

Gender Performativity and Self-Perception: Drag as Masquerade

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Abstract

Research has shown that gay men are more prone to body image disorders than their heterosexual counterparts. This mixed methods exploratory study investigated the levels of self-esteem, body-esteem levels, and femininity in a group of drag queens in the Dallas, Texas area. Participants were interviewed and completed the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, the Personal Attributes Questionnaire, and the Body-Esteem Scale. Results showed that the participants scored above average on levels of femininity, and although the participants did not have lower than average self-esteem scores, there is a correlation between high femininity scores and low male body-esteem scores. This study was limited by the small number of participants, but does indicate a need for further investigation into the self-perception challenges faced by drag queens.

Keywords: drag queens, self-esteem, body-esteem, femininity, masquerade

1. Introduction

David Harris (2005) in his book, *Diary of a Drag Queen*, says that people are generally more tolerant of drag queens than they are of homosexuals because drag queens have become staples of Hollywood films and are “therefore an endearing object of amused pity” (p. 15). Simply think of the tragic characters in *To Wong Foo*, *Thanks for Everything Julia Newmar*, Nathan Lane’s character, Starina, in *The Bird Cage*, Lola in *Kinky Boots*, Dame Edna, or even drag legend, RuPaul. Regrettably, there are many people who still perceive drag queens as freaks and failed men. Why else would a man want to act and look effeminate? Why would they want to marginalize themselves even further from the mainstream? Is there a motivation for performing that is so great it offsets the stigma of gender bending? Even within the gay community, drag queens have been stigmatized as sexually promiscuous, drug-addicted drunks. Many gay men have an aversion to those who embody the femininity from which they are always trying dissociate themselves because it perpetuates the view that gay men have failed at manhood.

Through a previous project, it was found that the men who chose to perform in drag were self-described as shy and not of the prescribed standard of gay beauty (Strubel, 2010). Subjects repeatedly mentioned that performing in drag is a way of drawing attention to themselves, attention they did not receive out of drag. In comparison to society’s prescribed ideal of gay men, the drag queen’s male personas are often plain, shy, very thin or grossly overweight, and at times, “trollish”. They are the men who are ignored by the perfectly polished, well-toned gay men found at gyms, on the fashion runways, or in popular media. The masquerade of gender allows them to try on a new identity, one whereby they may receive the attention they desire. For example, drag queen, Lauren Richards, says that when she’s in drag, “I feel like I am a movie star or some great actor...because when I am out of drag no one comes up to me randomly and asks to take pictures with me” (Strubel, 2010).

In asking what motivates a man to choose to perform in drag, especially when it is seen as such a contemptible act in contemporary western society, this exploratory study posited the following hypotheses:

1. Drag queens have low self-esteem as gay men.
2. Drag queens are hyperfeminine men, more feminine than the average gay man.
3. Drag queens have low body esteem as men, and there is a direct correlation between low self-esteem and low male body-esteem in drag queens.
4. Drag queens have higher body-esteem as their female persona compared to their male persona.
5. Drag queens with high femininity scores will have higher body-esteem when in their drag persona compared with their male persona.

It was decided to perform an exploratory study in order to determine which type of research design would produce the most valuable data and to determine the appropriateness of the questions and scales created for this research project.

2. Literature Review

2.1. What is Drag?

Drag queen is a term that has been popping up everywhere due to the popularity of *RuPaul's Drag Race* and *RuPaul's Drag U*, airing on the Logo Channel. However, many people still misuse the term and employ it when talking about any man dressed in women's attire. Drag queens, first and foremost, are not transvestites. A transvestite is generally a heterosexual man with a pathological fetish for women's attire (Transvestite, 2010). Drag queens are performers, and many prefer the term female impersonator to drag queen, especially those whose performance entails celebrity impersonations. The drag queen is a self-identified man who has no desire to live as a woman, nor become a woman. They are not to be confused with the transgendered and transsexual individuals who do live as women and even try to physically become more female. Some transgendered individuals are performing female impersonators, but by definition, are not drag queens. Within the drag queen category, there are further subcategories based on performance style (Taylor & Rupp, 2004). The camp queens are the clowns who perform theatrical drag. They emphasize the ironies of life in an exaggerated, yet humorous, manner. They focus on highlighting the subordination of women and the superiority of men in our society (Niles, 2004; Schact & Underwood, 2004). Camp characters are usually based on tragic or comic, strong, rebellious women such as Marilyn Monroe, Joan Crawford, Cher, Patti LaBelle, and even Lady Gaga. The camp queens use hyperfeminine facial expressions, gestures, makeup, and carriage to capture their characters (Strubel, 2010).

Regardless of the genre of drag, there is an unquestionably strong emphasis on mocking hyperfemininity and ridiculing female gender stereotypes. Many people incorrectly believe the focus on female failings is a form of derision. Drag queens vehemently deny the misogynistic implications, claiming it is actually a satire of prescribed gender roles created by heterosexual men. They love to draw attention to, and challenge, the sometimes ridiculous, gender roles and gender boundaries we have accepted as normal for years. They hope the scathing caricatures will especially enlighten women on the absurdness of the stereotypes and gender roles they've been subjected to by a dominant male society. There are many reasons an individual chooses to perform in drag. Several of which will be explored in this paper. Most drag queens frequently refer to the "educational" potentials of drag, as mentioned previously. They take to the stage with the hopes of educating and empowering the gay and straight communities alike. Dallas drag queen, Jenna Skyy, says he uses the stage to "create a shift in power between himself and the heterosexual audience, in hopes that they will reflect upon and question the dichotomous gender structure created by a heterosexual society" (Strubel, 2010, p. 13).

2.2. Gender Identity & Self-Esteem

For many, drag performance is a way of negotiating one's gender identity. Drag allows confused individuals an outlet for gender experimentation when they feel ambiguity with their own identity. The drag identity is neither masculine nor feminine, but rather a complex collective of characteristics that challenges society's traditionally polarized view of gender. Essentially, the drag queen creates a third gender category in a society where being gay means the individual lacks masculinity and, subsequently, power. Performing in drag and dominating the stage gives the individual a means of attaining masculinity and power, and allows them to challenge the dominant structure of society and question straight male privilege (Wilchins, 2004).

The gay and straight communities often hold local drag queen characters in high regard and give them celebrity status (Schact & Underwood, 2004; Strubel, 2010). The admiration of the audience and community helps to build up the self-esteem of the drag performers. In a study conducted by Steven Hopkins (2004, p. 140), drag queens "with little or no conventionally marketable talents" confessed that they were not only making money, but receive attention through drag performance. *RuPaul's Drag U* on Logo, a spin-off of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, is a new program that focuses on transforming less than attractive straight women into divas. The drag queen "professors" on the show advise women on dress, proper makeup application, body movement, and creating an overall [sassy] attitude. In an interview, RuPaul said that the show teaches the contestants confidence and empowerment and how to take charge of their own femininity (Brabham, 2010). In fact, the premise of both of his shows, *RuPaul's Drag U* and *RuPaul's Drag Race*, is a message of self-esteem and empowerment to all who feel less than confident in their bodies (gay, straight, and transgendered).

2.3. Masquerade & Self Esteem

Masquerade is defined as “an action or appearance that is mere disguise or show” (Masquerade, 2010). It is to pretend to be someone you are not, or to put on a deceptive appearance. The key is that masquerade creates anonymity and liberation from restrictive social norms, thereby facilitating expressions that are otherwise suppressed (Gargano, 2007). Gender is, itself, a performative act. Everyday we perform our prescribed gender roles through style. Women dress in clothing that society has appointed to women and men dress in men’s clothing. According to Joanne Entwistle (2007), gender is dislocated from the body, making masculinity and femininity arbitrary. If we are able to “put on” femininity and masculinity, then gender is not natural. As mentioned previously, performers see their drag character as an extension of their male self, but recognize that it is clearly a separate entity from their male persona (Taylor & Rupp, 2004; Taylor & Rupp, 2005). They often create a character that talks like a vulgar man, but takes on the physical appearance of a hyperfeminine woman who challenges gender ideologies. They do not want to be lumped into rigid categories that say all men should look and behave in one way, nor do they want to be marginalized because of their femininity.

The drag persona often expresses those aspects of the drag queen’s male persona “that the performer may not feel comfortable expressing as a male, and thus the female persona acts as a conduit for personal expression” (Hopkins, 2004, p. 145). Dressing up in drag provides a mask to hide under, especially for the introverted gay male. Out of drag he may shy away from approaching men, but the masquerade of drag provides such a strong cover the drag queen is even compelled to harass straight men. In this case, drag provides a sense of security that protects them against other people. The drag costume creates the illusion of femaleness, which allows the individual to “avoid the social pressures that are required of them when dressed as men” (Niles, 2004, p. 47). The transformation into an alter ego disguises the individual enough to allow them to dismiss all of the rules of conduct and interaction that they would be expected to abide by as their male persona. In drag, an individual can openly flirt with and fondle men they would normally never approach. They can be loud, rude, and crude to anyone they encounter without the fear of repercussions. If their behavior goes a little to far, they can always “blame the wig”. Most queens feel that they are unaccountable for what they do in character (Berkowitz & Belgrave, 2010). The costume allows them to get away with a risqué behavior that the male persona never would.

2.4. Body Image Disorders and Body Esteem in Gay Men

From birth, young boys are indoctrinated with what it means to be a man. One belief they hold is that being a man entails a certain set of attitudes and behaviors “that exude independence, a preoccupation with career, competitiveness, physical strength, aggressiveness, and courage” (Crosscope-Happel et al., 2000, p. 366). When young boys have difficulty attaining these goals emotional isolation is likely to occur, resulting in problematic behavior. In western society, males are told that they need to be muscular and defined, lean and fat-free, and to maintain a mature successful look. Boys are culturally encouraged to eat “heartily”, yet it is unacceptable for them to be overweight. Consequently, males become trapped between getting bigger and trying to stay slim (Lysne et al., 2002; Philpott & Sheppard, 1998). Even men who are physically fit may not be completely satisfied with their bodies because they still may not meet the unrealistic standards. By and large, the literature agrees that gay men express a greater degree of body dissatisfaction than heterosexual men (Morgan & Arcelus, 2009; Siconolfi et al., 2009; Udall-Weiner, 2009). For many years homosexual men have faced prejudice and persecution because of their “abnormal” sexual orientation. The stigma, imposed on them by an unaccepting society, has scarred many of their self-images.

In the 1980’s the AIDS epidemic inspired a new health consciousness among gay men and immersion into the gym culture. Muscularity soon became synonymous with a healthy, AIDS-free body (Pope, Phillips, & Olivardia, 2002). These irrational perceptions of AIDS and body build have been termed AIDSphobia. Out of fear of contracting AIDS, gay men found themselves discriminating potential partners based on their body size and shape. They believed it impossible for a man with a well-toned physique to be HIV positive. To look young and virile communicated a healthy status. Today, many gay men still equate physical beauty with health (Pope et al., 2002). Countless gay men, wanting to contradict the effeminate stigma set upon them by the general heterosexual public, also adopt the standards of muscularity determined by straight society (Harris, 1997; Morgan & Arcelus, 2009; Udall-Weiner, 2009). To many people, the hypermuscular body itself has become synonymous with gay narcissism. The well-toned body is still considered a definite indication of a man’s homosexual orientation (Harris, 1997).

Literature suggests, the fervent desire to look thin, youthful, and attractive is causing discontent for many gay men (Epel et al., 1996; French et al., 1996; Siever, 1994; Silberstein et al., 1989; Williamson, 1999; Williamson & Hartley, 1998; Yager et al., 1988). The current ideal in the gay subculture is a lean, yet toned and defined body. This is the image men find attractive in other men. And gay men, like heterosexual women, wish to make themselves attractive to men, because men tend to evaluate romantic partners on physical appearances to a greater extent than women (Epel et al., 1996; French et al., 1996; Siever, 1994; Silberstein et al., 1989; Williamson, 1999; Williamson & Hartley, 1998; Yager et al., 1988).

Again, the gay community has established a body standard of thinness, youthfulness, and overall attractiveness, where muscularity will grant sexual desirability and power (Sinonofli et al., 2009). Preoccupation with body image is damaging to mental health, and the idea that a standard body type must be met reinforces the idea that body modification is the preferred route to improving self-esteem (Garner, 1997). Emphasis on physical appearance has also contributed to making Body Image Disorders (BID) feel more culturally normative for gay men. Many men with BID often go untreated, further perpetuating their maladaptive attitudes and behavior (Garner, 1997; Silberstein et al., 1989). The popular media often defines what is accepted as attractive in heterosexual and homosexual culture. According to a study conducted by John Morgan and Jon Arcelus (2009), external influences from the media (men's health magazines, dating service adverts, and pornography) are stronger for gay men than heterosexual men. The constant barrage of perfectly sculpted images is certain to have adverse effects on anyone who is "less than perfect".

Gettelman and Thompson (1993) also suggested that gay men might also be predisposed to body image disorders because of an internalization of gay stereotypes. This stereotyping is concurrent with the concept of both internalized and externalized homophobia. Gay men in Western society are often stereotyped as abnormal and physically inadequate. A gay man, insecure with his own sexuality, may internalize the culturally imposed value of hypermasculinity, thinking that a bigger body will compensate for his perceived lack of "manliness" and tainted social status (Pope et al., 2000; Sinconolfi et al., 2009). It is the straight man's body that is worthy of being seen and worshipped (Harris, 1997). By internalizing the prejudices of society, a gay man is often left vulnerable to revulsion towards his own body and a low self-esteem (Williamson & Hartely, 1998).

2.5 Hyperfemininity

Hyprfemininity is defined as an "exaggerated adherence to a stereotypic feminine gender role" (Murnen & Byrne, 1991, p. 480). We now know that many drag queens create hyperfeminine characters for their female impersonations to mock heterosexual society's ascribed gender codes. And many believe that there is a connection between the hyperfeminine characters and the degree of femininity of the individual. However, Steven Schacht and Lisa Underwood (2004) suggest that the relationship between gender identity and the drag persona is too complicated to make these assumptions. To make these correlations also plays into society's view of gay men as universally effeminate.

3. Methodology

Survey methodology was used to test the five hypotheses. The self-esteem variable was measured using Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965). The degree of femininity variable was measured using a variation of the Personal Attributes Questionnaire (Spence & Helmreich, 1978). And the body esteem variable was measured using a variation of the Body-Esteem Scale (Franzoi & Shields, 1984). Data was partially gathered using an online quantitative questionnaire and analyzed using frequencies, means, and correlation analysis. The survey link was sent to three drag queens in the Dallas area. They then helped to distribute the survey by forwarding the survey link to other drag queens and posting it to their facebook pages. The survey was completely anonymous, however, several participants contacted the author to offer more information and suggestions. Through this contact, it was learned that several of the drag queens came from states other than Texas. Therefore, generalizations cannot be limited solely to the drag performers of the Dallas area.

To supplement the quantitative aspect of this project, unstructured interviews were also conducted with several drag queens in the Dallas, Texas area. The interviews were particularly useful because they allowed for an in-depth look at perceptions, attitudes, and other internal processes that could not be captured in the quantitative survey (Touliatos & Compton, 1988). The unstructured interview format also encouraged the respondents to be more open and expressive. The interview questions were based on the same questions that were presented in the online survey.

Observations were made for approximately 4 months on various blog sites dedicated to drag queens, such as CarrieFairfield.com. This allowed for easy observations of a population that is not always accessible to the general public.

3.1. Survey Sample

A total of 25 individuals responded to the survey. Of the 25 surveys, fourteen were completed and usable for analysis. Eight of the fourteen respondents had participated in drag performance at some point in their life. The other six respondents were gay men who did not perform in drag, but provided a control group for this exploratory study.

4. Survey Results

4.1. Hypothesis 1

A one-sample t-test was performed to compare the self-esteem scores of the drag queens against the test average of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. The results showed that there the self-esteem scores of the drag queens ($M=27.75$, $SD=4.59$) were significantly different from the hypothetical mean score ($m=20$) of the self-esteem scale, $t(7)=4.7753$, $p=0.002$, $p<0.05$. The drag queen subjects ($M=27.75$, $SD=4.59$) did not demonstrate lower self-esteem scores than the non-drag queen control group ($M=31.33$, $SD=7.17$), $t(12)=1.14$, $p=.28$, $p>0.05$.

4.2. Hypothesis 2

A one sample t-test showed a statistically significant difference between the femininity scores of the drag queens ($M=45.38$, $SD=6.44$) against the mean for the Personal Attributes Questionnaire ($m=30$), $t(7)=6.76$, $p=0.0003$, $p<0.05$. Drag queens have higher than average femininity scores. However, the same one sample t-test for the control group also shows that gay men, in general, have a higher than average femininity score ($M=43$, $SD=3.63$), $t(5)=8.76$, $p=0.0003$, $p<0.05$. There was no statistical significance between the means of the drag queen sample and the control group. One group was not significantly more feminine than the other. An unpaired t-test comparing the means of the masculinity and femininity scores on the Personal Attributes Questionnaire for the drag queen sample shows that there is a statistically significant difference between the means of the masculinity ($M=31.13$, $SD=5.59$) and femininity scores ($M=45.38$, $SD=6.44$), $t(7)=4.73$, $p<0.05$. The same test run on the control group shows a significant difference in their femininity ($M=43.00$, $SD=3.63$) and masculinity scores ($M=30.83$, $SD=2.14$) as well, $t(10)=7.07$, $p<0.05$. Femininity scores were significantly higher than the masculinity scores for all gay men taking the survey.

4.3. Hypothesis 3

A one sample t-test comparing the body esteem of drag queens ($M=95.29$, $SD=19.34$) to the mean of the Body Esteem scale ($m=72.5$) is significant statistically significant, $t(6)=3.12$, $p=.0206$, $p<0.05$. Drag queens surprisingly had higher than average male body esteem. An unpaired t-test comparing the male body-esteem of drag queens ($M=95.29$, $SD=19.34$) and that of the control group ($M=99.33$, $SD=25.20$) shows no statistically significant difference in means, $t(11)=0.33$, $p>0.05$. A Pearson Product moment-correlation analysis between self-esteem scores and male body esteem scores for drag queens shows a significant association ($r(7)=0.66$, $p=0.10$). There is also a significant correlation between self-esteem and male body esteem for the gay control group either ($r(6)=0.767$, $p=0.08$).

4.4. Hypothesis 4

A paired t-test between the means for male body esteem ($M=95.29$, $SD=19.34$) and the female-persona body esteem of drag queens ($M=97.57$, $SD=21.87$) did not show any statistical significance, $t(6)=0.45$, $p>0.05$. However, for four out of the seven drag queen respondents, their female body esteem score was higher than their male body- esteem score. Again, it was not considered a statistically significant difference.

4.5. Hypothesis 5

A Pearson Product Moment Correlation Test shows that there is a significant correlation between a drag queen's femininity score and her female body esteem, $r(7)=.867$, $p=0.01$. The higher the femininity score, the higher the female body esteem score. Correlation analysis also shows a negative correlation between a drag queen's femininity score and male body esteem score, $r(7)=-0.83$, $p=0.02$. The higher the femininity score, the lower the male body esteem score. In fact, for all subjects, the higher the femininity score, the lower the male body-esteem score, $r(12)=-0.64$, $p=0.02$.

5. Research Summary and Conclusion

Through the quantitative component of this study, it was shown that drag queen performers do not necessarily have a lower than average self-esteem. However, the qualitative component (open-ended questions and observations) showed the opposite. Drag queens are actually very self-deprecating and self judgmental. Drag queen, Jenna Skyy, said during an interview, "Take a whole lotta ugly to get to pretty" when asked about his male persona. He even lamented the fact that Jenna received much more attention than Joe. He appeared quite distressed that men frequently approach him (when out of drag) only to ask him about Jenna and her next appearance in Dallas. Just as with the heterosexual population, gay society is inundated with the surreal images spread across American media. Whether the media images come from gay erotica and pornography or mainstream advertising, these images set the standards for gay male beauty. Gay men, much like their heterosexual counterparts, compare themselves to these media images, as well as to their own peers.

According to Leon Festinger (1954), we as humans are inclined to compare ourselves with others, stemming from the drive for self-evaluation. Generally we tend to compare to others who are roughly comparable to ourselves because we are interested in accurate self-perception. In this case, gay men will compare themselves to other gay men (peers and media figures). Social comparison to others with supposed superior attributes can result in self-deprecation and body image disturbances. Future research should include more subjects in the empirical portion of the study to ensure validity of self-esteem assessment. It is possible that with more subjects the results will match the data from the qualitative portion of this study.

The surveys have shown that men who perform in drag do not have low body-esteem scores as men, and a subject's low male body esteem does not appear to impact his choice to perform in drag. Men do not necessarily perform in drag simply because they have low male body esteem. Self-esteem did not appear to have a significant correlation to a drag queen's male body esteem either. Again, this can only be concluded with a future study using more research subjects. Drag queens do not appear to statistically have significantly higher body esteem as their female character than as their male persona. Performing in drag does not necessarily increase one's positive perception of their body. However, the mean scores of body esteem were slightly higher for the individuals in their drag persona versus their male persona (see Table 1). In addition, surveys and interviews did show that there are certain areas of the body that cause more distress for the drag queen as a male than when they are dressed as a female and vice versa. For example, one individual had a very critical view of his chest as a male, but as a female, he had very strong positive feelings towards his chest. A large chest is considered an asset to a drag performer who wants to create cleavage, and natural cleavage is regarded more favorably than prosthetics. The change of persona generated a transfer of corporeal satisfaction to different areas of the body. This is an area that should be explored more in future studies.

The transgendered individuals who participated in this study also revealed an issue that needs to be explored apart from other drag performers in future research. Because they are living daily as women, the male body esteem scores of the transgendered individuals significantly skewed the data. Scores were considerably low, or they simply left that part of the survey incomplete. In the future, these individuals should be analyzed separately or dropped from the data set all together.

Unexpectedly, this exploratory study revealed that femininity scores were an important factor in analyzing this population. Subjects (drag and non-drag), in general, have higher than average femininity scores. Performance in drag, however, does not mean that the man is more feminine than his non-drag performing counterparts, because the non-drag performers in this study also had high femininity scores. This can possibly be attributed to their acceptance of the fluidity of gender. And to measure femininity against masculinity is to continue to put gender into dichotomous categories, which the LGBT community strongly opposes. It appears that the body esteem in drag queens is more related to their degree of femininity rather than their self-esteem. There is a direct correlation between high femininity scores and higher female body esteem scores in drag queens. There is a direct correlation between high femininity scores and low male body esteem scores of all participants (drag and non-drag). This is not surprising considering Body Image Disorder is traditionally considered a feminine or female affliction. In a future, larger-scale study it should be specified on the self-esteem survey whether the drag queens should answer from the perspective of their male or female persona. Possibly they would have responded differently to the questions from the perspective of their drag persona rather than their male persona.

In the future, a gender-neutral body esteem survey needs to be developed specifically for drag queens because gender identity plays a large role in one's self-perception. Perhaps a survey method is needed that takes into consideration individuals who make drastic changes in identity on a regular basis. In conclusion, this exploratory study has shown, on the whole, that there are certain elements such as femininity and body esteem, which are deserving of more scrutiny in a larger scale study. For example, it is likely that performing in drag can help individuals to become more confident as men. Despite the self-deprecating behavior of the drag queens and their vocalized dissatisfaction with their bodies, some of them have obviously transferred some of the esteem and confidence from the female persona to their male persona, as evidenced in the overall above average self-esteem and body esteem scores. It is also possible that they have used drag performance as a replacement for gym activity and bulking up to alleviate body esteem and self esteem issues within the scrutinizing gay community. Drag, for these individuals, has become an alternative for receiving the attention they seek from their gay cohorts. Drag performance is, in a sense, therapeutic when it comes to body esteem. The drag queens "distill the power of drag and own it when the wigs come off" (Brabham, 2010, ¶ 5).

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Table 1: Ratings of self-esteem, body esteem, femininity, and masculinity

	Self-esteem	Body Esteem	Femininity Score	Masculinity Score
Drag Persona				
M	----	97.57	----	----
SD	----	21.87	----	----
Male Persona				
M	27.75	95.29	45.38	31.13
SD	4.59	19.34	6.44	5.59
Control Group				
M	31.33	99.33	43	30.83
SD	7.17	25.20	3.63	2.14

Note. Ratings are shown for drag queen participants (n=7) as their female and male persona, and ratings for the gay control group (n=6). M= mean, SD= standard deviation.