
- Rupp, L. J., & Taylor, V. (2015). *Drag queens at the 801 cabaret*. University of Chicago Press.
- Rupp, L. J., Taylor, V., & Shapiro, E. I. (2010). Drag queens and drag kings: The difference gender makes. *Sexualities*, 13(3), 275–294. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460709352725>
- Santone, M. (2019). Drag culture gets watered down by mainstream TV. <https://cccadvocate.com/10890/opinion/drag-culture-gets-watered-down-by-mainstream-tv/>
- Schechner, R. (2003). *Performance theory*. Routledge.
- Shapiro, M. (2016). I'm Northwestern's president. Here's why safe spaces for students are important. Northwestern (originally appeared in *The Washington Post* on January 15, 2016). [https://news.northwestern.edu/stories/2016/01/opinion-washpo-safe-space?_escaped_fragment_ =](https://news.northwestern.edu/stories/2016/01/opinion-washpo-safe-space?_escaped_fragment_=)
- Shastri, P. (2020). Drag culture: From underground ballroom movement to mainstream fashion. *Times of India*. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/readersblog/straight-outtarunway/drag-culture-from-underground-ballroom-movement-to-mainstreamfashion-25397/>
- Siddons, E. (2019, March 17). *The extraordinary rise of drag brunch: a dining delight or a betrayal of queer history?* The guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2019/mar/17/the-extraordinary-rise-of-drag-brunch-a-dining-delight-or-a-betrayal-of-queer-history>
- Stokes, R. (2008). Tourism strategy making: Insights to the events tourism domain. *Tourism Management*, 29(2), 252–262. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2007.03.014>
- Taylor, V., & Rupp, L. J. (2004). Chicks with dicks, men in dresses: What it means to be a drag queen. *Journal of homosexuality*, 46(3–4), 113–133. https://doi.org/10.1300/J082v46n03_07
- Tewksbury, R. (1994). Gender construction and the female impersonator: The process of transforming “he” to “she”. *Deviant Behavior*, 15(1), 27–43. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01639625.1994.9967956>
- Waltz, A. (2020). The popularity of drag brunches and other events show the scene's mainstream appeal in Pittsburgh. <https://www.pghcitypaper.com/pittsburgh/the-popularity-of-drag-brunches-and-other-events-show-the-scenes-mainstream-appeal-in-pittsburgh/Content?oid=16509801>