

WIGS, HIGH HEELS, AND CAMERA LENSES: A LONGITUDINAL CONTENT
ANALYSIS OF DRAG QUEENS IN FILM

By

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I. INTRODUCTION

Media is an ever present, rapidly changing element of our world and plays an important role in the depiction of characters with whom we are not readily acquainted. Characters are defined for us in television, movies, and print when we do not know them in our own lives. The film industry often fills in the gaps for those of us who do not know anyone who performs drag. With Hollywood being a main architect of popular culture, films are created and designed primarily for the entertainment of others, chiefly through heteronormative ideology. In the past twenty years, drag queens have gained in popularity in television shows such as *RuPaul's Drag Race* (2009-present) and movies such as *The Birdcage* (1996) and *Kinky Boots* (2005) and are not excluded from being portrayed through a heteronormative lens. Rising in popularity, drag queens have often been associated with exaggerated feminine stereotypes that depict them as humorous and overly dramatic.

Some scholars claim that these representations reiterate the binary gender and sexual system (Schacht 2000), yet others illustrate that drag queens have the capacity to challenge that system (Butler 1993; Rupp and Taylor 2011; Mann 2011; Horowitz 2012). Utilizing a qualitative content analysis of ten films from 1982 until 2005 that feature drag queens, I have analyzed how drag queens are depicted in the films and examined how they interact within relationships with others. This thesis explores the depiction of drag queens in film. My analysis is framed by symbolic interactionism, performativity, and queer theory. Examining how the depictions of drag queens have changed over time gives us insight into whether the cultural image of the drag queen has changed or whether the depictions continue to reflect only the “campy” side of drag. Studying depictions of drag

queens, a marginalized group, helps to explore prevalent gendered and sexual stereotypes, and adds to theories of performativity and heteronormativity. There is no comprehensive sociological analysis of drag queens in film; hence, this study will add to current literature about gender and sexuality in film.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Gender scholars have speculated about the origins of drag culture. Some authors place the emergence of modern drag in the late 1900s and others associate modern drag with the Stonewall Riots that occurred in June of 1969 (Rupp and Taylor 2003). The literature on drag queens and dragging is vast, and the drag subculture has been studied in varying ways. These studies discuss how drag adds to stereotypes about gay men and that drag echoes the masculine/ feminine hetero/homosexual dichotomies in our culture. On the other hand, some scholars claim that drag has the ability to break down this dichotomy and has the capacity to help others see flaws in a dichotomous system. This review discusses the difficulty researchers have with defining “drag queen,” methodological approaches to drag research, intersectionality within current research, racial and gender stereotypes found in films with drag queens, how drag queens negotiate, balance, and navigate space, theoretical perspectives utilized in studies of drag, and the lived experiences of drag queens.

Drag Queen Defined

Scholars define what it means to be a drag queen in several ways, and studies suggest that drag queens, themselves, have definitions of what it means to be a drag queen. According to Taylor and Rupp (2005), Sushi, one of the drag queens they interviewed was unsure what it meant to be a drag queen. She says:

She began to dress in drag in high school and for a time was a street prostitute in Los Angeles. At first, she thought that wanting to wear women’s clothing meant that she wanted to be a woman, but then she came to realize that it just meant that she was a drag queen. “I know I’m a drag queen; I finally realized that I’m a gay man who puts on women’s clothing and looks good.” Yet she still worries that she is really a closeted transgendered person. One night we asked her the difference between being a drag queen and being transgendered and she replied, “A drag

queen is someone like Kylie who has never thought about cutting her dick off.”

Through this interaction, one can see that Sushi considers a drag queen an individual who has never considered sex-reassignment surgery. On a similar note, Kirk argues that drag queens are gay men dressed as women, that “passing” is men disguised as women, often referred to as transsexuals, and adds that drag queens are “individuals with an acknowledged penis, who have no desire to have it removed...” (2004:172). Kirk (2004) goes on to say that “passing” is a feeling of the need to hide one’s identity for fear of oppression. Additionally, Rupp and Taylor’s (2006) interviews show a fairly uniform answer in regard to “passing.” The drag queens in their study tend to consider passing as a desire to be a woman. Some of the drag queens described times in their lives when they chose to pass as women but have reverted back to more masculine characteristics. Though, they do not necessarily continue to retain these masculine characteristics. Taylor and Rupp state, “The drag queens at the 801 [a Key West, Florida night club], at least some of them, have slipped back and forth between genders” (2006:13).

Taylor, Rupp, and Gamson (2004) describe drag’s long history in the United States. Beginning in the mid-19th century, drag as a form of entertainment, emerged. Its role in gay male communities dates to the 1920s and is considered by some as the first form of pre-political, public resistance by the modern gay and lesbian movement. Since its early days, they note that drag has played a role in rallies and demonstrations for other large movements. According to these authors, “tactical repertoires” consists of contestation, intentionality, and collective identity. Through their work with the drag queens at the 801 Cabaret, a nightclub in Key West, Florida, the authors claim that these drag queens create contestation through confusing “sex and gender categories, meanings,

and experiences” (23) for audience members. Intentionality is introduced at the beginning of shows through spoken political statements. Finally, collective identity emerges, first through gay collective identity that is in opposition to heterosexuality. Through this opposition, Taylor, Rupp, and Gamson (2004) specify that it gives the drag queens an opportunity to “undermine identity classifications, reach across differences, and expand gender and sexual categories” (31).

Qualitative Methods in Research on Drag Queens

Studies of drag queens employ qualitative methods; none have used quantitative methods. Because drag queens are a small and rather dispersed population, conducting a large-scale quantitative study would be much more difficult. Even more importantly, trying to assemble a large yet random sample of drag queens is nearly impossible. Some researchers spend a great deal of time in the field and utilize multiple forms of qualitative methods for attaining data. For instance, Rupp and Taylor (2003; 2004; 2005; 2005; 2006; 2010; 2011), at times in conjunction with other authors, have written prolifically about the experiences of drag queens. Their studies of drag queens are all based on a qualitative study of drag queens in Key West, Florida. The authors utilized “life histories, observations of [the drag queen’s] performances, and focus groups with audience members” (2004:114) to get a better understanding of the inner workings of drag queens, their life experiences, and community impact. Horowitz (2012) spent nine months with performers and included “extensive participant observation, including twice-weekly attendance at performances, presence for backstage preparations and rehearsals, travel to engagements in and out of Cleveland, group and individual interviews, and informal meetings” (305). Combining these methods enabled Horowitz (2012) to give an in-depth

breakdown comparatively of what drag queens and drag kings produce culturally through gender and sexual identities. Through eight years of personal ethnographic experience, Schacht (2002; 2004) explores the fluidity of gender and utilizes his research on drag queens as a teaching tool in his classroom. Lastly, Berkowitz and Belgrave (2010) discuss the contradictory statuses of celebrity and marginality that drag queens experience. The authors discuss that, though they have marginalized statuses both economically and socially, drag queens utilize “doing masculinity” while in drag and that this creates “situational power, control over the audience, and income” (179), all benefits of the celebrity status of drag queen. Their analyses about drag culture are taken from an ethnographic study consisting of in-depth interviews and observational data of participants. Each of these studies allows us to understand the everyday experiences of drag queens by utilizing qualitative methods.

Intersectionality

An intersectional approach is employed by several researchers in order to explore the complexity and the nature of the lived experiences of drag queens. Intersectionality is the idea that researchers must look at the overlapping identities of any one individual to better understand their experiences and oppressions, including race, class, gender, ethnicity, ability, and/or age. In reference to early intersectional analyses, Baca Zinn (2012) notes that “while these works were situated in the lives and experiences of African American women, they offer important insights and striking directions for reinterpreting the experiences of other groups of women as well” (29), important to drag research and this study in particular. In Judith Butler’s (1993) discussion of identity formation, she argues that utilizing “queering” in queer research, as race has been used in the service of

racism, should be a form of inquiry. She maintains that the deconstruction of queer is not a hindrance but rather a helpful way to understand the constructions of homosexualities and the misuse that the term not only employs but enjoys. In addition to racial, ethnic, regional, and national backgrounds of their studied group of drag queens, Rupp and Taylor (2003; 2004; 2005; 2011) also find that economic stability is a difficulty for some of the drag queens they studied. They found that “The one they [the drag troupe] really worry about is David, who has had bladder cancer, a heart attack, and an aneurysm, among other things. All of this without medical insurance, and of course when he is ill or recovering from surgery, he can’t work thus has no income” (165). This example highlights how medical bills, low wages, and an inability to work contribute to economic marginality of drag queens. They also describe the different gender and sexual identities held by the drag queens of their research and the fluidity of the drag queens slipping between genders. Milla is described as a drag queen that decided she wanted to be a woman and began hormone treatment, but then, after having considered sex-reassignment, decided that she really enjoyed herself as a man and now describes herself as omnisexual (2006). In the same thought, the authors make a note that the drag queens usually use female pronouns but that they easily move back-and-forth between the use of male and female pronouns, too.

Racialized and Gendered Stereotypes

Although films that feature drag queens address the view of a marginalized group, they are not exempt from holding stereotypes, and some authors assert that stereotypes of race and gender are no exception. Mary Kirk (2004) addresses racial stereotypes in the

characters Noxeema and Chi Chi from *To Wong Foo Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar*, and she states that the character Vida helps Noxeema and Chi Chi to be acceptable through the power and privilege of her whiteness. Kirk notes that Noxeema is written with two stereotypes. The mothering black mammy figure is expressed through her taking Chi Chi as a drag queen apprentice of sorts and teaching her how to be a drag queen. The black, super-athlete is demonstrated when Noxeema is shown in a basketball league acting as a cheerleader, that is until she gets the ball and aggressively makes a play, according to Kirk, perfectly. In addition, Chi Chi is stereotyped as the overly sexed “Latina bombshell” (2004). Kirk describes a scene where Chi Chi expresses her desire to “jump the next man and [ride] him all the way to New York City” (176). Kirk argues that the film reinforces “dangerous sexist and racist stereotypes” with portrayals such as these (174).

Watson gives a similar example from *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* within the character Cynthia, a Filipina “whose bar room antics, ‘shooting’ ping pong balls from her vagina, construct her character as a perverse object of ridicule and degradation” (2008:101). From a different point of view, Robbins and Myrick (2000) state that Cynthia’s display of shooting ping pong balls best exemplifies the sexed difference of the bodies in drag. In an attempt to outdo the drag queens, Cynthia performs this routine to a crowd of men, and the ping pong ball acts as a reminder to the physical or internal difference of the reproductive body (Robbins and Myrick 2000). No matter how we are viewing these films, they continue to be “undercut by sexist and racist stereotypes...and the joke’s still on women and people of color” (Kirk 2004:178).

Negotiating, Balancing, and Navigating Space

Negotiating, balancing, and navigating spaces are all ways in which we can think about how drag queens maneuver through their daily (and nightly) lives, including their race, class, gender, and even religion. In an interview with one drag queen and one drag king, Barnett and Johnson (2013) discuss how the two navigate political and leisure space differently. They claim that “moving between gender and identities and representations affords Dominique and Dickie the ability to take up gender presentation intentionally and strategically in leisure regimes” (686). Here, both of their respondents are able to exercise their ability to express their political positions on gay and lesbian rights within leisure spaces, the night club.

Berkowitz and Belgrave (2010) explore the contradictory statuses of drag queens as both celebrities and as a marginalized group, a space that involves “nuanced strategies to negotiate their contradictory status of admired yet alienated performers” (159). On the subject of negotiating drug use and celebrity status, one well respected drag queen claimed that her career as a drag queen would be compromised if she used drugs every night. Though, one of the two authors later saw her out with white powder on her nose, sniffing uncontrollably, dilated pupils, and an inability to look the author in the eye. The desire to portray oneself as a professional drag queen means that one must not be associated with drug use even though the authors found it apparent that she was indeed using drugs (Berkowitz and Belgrave 2010). Drag queens also find themselves negotiating their religious beliefs. Sullivan-Blum (2004) explains that the drag queens that she studied often reinscribe the religious discourse of Christianity to negotiate and remain loyal to a religion that is not typically accepting of transgressions outside of the hegemonic gender or sexual binary system. One tactic that the drag queens of this study

utilize is naturalization. Jacob, one of Sullivan-Blum's respondents, "claims that sexual exploration is a way of appreciating God's gifts and should not be feared" (202) and feels that people are meant to have more than one love without disrespect to their partner. Sullivan-Blum goes on to say that Jacob claims that sexual attractions are intended by God. For these drag queens to understand their sexuality as natural and an ordination of God, they skirt the sinfulness of homosexuality.

According to McNeal (1999), the heteronormative models of gender and sexuality have created an institutionalized form of performance that forces gay men, specifically drag queens, to balance transgression *and* conformity of both feminine and masculine qualities. McNeal points out that "homosexually inclined males have difficulty experiencing themselves as unproblematically masculine because they have same sex fantasies and desires in a heterosexually modeled behavioral environment," and it is in this double-bind that drag queens "represent the professionally stigmatized in their roles as female impersonators" (352). For drag queens, there is a constant matter of balancing sexuality and gender performance, both on and off stage. Likewise, drag queens often have to navigate their sexuality with their race or ethnicity. For instance, Rhyne (2004) writes that "queerness and Black masculinity are often at odds with one another, particularly for drag queens of color" (185). As in the case of Vaginal Crème Davis, Rhyne (2004) discusses that drag queens of color summon a discontinuity not only between Black masculinity and queerness but between male bodies and feminine performances also. It is within this disjointedness that the assumptions about these categories are challenged by drag. While not explicitly stated, these studies show why the experiences of drag queens cannot be understood from a single viewpoint because of the

fluidity of their lives and the negotiating, balancing, and navigating of multiple spaces that take place in their everyday lived experiences.

Theoretical Perspectives

Studies analyze drag queens and their performances from many different theoretical frameworks. Most employ symbolic interactionism, performativity, and/or queer theory. Berkowitz and Belgrave (2010) state that, symbolic interaction acts as a method to tell of the everyday experiences of drag queens and that the meanings that drag queens make of these experiences are not inherent but emerge out of the interpretive process. They incorporate a framework that utilizes social interaction, identity, and performance theory to understand how drag queens manage their statuses as both marginalized and celebrity, and how their performances and identities are shaped from this management. They find that drag queens experience marginalization but that drag can enable gay men to manipulate femininity in such a way that attention, income, and situational power are incentives (2010). A quote from Keeley explains that,

Being a drag queen, the community begins to recognize you and see that you put on a good show. I mean the gay community loves drag queens. That is a worldwide fact! Everybody knows that gay people love drag queens, I mean there are some... that think its wrong, but the majority, like 99 percent of gay people love drag queens (168).

While Berkowitz and Belgrave (2010) state that this quote is from an amateur drag queen, they note that this sentiment was claimed by other performers, too. In this instance, Keeley is expressing her fondness of the celebrity status and attention that is associated with being a drag queen. Berkowitz, Belgrave, and Halberstein (2007) express in an additional article on drag performers where they take a naturalistic approach “that

the meaningful features of everyday life consist of individuals' orientation to and actions within this world, as they carefully manage their realities" (16).

In utilizing symbolic interactionism in studies of drag, the meanings of these everyday experiences can be filtered out and understood. Blumer (1969) wrote that symbolic interactionism holds three premises:

The first premise is that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them... The second premise is that the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows... The third premise is that these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters (2).

This approach helps researchers understand the relationship between the subjects, in this case drag queens, and the society of which the subjects are a part on a micro-level, focusing on the nuanced happenings of one's everyday life and their social interactions. In drag research, this means exploring the everyday experiences of drag queens, and often times, it means taking a more grounded approach to research involving drag queens which I have done here.

Rhyme (2004), through a lens of performative femininity, argues that ideas about white essentialism are deconstructed through white drag performers performing white drag. Rhyme makes use of the performances of drag queen Divine, the stage name of Harris Glenn Milstead, as an example of white drag performance complicating race *and* class. To demonstrate, in her role as Edna Turnblad in the film *Hairspray*, Divine in drag can be seen as a challenge to institutionalized racism in that Edna and her daughter, Tracy's (Ricki Lake) class-marked, excessive bodies are re-sexualized outside the structures of white supremacy" (189). She suggests that, rather than completely subverting race and class, performances such as Divine's demonstrate that gender

performance is much more complicated than gender incongruity, and we have much to learn about the intersections of other identity performances and the resistance to the conformity of those identities.

In studying gender and sexuality through a lens of performativity, researchers take a nonessentialist position meaning gender is not inherent and that it is socially constructed through our interactions with others. Butler's (1993) example is that, as a girl child is born, an "It's a girl" proclamation is made, and the "girling" (or gendering) process begins (231). This process is ongoing, repetitive, and fluid and that gender is not a stable identity. Gender is a set of actions, motions, and gestures, and it is not initiated by these actions rather it is initiated through the gendering of others and is upheld by these actions.

In regard to drag queens, Butler (1993) utilizes a queer perspective. She views Venus (and *Paris is Burning*, a documentary about drag queens in New York) as parodying dominant norms and discusses whether this parodying actually challenges those norms or simply reinforces them. She finds that, "drag is not unproblematically subversive. It serves a subversive function to the extent that it reflects the mundane impersonations by which heterosexually ideal genders are performed and naturalized and undermines their power by virtue of effecting that exposure," but "there is no guarantee that exposing the naturalized status of heterosexuality will lead to its subversion" (231). In fact, she explains that heterosexuality can use its denaturalization in a parody that does not call into question its essentiality. In this way, Butler describes drag as both challenging and reinforcing the binary system.

Barnett and Johnson (2013) apply a genderqueer lens and narrative inquiry to demonstrate how drag kings and drag queens employ their drag personas for political and activist purposes and how leisure spaces influence their lives. Genderqueer, as explained by Barnett and Johnson, does not have a definitive definition. Instead, they point out that there are some specific characteristics that those who identify as genderqueer use to identify themselves. Rejecting a male or female identity, identifying as both or between genders, and challenging the norms and roles associated with a dichotomous male/female gender system are all ways in which genderqueer individuals express identity. Genderqueer is utilized as a way of understanding the shortfalls of the binary, masculine/feminine, system, and an experience-centered narrative inquiry as an approach places participants within the research process as the authorities of their own experiences. They conclude that drag performers' negotiations between political and leisure spaces demonstrate that normative constructions of gender are unstable and that they become "political actors and key figures in the creation and preservation of queer leisure spaces" (691).

Though it is understood in sociology that gender and sexuality are socially constructed, queer theorists posit that deviant cases are important to understanding that binary gender and sex systems are flawed and that dominant ideologies do not capture the complexity of variation in gender and sex (Valocchi, 2005). Queer theory focuses on the difference between gender and sex ideologies and the lived experiences of the individual. Theorists pay particular attention to the homosexual/heterosexual dichotomy and understand sexuality as fluid and not necessarily as associated with sex of object choice. Valocchi asserts that heteronormativity, the idea that heterosexuality is natural and that

homosexuality is its opposite, “works to maintain the dominance of heterosexuality by preventing homosexuality from being a form of sexuality that can be taken for granted or go unmarked or seem right in the way that heterosexuality can (2005:756).

The Drag Queen Experience

The everyday experiences of drag queens range from positive to negative. Berkowitz and Belgrave (2010) state that their research supports previous findings that drag queens are marginalized on social and economic fronts, some experience celebrity status yet most cannot live fully off of the income of drag performances. Some drag queens in Berkowitz and Belgrave’s study describe multiple forms of cruelty from others, including discrimination and assault, and one respondent in particular expressed having considered giving up drag for something “normal.” Drug and alcohol abuse is not uncommon. The authors assert that “the gay nightclub scene in general and the drag scene in particular are simply overwhelmed with drugs and alcohol” (171).

Sullivan-Blum’s (2004) research on drag queens describes negotiations between gender and faith. One respondent she interviewed is not allowed to sing in his church choir, and “this is a source of grief for him” (199), yet the respondent defends his church’s right to do so. Negativity also comes in the form of attitudes toward drag queens. Rupp and Taylor (2003) find that gay men in their audience-formed focus groups discussed fear of or hostility to drag. The concern from these participants was that being too gay gives gay males a bad name and that the representation others see is that of “weird, freaky people” (187) bringing unwanted attention to their community.

While numerous studies demonstrate discrimination and other negative experiences in drag queens’ daily lives, there are positive aspects for some drag queens,

including attention, income, and situational power. Berkowitz and Belgrave (2010) point out that the transformation from man to drag queen is rewarding in that it, according to their participants, can lead to attention from others. It is this attention that Berkowitz and Belgrave state can create situational power. They suggest that it is within the safe space of the stage that “drag queens have the contextual power to subvert gender norms where they (at least temporarily) challenge audience members’ taken-for-granted notions of gender, sex, and sexuality” (177). To add to the idea that drag queens hold power through their stages, Taylor, Rupp, and Gamson (2004) state that drag shows are “tactical repertoire” for the gay and lesbian movement. They state that the stage is used by drag queens as a place where drag queens discuss any number of gay and lesbian issues (AIDS, transsexuality, gay marriage, and hate crimes). Here drag queens experience power through not only the stage but the microphone, enabling them to educate heterosexual audience members about what it means to be gay. Schacht (2002) describes the power within drag performance in the following way:

In a sense, since many audience members are themselves young, culturally attractive women, during every show a seemingly high stakes contest occurs over who can appear to be the most “real” woman. While the female illusionists almost always “win,” those who in action or image seemingly question this expected outcome must obviously be put in their place and situationally subordinated. I believe to do otherwise would not only undermine the very real power that the performers’ exercise in this context, but it would also diminish the audience appeal of the shows – men as the most beautiful and glamorous women you will ever meet.

In this example, drag queens garner power through their performances, which, according to Schacht, is an accomplishment produced as acknowledged men rather than the women they are impersonating.

In a 2005 article reflecting on their academic careers together, Rupp and Taylor illustrate that what they have come to learn from drag queens is exactly what the drag queens they researched were trying to accomplish. They note that what the drag queens intended was to make others think more critically about gender and sexuality. Rupp and Taylor write that they “came to think of drag shows as political consequences, that they embody protest and build a complex collective identity across genders and sexualities,” (37) and that they utilize their study within the social movement debate about what makes cultural forms political. This sentiment is furthered when Taylor and Rupp (2006) discuss that audience members’ ideas about the boundaries of heterosexuality are challenged by sexual arousal. They discuss many audience members’ reactions to the performances. Straight men, straight women, gay men, and lesbians describe their attraction to the performers and state that this can be contradictory to their sexual identities. For instance, one straight woman said that she felt that she could kiss one of the performers because of her sexiness, and she noted that she’s “not gay at all” (15). Taylor and Rupp’s research shows how drag queens have a platform and space in which they can challenge people with regard to gender and sexual categories.

Drag queens are innovative when the negotiations of important issues are in play. The drag queens of Sullivan-Blum’s (2004) research have created counterweights for a religion that typically considers their gender and sexual transgression a sin. In a discussion about the morality of sexual behavior, two respondents believe “that in order to have sexual lives in line with God’s will, gay men must have monogamous relationships” (201). Through this negotiation, the respondents frame sexuality in such a way that they retain their sexual morality. While maintaining their Christian identity,

Sullivan-Blum claims that these drag queens “challenge the rigid dichotomies of gender and sexuality” (195) prescribed by their religion.

What can drag queens tell us through their portrayal in film? Movies, just as drag queen performances, are a form of entertainment. The movie industry is giving exposure to drag queens not seen in the past, and in doing so, more people are exposed to drag queens, their lives, and experiences. Humor can be seen as perpetuating or reducing inequality of many types, and stereotyping drag queens as campy or humorous has the potential to do damage to the LGBTQIA community. On the other hand, it is possible that this exposure is a positive form of protest that holds the potential to teach audience members about the fragile boundaries of binary gender and sexual systems. Through this project, I explore the following research questions: Are drag queens depicted in a stereotypically gendered and sexual way? How do drag queens in film describe themselves? Do these films reiterate or contradict the assumptions that we make about gender? Finally, what do these patterns and stereotypes mean for a society that has a very set binary system of gender?

III. METHODS

I use qualitative research methods to explore the ways in which depictions of drag queens reinforce or undermine categories of gender and sexuality and whether the depictions change over time. I conducted a content analysis of ten films. A qualitative content analysis is appropriate for this study because of the ability to look specifically at actions, reactions, depth, and richness of characters and their experiences that would not likely be achieved through a numerical study. A deeper understanding of the films and what is depicted as far as drag queens are concerned is realized through qualitative analysis. Cho and Lee explain that “Kracauer (1952) advocated a qualitative approach to content analysis, in which meanings and insights can be derived from the text more holistically” (2014:3). Approaching films about drag queens through this technique can give us a view of how drag queens are depicted on a much broader scale. Another major benefit to content analysis is the ability to research a subject group unobtrusively. Because the subject is viewed in a content analysis through newspapers, magazines, or movies, there is no direct contact with the subjects (Cho and Lee 2014), a benefit that avoids potential harm to the subjects.

My sample consists of ten films from 1982 to the present, each of which has drag queens as either primary or secondary characters. This sample comes from an internet search for “drag queens in film” through IMDb and Google searches. It only includes individuals being portrayed as drag queens regardless of sexual identity. For this paper, drag queens are individuals born biologically male and who perform female drag. This sample of films includes portrayals of drag queens as biological females, biological males, and male-to-female transgender individuals. There are two biological females

included within this study. I have included both of these films because while they do not fit the biologically born males criterion, in these films the biological females are impersonating men that perform as drag queens. Therefore, the depiction is still meant to be biological males impersonating females. I analyze both mainstream and independent films, and while they all primarily consist of comedy, they also include drama, musical, crime, romance, and combinations of these genres. The films that I will examine with brief descriptions are as follows: *Victor Victoria* (1982), set in 1932 Paris, is about a woman, Victoria Grant, petitioned by a hustler, Richard Di Nardo, to act as a man, Count Victor Grazinski, who will perform as a drag queen. The film follows the duo's antics and friendship in addition to Victoria, as Victor, falling for King Marchand. *Torch Song Trilogy* (1988) revolves around the life of Arnold Beckoff, a drag queen living in New York City. The storyline follows approximately nine years of Arnold's life. Over the years, Arnold finds himself in love and broken hearted multiple times in the midst of dealing with an adoption, the death of his "soul mate," and a long overdue argument with this mother. *The Adventures of Priscilla Queen of the Desert* (1994), tells the story of three drag queens as they travel across the Australian outback from Sydney to Alice Springs to perform in a club there. Their story includes the death of a partner, finding out that one of the trio has been married to a woman and has a child with her, and the realization that Sydney, Australia is actually a safety net separating them from the outside world. *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar* (1995) is also a film about three drag queens who are traveling cross-country. Vida, Noxeema, and Chi Chi's road trip from New York to Hollywood to enter a "Drag Queen of the Year" contest is stalled in a small town for several days because of car trouble. The story then follows the group

of drag queens as they transform not only the small town of Snyder'sville but themselves as well. *The Birdcage* (1996) tells the tale of two different families coming together for the marriage of their children. The Keeley family is a "right-wing conservative" family, and the father, Ohio Senator Kevin Keeley, is the vice president of the Coalition for Moral Order. On the other hand, the Goldman's are a gay couple who own a drag club where Armand is the director and Albert (Starina) is the star of the show. *Flawless* (1999) follows the life of a man, Walter, who is a retired police officer who is homophobic and absolutely does not get along with his drag queen/singer/musician neighbor, Rusty. The opening scenes depict Walt having a stroke in the hallway of his apartment after trying to respond to gunshots heard in a higher level. After some time with a physical therapist, the therapist recommends Walter seeing a singing coach to help improve his slurred speech. Walter reluctantly asks Rusty to help in this endeavor. The film then follows the ups and downs of this new relationship. *Holiday Heart* (2000), the title character's name, is the story of a very compassionate and highly dedicated Christian drag queen. Holiday's boyfriend dies at the beginning of the film, and he soon finds himself befriending a little girl and her drug addicted mother. The story goes on to show the developing friendship, the mother's struggle with saying clean, and Holiday becoming a father-like figure for the girl. *Connie and Carla* (2004) follows two women escaping a mob boss as they seek shelter performing as drag queens in a night club. In the midst of their cover act, the two become close friends with the actual drag queens at the club and one falls in love with the brother of one of their troupe members. *Kinky Boots* (2005) revolves around a shoe factory, its owner, Charlie, and one very open drag queen, Lola. Near the beginning of the film, we learn that Charlie's father has passed away, and Charlie has inherited the

shoe factory. We also learn that the shop is going under. To remedy this and after a chance encounter with Lola, Charlie decides that, to save the factory and with some help from Lola, he will attempt to make shoes that are sturdy enough for drag queens. *Rent* (2005) depicts the lives of a group of Bohemians in New York City's East Village between Christmas Eve of 1989 and 1990. Revolving primarily around a rental agreement with their former roommate and new landlord, the film incorporates topics such as poverty, love, sexuality, loss, death, and AIDS/HIV. The variety of films selected will help to give a more accurate interpretation of how drag queens are depicted overall and will also help to give specific representations.

I code each film according to the relationships that the drag queens have with family, friends, and other characters with whom they interact. I examine the appearance of the drag queens and ask: Do the drag queens always dress in a feminine manner or do they at times wear masculine clothing? Are effeminate or masculine voices used or both? Also, I look at body gestures. Are the drag queens gestures considered feminine or masculine by cultural standards? Feminine gestures include limp wrists, swaying hips, neck rolling, finger pointing, and small or short movements, and masculine gestures were coded by broad stances, arms held out away from body, assertive stance, taking up additional space, and firm and/or long movements. I watch the actions of characters in each scene and looked at the relationships between drag queens and other characters. Are the interactions neutral, not helping or supporting of each other? Or are there positive interactions, did they appear to be friends or friendly acquaintances? Or are the interactions negative, did they ignore, grimace, curse, glare at one another, or get into a physical altercation? Are characters generally happy with their interactions with drag

queens, or were characters angry? Do the characters use positive language, language that was encouraging of others, or were they negative, were loud voices, profanity, or sarcasm used? I watch each film multiple times looking for more of these details. Using a grounded method, I first took detailed notes on every scene, and then systemically coded each scene into a chart that was examined scene by scene for patterns in addition to exploring for changes over time (Esterberg 2002). This method of coding will create an organized and systematic way to analyze the data from the films while remaining reflexive and open to interpretations that may emerge from these depictions. After open-coding the charts, I examine the data line-by-line again focusing on the themes established during open-coding (Esterberg 2002).

IV. FINDINGS

The content analysis of films revealed three main themes. First, the films utilized depictions of gendered and sexualized humor. In particular, I found that the films utilized hyperfemininity and relied on numerous racialized, gendered, and sexual stereotypes as “comedy.” Second, the films emphasized how drag queens define themselves. The films frequently portray not only the terminology that drag queens assign to themselves but their actions, movements, and comportment. The third prominent theme in the films concerned the conflict and resolution that drag queens experience with neighbors, family, and strangers, often with resolution that resulted from the conflict.

Reliance on Racialized, Gendered, and Sexualized Stereotypes for Humor

Humor is a common device used in literature, film, television, and print forms of media. Films about drag queens are not exempt from this technique. Many of the films that I reviewed are listed comedy or comedy-mix. The film’s genres are classified in the following manner by IMDb: *Victor Victoria*, comedy-musical; *Torch Song Trilogy*, comedy-drama-romance; *The Adventures of Priscilla Queen of the Desert*, comedy-drama; *To Wong Foo Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar*, comedy; *The Birdcage*, comedy; *Flawless*, crime-comedy-drama; *Connie and Carla*, comedy; and *Kinky Boots*, comedy-drama. As one can see, the films are primarily comedy related films. Only two of the films I analyzed were listed as other than comedy; *Holiday Heart* is listed as a drama and *Rent* as drama-musical-romance.

In reviewing the films, I found that many types of stereotypes were prolific. According to Kirk (2004) and Watson (2008), stereotypes take many forms in the films they studied. *To Wong Foo Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar* (1995), the characters

Chi Chi and Noxeema are stereotypical Latina and black representations, respectively. The film *Connie and Carla* (2004) has a Filipino/a character who is portrayed as a “bombshell” with no brains, similar to *To Wong Foo’s* Chi Chi. In *Connie and Carla* (2004), Lee, or N’Cream, the N’Cream to the duo called Peaches N’Cream, is a young performer who is often misunderstood because of her accent, “checks out” others, does a shimmy that is sexually suggestive, and makes sly comments implying her hypersexuality. In a conversation with the group of drag queens, Peaches comments that “if you can’t lick em, then join em,” in reference to Connie and Carla singing live rather than lip synching to music. N’Cream’s response is “who’s getting licked?” to which everyone rolls their eyes and makes disapproving sounds. Additionally, viewers first meet N’Cream wearing a maid’s outfit. In *The Birdcage*, the Guatemalan housemaid to the Goldman family, Agador, is also portrayed as an overly sexualized bombshell, but in this case, Agador is Latino/a. Agador, who wants very badly to perform in Armand’s show, is typically shown with very few clothes, also including a maid’s outfit, and no shoes as she notes, make her fall. In multiple scenes she is seen singing and dancing, most notably to Gloria Estefan’s “Do the Conga.”

Stereotypes are not limited to drag queens in the films I analyzed. In *Flawless* (1999), the central character, Walter, is a middle-age, white, retired police officer. This character is gruff and tends to use the term “fucking faggot” in the multiple arguments he has with his neighbor Rusty. A group of ruffian boys, who at one point attempt to rape Chi Chi (*To Wong Foo*), are portrayed as dirty, uneducated, lacking in manners, and hypermasculine. A sheriff’s officer is portrayed as a backwoods, power-hungry, officer that abuses his position to get what he wants. At one point, the officer is looking for the

drag queens in all the places he believes drag queens should be: flower shops, ballet classes, etc. Likewise, Jeff, the brother of the leading drag queen, in *Connie and Carla* is trying to come to terms with his brother's identity as a drag queen and states that he cannot understand why his brother would be out getting a manicure. Here, Jeff is portrayed as the unaccepting male family member whose masculine identity forgoes even his love of his brother to the extent that he hides knowledge of his brother's identity from his fiancé. And, as stated earlier, the character Don from *Kinky Boots* is portrayed as an ignorant blue-collar worker. Why are there so many stereotypical roles written into these movies? One possibility is that the characters in comedies are not intended to have strong and/or deep profiles. Rather, comedies are written with superficial, predefined characters that we only associate with on the surface because we are meant to laugh at them, and as a medium, films rely on character tropes to quickly convey information to the audience (e.g. the intellectual wears glasses or the bombshell wears red). As a result, these films bring to light an underrepresented population, yet they continue to represent these groups in stereotypical ways to create humor.

In addition to being in comedy-specific films, drag queen portrayal tends to be given humorous characteristics. This humor is achieved through lines, language, gestures and body language, and voice inflection. For example, in the film *Kinky Boots* (2005), Don, a large working class man that is portrayed as the brute of the workplace and who is a six-year arm wrestling champion heckles Lola, the star drag queen. To make light of this situation, Lola sits on Don's lap and says, "If you can't get girls to wear them [the boots they are designing], [lowers voice] you'll never get a bloke like me to wear them," then scratches Don's chin in an exaggerated sexual way. At this point, Don realizes that

Lola is a man, and the entire factory laughs at him for his mistake. In an attempt to address the mistake of misattributing a drag queen for a woman, the film taps into humor by poking fun of the ignorant blue-collar worker, Don, and his misunderstanding of Lola. Lola utilizes her voice and body language to lead Don along his current thought process then alters the information that he is reading from her to inform him that his assumptions about her and that thought process were wrong.

Another example of drag queen's use of voice and body language is in the film *The Adventures of Priscilla Queen of the Desert* (1994) when the traveling trio stops in a small town and decide to go to the local bar for drinks. Having lost a game of Snap to Adam, Tick finds himself dressed in full drag as Mitzi alongside Felicia (Adam's drag persona). Mitzi is wearing a pink dress made completely of flip-flops, her earrings are also flip-flops, her shoes are a high wedge closely resembling a Roman-style sandal and go up over her calves, and her wig is light pink with large curls plied closely to her head. Felicia is wearing a fuchsia and purple frock over a baby blue and pastel purple corset-style teddy embellished with fluffy fabric flowers around the genital area. Her frock and teddy are accompanied by a matching baby blue and pastel purple wig made of plastic strips and matching go-go boots lined with purple fur. Needless to say, the entire town notices them upon their arrival. When the three drag queens walk into the bar, they immediately head for the bartender and attempt to order drinks. Bernadette, a female-to-male drag queen, begins their order but is cut off by a local woman and the two exchange words:

Shirley: Well, look what the cat dragged in [shoves two men aside to make room to see the drag queens]. What have we got here, aye? A couple of

show girls, have we? Where did you ladies come in from? Uranus?

Bernadette: Could I please have a st... [lady interrupts, slams Bernadette's hand down with her own].

Shirley: [angrily] NO! Ya can't have... ya can't have nothin! We've got nothing here for people like you. Nothing!

Bernadette: [slowly turns toward Shirley and says the following line politely, calmly, and at a higher pitch]. Now listen here you mullet. [voice changes to angry, more rapid, and lower pitch] Why don't you just light your tampon and blow your box apart because it's the only bang you're ever gonna get, [voice pitch drops even lower] sweetheart.

At this point the entire bar erupts into laughter as Bernadette has made Shirley look foolish by calling into question her feminine desirability. Bernadette's use of pitch, inflection, and language all work together to create laughs both in the bar and on the screen. These films are able to achieve humor through the drag queens' use of these mechanisms, but in doing so they also demonstrate male silencing in order to have authority over females.

Throughout the films that are listed as comedy, a common theme is the use of hyperfemininity as a comedic device. In several of the films, drag queens are portrayed with exaggerated feminine language, gestures, and clothing. For instance, in *The Birdcage* (1996), Albert, also known in drag as Starina, is portrayed as hysterical and often screams in a high-pitched voice, feigns fainting from anxiety causing situations, and has to practice on more than one occasion being a "man" for the arrival of the conservative Keeley's. In most scenes, even the most serious scenes, Albert's character is

meant to be funny. In these scenarios, humor is utilized by making the character of Albert hyperfeminine. This hyperfemininity appears feminine but are ways that women do not typically act. It is a stereotype, exaggerated versions of how women are perceived as acting. In another scene seated outside of a café, Armand is teaching Albert to act more masculine because Albert insists that he can “play it straight.” Armand first tells Albert that the way he holds his glass, has his pinky finger pointed out, and his posture are all indicators of his sexuality. Armand then goes on to tell Albert that his spreading of mustard is not manly and that men “smear” their mustard, highlighting the idea of gender as performance. Armand repeatedly tells Albert to put his pinky finger down and at times gives the pinky finger a smack as a reminder. When Armand does this, Albert squeals, squeaks, and howls at the reprimands.

Angel Dumott Schunard, the sole drag queen from the film *Rent* (2005), is introduced to audience members out of drag in her first scene, but the remaining scenes with Angel each show a much more feminine, if not hyperfeminine, character. Angel is first introduced to Collins’ friends at their apartment and as their benefactor in a time of need. She has recently earned one-thousand dollars, contradictorily to her kind nature, by killing the dog of a rich lady’s neighbor. As *Rent* is a musical, this is a song performance by Angel, “Today 4 U,” where she dances around the apartment making Collins, Roger, and Mark laugh as she recounts the events that helped her earn the money. Through Angel’s cheerful attitude, upbeat song, and gleeful dancing about the apartment, the writers of the story are able to portray the death of someone’s pet as humorous. The song is as follows, minus the chorus and the last stanza as it is about Angel meeting Collins:

Collins: Gentlemen, our benefactor on this Christmas Day/ Whose charity
is only matched by talent, I must say/ A new member of the Alphabet City
Avant-garde/ Angel Dumott Schunard/ [Chorus removed, sung by Angel]/
And you should hear her beat

Mark: You earned this on the street?

Angel: It was my lucky day today on Avenue A/ When a lady in a
Limousine drove my way/ She said, "Darling, be a dear, haven't slept in a
year/ I need your help to make my neighbor's yappy dog disappear/ This
Akita-Evita just won't shut up/ I believe if you play nonstop that pup Will
breathe its very last high strung breath/ I'm certain that cur will bark itself
to death"/ [Chorus removed]/ We agreed on a fee, a thousand dollar
guarantee/ Tax free and a bonus if I trim her tree/ Now who could foretell
that it would go so well/ But sure as I am here that dog is now in doggy
hell/ After an hour, Evita in all her glory/ On the window ledge of that
twenty third story/ Like Thelma and Louise did when they got the blues/
Swan dove into the courtyard/ Of the Gracie Mews

It is Christmas day, and Angel is wearing an outfit fashioned much like a Mrs. Claus costume though not the traditional image we hold of Mrs. Claus. She has on a red velvet coat, trimmed in white fur that comes to mid-thigh over a solid white dress of the same length. Her belt is black and white zebra print that matches her tights of the same color and print. Angel's black calf-high pleather boots are also reminiscent of Mrs. Claus' boots though Angel's are more of a platform heel.

Throughout the films there is great variety in how drag queens alter their voices in different situations. Some chose to speak in only an effeminate tone and pitch while others only spoke in masculine tones and pitches, and still some spoke in both feminine and masculine ways. Take for example the character Brian, who in drag as Brianna raises the pitch of her voice but as Brian makes no change to pitch and has a much deeper voice. On the other hand, some of the characters never change the pitch of their voice. Lola from *Kinky Boots* does not change the pitch of her voice. It is always deep and resonant, in and out of drag, but when in drag Lola does add arcs at the end of sentences to imply femininity. This can also be said of the character Robert/Peaches, from *Connie and Carla*, when in drag; he does not change pitch only inflection on words. Albert/Starina does not change her voice either. On the contrary, she only uses a strained, high pitched voice, except when he is practicing “being a man” with Armand.

Additionally, the characters, when in drag and often out of drag, tend to flick their wrists, sashay at the waist, employ neck rolling, use large sweeping hand gestures, and often shake their index fingers in a manner that tells little children “no-no.” As an illustration, upon hearing that the Keeley family would be coming to pay a visit to the Goldman’s, Armand gathers the drag queens who perform in his show together to help rid his house of the decorations his son calls “over the top.” During this scene, the son, Val, wants to know who has put *Playboy* magazines in the bathroom, something to make the Goldman’s seem more masculine. Several of the drag queens respond by sucking their teeth at Val and rolling their eyes. Adam/Felicia, the youngest of the *Priscilla* trio, is noted by Bernadette, the eldest, to be in performance mode at all times. He is also the most flamboyant of the three and utilizes eye rolling, hip shaking, lip pursing, and finger

snapping to express his femininity. When put all together, these actions seem over the top and very different than how women typically act. Where non-drag queen characters are assigned lines and line delivery that are meant to be humorous, these over the top actions are used in scenes to elicit laughs from audience members.

While performing, the attire of the drag queens typically consists of large, high wigs, evening gowns, heels or stilettos, long fingernails, and heavy make-up, and many head pieces and props all images that are stereotypically drag queen related. While this may not seem to be a portrayal of hyperfemininity, it is not common for a woman to look like this regularly. In *The Birdcage*, Starina is first seen on stage with leopard print six-inch heel boots, leopard print gloves and muff, and a tall leopard print hat that resembles the shape of something an Egyptian pharaoh would wear, all draped in a black shroud that starts at the top of the hat and ends mid shin. The premise of *Kinky Boots* speaks directly to hyper-feminine attire. The story culminates with a very traditional shoe company is now manufacturing stiletto heels specifically for drag queens. An insistent note by Lola is that the boots they are designing should *not* be burgundy. The boots should be red because red is sex. Lola also says that there is not much heel to the boot that Charlie designed, and she even asked the women of the factory if they would go out in these boots. She received a collective “no.” At the time, Lola is wearing turquoise heels that match her turquoise dress. Depictions such as these can give the impression that all drag queens are hyperfeminine and are all the same, when in reality, there are vast differences in drag queens, their performances, their genders, and even in their sexualities as also noted by Taylor and Rupp (2003) and by Balzer (2005).

According to some queer theorists, “performative” gender transgressions by individuals such as drag queens disrupt dominant heterosexual norms (Rupp and Taylor 2003). I argue the stereotypical images, especially hyperfemininity, of these drag queens also challenge these norms. Through their hyperfeminine performances on stage or hyperfeminine appearance in other locations (on the street or in a “straight” club), drag queens contest dominant images of a woman by being something different. In these cases, the drag queens offer a type of femininity that is a blend of masculinity and femininity, quite different than a woman should appear or act. Furthermore, while these images are stereotypes of drag queens, they garner laughs from the audience. Finding these characters funny can make it easier to experience drag queens and other individuals who identify outside of these binary systems. Although hyperfemininity and other stereotypes of characters were used prolifically throughout the films, other sides of the drag queens are also visible (e.g. seeing the drag queens outside of their drag persona and in their daily lives). Individuals are able to experience the hyperfeminine performing drag queen *and* the person who helped a businessman get back on his feet, argues with his mother, or helps a stranger in an alley. Audience members get the chance to relate to characters who experience the same things that they do.

How Drag Queens Define Themselves

In the films I analyzed, the term “drag queen” is understood in various ways by the characters, and not all characters positioned as drag queens so identify themselves as such. The films imply that there are hierarchies among different gender presentations of drag queens and in how individuals identify themselves (e.g. drag queen, female impressionist, or transvestite).

Some individuals expressed not wanting to use the term drag queen for themselves then referred to themselves as drag queens at a later time. Typically this happened because characters chose to use a term that they felt elevated their status as a male-bodied individual performing as a female. For instance, Rusty in *Flawless* tells Walt that he is not a drag queen but a female impersonator. Rusty tells Walt why he does not like the term drag queen:

Rusty: You know because most drag queens, you know, parade around looking flawless, you know, and if they sing, you know, they lip sync to records, and um, I'm a singer, um, and I'm a female impressionist. I'm an artist, you know?

Rusty associates himself with a higher level of drag performer. In this case, female impressionist is to be regarded more highly as Rusty sees his singing as art and lip syncing is not. It is also implied that Rusty's reputation is balanced on his "art." Rusty and Walt get to know each other better, and Rusty goes through some difficulties such as an abusive boyfriend and the loss of his mother, issues that Walt and Rusty have discussed. During these later conversations, Rusty takes back what he has said about the person he believes himself to be:

Rusty: You're right Walt. Honey, I just want you to know that you're right. You know. I'm a... I'm not an artist, you know? I'm not some... female impressionist. I'm a... I'm lonely... and I'm ugly... and I'm a drag queen.

Walt, who recently suffered a stroke and has been seeking help from Rusty to help improve his speech, now tells Rusty that he is the one that is feeling sorry for himself. In this film, referring to oneself as a drag queen implies that one is alone and unattractive.

Drag queens define themselves in other ways that suggest a hierarchy and status about gender presentation. In *Kinky Boots*, when Lauren uses the term transvestite in a conversation with Lola, Lola corrects Lauren because to her, drag queen is considered a higher level status than simply transvestite. Though Lola does not denounce the term transvestite, she explains herself to Lauren in the following way:

Lola: I'm not merely a transvestite, sweetie. I'm also a drag queen. It's a simple equation. A drag queen puts on a frock, looks like Kylie. A transvestite puts on a frock [pauses] looks like Boris Yeltsin in lipstick.

There, I've said it.

For Lola, drag queen is the appropriate term. She, unlike Rusty, does not see the term drag queen as a lower status or demeaning in any way. In fact, that is what she wants to be called. Here, a man who simply wears women's make-up is not a "real" representation of a woman.

Some describe themselves as entertainers such as Arnold in *Torch Song Trilogy*. Arnold considers himself not only a drag queen but an entertainer. He does this in the opening monologue where the audience watches as he applies his makeup for a drag performance:

Arnold: For those of you what ain't yet guessed, I am an entertainer, or what's left of one. I go by the name Virginia Ham. Ain't that a kick in the rubber parts? You should hear some of my former handles: Anita Mann,

Fonda Boys, Clair Voyant, Fay Ways, Bang Bang La Desh. Yeah, I'm among the last of a dying breed. Well, once the ERA and Gay Civil Rights Bills have been passed, me and mine will find ourselves swept under the carpets, like the blacks done to Amos, Andy and Aunt Jemima. Hey, that's all right. With a voice and a face like this, what do I got to worry about? I can always drive a cab. You know there are easier things in this life than being a drag queen. But I ain't got no choice. See, um...Try as I may, I just can't walk in flats [laughs].

This monologue gives viewers several ideas of what drag queen means to Arnold. First of all, he thinks of himself as an entertainer though later he does use the term female impersonator to describe the kind of work he does. It also demonstrates where Arnold feels drag queens rate within the gay community when he says that after Gay Civil Rights are passed he will be swept under the carpet, presumably referring to drag queen's long history as the face of the gay community. He feels drag queens are decreasing in numbers. Lastly, Arnold gives the audience some insight into drag queen appearance when he jokingly states that he cannot walk in flats. An issue of particular interest to this film and its opening monologue is that Arnold is played by Harvey Fierstein who also wrote and directed the film and has performed female impersonation. This adds to the unique perspective that Arnold gives to viewers because Fierstein has walked, quite literally, in the shoes of a drag queen.

According to some drag queen characters, one must work at becoming a drag queen. When Noxeema and Vida, two highly experienced drag queens, meet Chi Chi, a young inexperienced drag queen, they decide to take Chi Chi to Hollywood with them to

participate in a Drag Queen of the Year competition. Their decision to take Chi Chi along is to help her feel that she can be “fabulous” just like them. Many times Noxeema and Vida call Chi Chi a “little Latin boy in a dress” because they are yet to see her as a drag queen. After Vida throws out their road map, Noxeema informs Chi Chi that she is not a drag queen:

Chi Chi: How are we going to know where we are going, okay?

Vida: Instincts my dear.

Noxeema: And exquisite wit. Darling, if you’re going to become a drag queen, you’re going to have to learn these things.

Chi Chi: What do you mean, be a drag queen? I am a drag queen.

Noxeema: Oh, huh, child, no, no, no. You are, simply put, a boy in a dress.

When a straight man puts on a dress and gets his sexual kicks, he is a transvestite. When a man is a woman trapped in a man’s body and has the little operation, he is transsexual.

Chi Chi: I know that.

Noxeema: When a gay man [indicates herself] has way too much fashion sense for one gender, he is a drag queen.

Vida: [snaps her fingers] Thank you.

Noxeema: And when a tired little Latin boy puts on a dress, his is simply a boy in a dress.

This upsets Chi Chi, but the others tell her that they can teach her to become a drag queen. Though Noxeema and Vida tell Chi Chi that there are four steps to becoming a drag queen, they are not sincere with her. They are making the steps up as they go and

tell Chi Chi that she will know when she has accomplished them. The film expresses that while the two experienced drag queens do not really know the steps to becoming a drag queen, they do know what a drag queen is and will not only notify Chi Chi upon completion of a “step,” they will also help her along the way. Once again, drag performers see their choice in terminology as on a higher level than others. For Noxeema and Vida, being a drag queen is learned and accomplished, and wearing a dress does not make one a drag queen. In fact, as Noxeema states, they see drag queen as much more than transvestite or transsexual.

One film describes what it means to be a drag queen when it comes to performances, movement, and sound. In *Victor Victoria*, while Victoria is rehearsing at the piano, Toddy tells her several times to lower her voice (Victoria is pretending to be Victor so that she can act as a drag queen also named Victoria). When she finally gets the pitch low enough, Toddy tells her that it is “just low enough to be a touch masculine.” Then he goes on to remind her how she should be moving during the performance. He says, “Now when you’re dancing remember, make it broader [makes wide sweeping motion with this arms] with tons of shoulder. Remember, you’re a drag queen!” Though this film is set in 1934 Paris, it still holds many of the images we see in drag performance today. A similar film about women pretending to be men to perform as drag queens is *Connie and Carla* (2004). Connie and Carla are the new stars of a show in California and are also learning and practicing the role of drag queen. When they first audition for their parts and forgetting exactly how to act, the two of them feed off of each other, lowering their voices together and altering their arm movement to be broader. These two films give the audience firsthand accounts of how drag queens should appear, act, and sound.

Victoria, Connie, and Carla are learning to be drag queens and teaching the viewers at the same time. Most of the other films have established drag queens and take a much less direct approach, an approach where the viewers interpret drag queens on their own.

What it means to be a drag queen varies greatly throughout the films. Where some drag queens deplore the term drag queen, others embrace it. Transvestite is the term for a straight man in drag to some, yet it can be part of the drag queen equation to others.

There is no definitive definition to drag queen from researchers, drag queens themselves, or in the depiction of drag queens in films, but what can be delineated from the films is how drag queens feel about what term best suits each of them. More often than not, when the subject comes up about what terminology should be used, the drag queens in these films express a hierarchy of terminology and that their particular choice is of a higher status than other terms they discuss. All of these definitions and descriptions in the films demonstrate a presumed hierarchy on the ideal way to represent femininity as biological men. This reinforces ideas that gender is not a simple equation of male and female nor is it binary. Rather, it is varied and experienced by individuals in different ways. Instead of one set way to perform femininity, drag queens in these films are demonstrating a number of different “femininities” (see RW. Connell’s *Masculinities*, 2005), and for them, some are more exalted than others.

Conflict and Resolution in Relationships Depicted

The third theme that I identified in the films was conflict in relationships. Drag queens depicted in these films often dealt with conflict with others, such as neighbors, family, and strangers concerning their sexuality and/or decision to perform drag. Conflict between characters usually arose out of morality, from religiosity, through

misunderstanding, and/or from homophobia and/or transphobia. While a number of the drag queens, both individually and within their troupe, experience many forms of conflict with many different people in their lives, there also exists a theme of acceptance or resolution within the films. At times, this resolution comes from those who are close to the drag queens but others occur out of newly formed friendships.

Arnold's mother (*Torch Song Trilogy*, 1988) disagrees with how Arnold lives his life not only based on her religious views but based on misunderstanding. In what appears to be a long overdue argument with his mother, Arnold expresses exasperation with his mother's misunderstanding of his sexuality and his decision to perform drag. His mother relays to Arnold that she believes his lifestyle will affect David, a boy that Arnold is to adopt:

Ma: Arnold, think about the boy. The way you live is bound to affect him!

Arnold: Ma, David is gay.

Ma: He hasn't even been here a year.

Arnold: He came that way!

Ma: Nobody comes that way!

Later in the same argument, Arnold tries to help his mother see his point of view:

Arnold: Try and imagine the world the other way around. Imagine every book, every magazine, every TV show, every movie was telling you you should be homosexual. You know you're not, but...

Ma: Stop already, you're talking crazy.

Arnold: You wanna know what's crazy? After all these years I'm still sitting here trying to justify my life. THIS is crazy!

Their argument goes on for some time, and in the end, the two will not budge on their points of view, and no resolution is made. In the same film, Alan, Arnold's partner, experiences conflict on a much more extreme level. Although Alan is not a drag performer, he is viciously attacked one night shortly after he and Arnold learn that they will be able to adopt David. What was meant to be a joyous occasion leads to Alan's death at the hands of several men who use homophobic slurs while beating and kicking him.

In *Holiday Heart*, Wanda is an addict with an abusive, drug dealing boyfriend and Niki is her young daughter. When Holiday, a very compassionate drag queen, first meets Niki, she is on the street screaming for help as her mother is getting beat up by her boyfriend. Holiday intervenes and then gives Wanda and Niki a stable place to stay. Over time, Holiday begins to consider Wanda and Niki part of his family. Unfortunately, Wanda is unable to kick her drug habit and returns to using drugs. After having come home one evening, Holiday finds Wanda at home with a man who is a known drug dealer. When Holiday expresses his dislike of this new relationship, the drug dealer, Silas, shows up backstage before a drag performance and holds Holiday at gunpoint. Silas tells Holiday:

Silas: Hey, uh, I need to talk to ya Holiday.

Holiday: Negro, we ain't got shit to talk about.

Silas: Hey man, I'm talkin' to you [reaches up and grabs Holiday's arm]

Holiday: Get your fuckin'...

Silas: Hey, say what [as he pulls his gun out, grabs Holiday's face, and sticks the gun to Holiday's cheek]. Man don't ever pull away from me

when I'm talking to you. You understand? So what, you don't like me?
Well, you better get over that shit. Cause come tomorrow man, we gonna be neighbors. And all them little dinners and them outings, there ain't gonna be no more of that shit. It's Niki, it's Wanda, and me. We're family now. So man, I just gotta start taking my fatherly duties seriously. Cause I can't have my daughter being influenced by a man who wears a dress.
Now can I? [raises his voice] Now can I?

Holiday: No

Silas: [pulls cash out of his coat pocket] There's first month's rent [shoves the money down the front of Holiday's dress] and a little something extra for you to stay away. Just stay away [wipes under Holiday's eyes and turns to leave]. Have a good show.

In this scene, Holiday experiences conflict with Silas because Silas says that Niki does not need to be influenced by someone who cross-dresses, and in saying this, Silas implies that the unnaturalness of a cross-dressing man, and therefore challenge to masculinity, is not good for Niki but a man who deals drugs is not a problem. Later, Niki, Wanda, and Silas return home from Niki's talent show and have brought Silas' niece as well. Holiday steps out to ask how the talent show went and Silas' niece asks Holiday, "Are you wearing makeup? Are you the fag?" and to this Silas responds, "Baby he *is* a fag."

A further example of conflict from homophobia is between Rusty, the main drag queen in *Flawless* (1999), and her neighbor Walt. Rusty is a drag performer and Walt a well-known and glorified ex-police officer, a neighborhood hero. In one of the first

scenes of the movie, Rusty and Walt have the following conversation as Rusty and her friends rehearse with the apartment windows open:

Rusty: Yeah, gitchi gitchi ya ya da da, gitchi gitchi ya ya here, mocha choco-lata ya ya.

Walt: Hey! Hey! Shut the fuckin' window or shut the fuck up!

Rusty: You shut your fuckin' window!

Walt: Fuckin' faggots!

Rusty: The gay community thanks you for your support, fucker!

Walt: Fuck you and the gay community!

Rusty: Fuck you and your "Let's get married, have kids and beat up the fuckin' dog" community, Fucker!

Walt: Fuckin' demented fuckin' fruitcakes!

This scene is only one of many in which the two argue, and where Walt uses not only homophobic slurs but profanity. In addition to Walt's homophobia toward Rusty, he also does not understand Rusty. In a later scene, Rusty's boyfriend, Sonny, shows up and begins demanding money from Rusty. Rusty manages to get herself and Rusty into the bedroom and is able to lock the door, and Sonny leaves. The two go on to have a discussion about why Rusty feels she is a woman and why she would want to have sex reassignment surgery. The following lines depict Walt's misunderstanding of Rusty and of individuals who are transgender.

Rusty- This won't happen once I have my operation to be all woman, you know? That's why I work teaching and sewing, saving up for the day that I become a real woman.

Walt- You're gonna become one of those he-she freaks?

Rusty- All she...after the hormone shots and the operation.

Walt- You're gonna cut off your dick and balls?

Rusty- Snip-snip, sweetheart.

Walt- How could a man cut off his dick and balls? Why would you do that?

Rusty- Because... I'm a woman trapped in a man's body.

Walt- You're no woman.

Rusty- I'm just not your idea of a woman, Walt.

Walt- You're nobody's idea of a woman.

Rusty- I'm my idea.

Walt- Maybe I can under... understand if...if...uh, you wanted to be a woman, but... I don't understand a man wanting to be an ugly woman.

Rusty- [visibly asleep not hearing this last line from Walt]

By this time, Rusty and Walt have gone through several ups-and-downs, appearing friendly together at times then explosively angry at others, and it appears that Walt is beginning to at least try to see from Rusty's perspective. Although homophobia is experienced by many of the drag queens in these films, there are usually moments when the drag queens are seen in a new light, either when the drag queen stands up for herself and/or when the homophobic person sees the drag queens for who they are. Though, the latter is often attributed to the former. I argue here that the binary gender and sex systems are challenged by the resolution that comes from this conflict, covered in the following pages.

Though conflict is rife within the films, there is often resolution between the misunderstanding characters and the drag queens. In many of the films, the plot depicts one or more characters who begin to accept the drag queen/s for who they are as drag queens, and in some cases, a strong friendship develops. In *Kinky Boots* (2005), Charlie is initially offended by Lola's performance and her decision to wear dresses, and he hides his association with her from his employees at the shoe factory by sneaking her in the back door, though this is foiled only minutes after her arrival. At a later time, Lola asks some workers if there is a bathroom nearby, and Don, a hypermasculine man in the factory, replies, "I'm afraid we've only got men's and women's." Charlie finds her in a different bathroom upset. The two discuss their fathers wanting them each to fit into a certain kind of mold, Charlie's father wanting him to be the fourth generation factory owner and Lola's a heavyweight boxer. The two begin to form common ground. This headway seems to have been disrupted when Lola meets Charlie's fiancée, Nicola, and Lola introduces herself, "Hello, I'm Lola, I'm the one designing his line of transvestite boots." Rather than getting upset over Lola's announcement to Nicola, Charlie makes the decision to devote the factory completely to their new designs. Unfortunately, the night before their big debut in Milan, Charlie and Lola are celebrating the success of the factory, the workers, and their hard work, but just before they meet, Charlie discovers that Nicola may be cheating on him. Charlie takes his frustration out on Lola and tells her that she looks "like the worst bits of both," referring to the only two genders that he knows.

Later in Milan, there are no models to present the factory's new product. Charlie decides to model his own boots. He miserably fails on the catwalk by stumbling

everywhere and eventually falling, but Lola and the girls appear on stage. Lola begins singing a montage of several songs about boots, and the crowd gives all of them a standing ovation at the end of the performance. We learn after the show Charlie's phone message to Lola as she plays it for Lauren and Charlie on her cell phone:

Charlie: I'm looking at a shoe fair program with a big gap where you should be. But I have to say, unlike most people, wherever you leave, you leave a gap, Lola. You will in Northampton. You have in Milan. Listen, if people ever tell you, you look half a man, you gotta remember, actually, that's fine. I mean, I don't know what half a man is. I don't know what the hell a man is. But I know that if it involves being brave, you are more of a man than I will ever be. Goodbye, Lola.

Lola: Don't think that's why I came. I came for the adulation [they all laugh and walk away together, arm-in-arm].

Through the ups and downs of Charlie and Lola's relationship, Charlie continues to revert back to thinking that Lola in a dress is inappropriate. Though, because the two spend time together, get to know one another, and begin to make connections, Charlie is eventually able to accept Lola and her performances in drag so much so that he was willing to put on her boots and attempt to showcase them in Milan.

Many of these films hold the same type of resolution. Similar to *Kinky Boots*, in *Connie and Carla* (2004), Jeff begins the movie highly uncomfortable with his estranged brother. After learning that Robert was kicked out of their home for his choice in female clothing rather than him simply leaving, Jeff eventually accepts his drag queen brother as Robert and as Peaches. *The Birdcage's* moment of acceptance comes when Senator

Keeley realizes that the Goldman family is willing to help the Keeley family out of a tough situation with the press. Alongside Starina, the entire Keeley family ends up dressing in drag and slipping out of the club with the actual drag queens and the audience at the end of the night's show. After a long overdue argument with his mother about his sexuality and drag performance, Arnold's mother in *Torch Song Trilogy* takes a step in the right direction in trying to understand her son. Though not as obvious as many of the other films, Ma Beckoff gives her son a knowing look in the final scenes of the movie, as she and her son begin to mend their broken relationship. In a very dramatic turn around, Walter from *Flawless* (1999), who is severely injured and in need of medical attention, calls Rusty his sister so that Rusty can ride to the hospital in the ambulance with him. This comes after many arguments with Rusty that tend to use the phrase "fucking faggot" and demonstrates that Walt has begun to understand Rusty and accepts Rusty in the feminine.

While many characters began their journeys at odds with drag queens, a great deal of those at odds come to accept the drag queens and a positive resolution is achieved in the end. These resolutions can be interpreted as a positive depiction. Thus, rather than the conflict dictating the entire storyline, audience members are led along storylines that show the evolution of friendships that form out of conflict with drag queens. They encounter the pain, loneliness, and heartbreak that the drag queens face from the lows in their relationships then experience the positive resolutions that are created when the drag queens become friends with their former foes. As the once angry, protestant character initially sees the drag queen/s as simply "men in dresses," they later learn to accept and even care for the drag queens they were once in opposition with. These "good

resolutions” are based solely on whether the representative from the heteronormative perspective is willing to make the change necessary for acceptance.

V. CONCLUSION

My goal in this study was to explore how drag queens are depicted in film. Do drag queens in movies actually challenge our gendered and sexual norms, are they stereotypically depicted, how do drag queens see themselves, and what does all of this mean for our society? Through this analysis, I found that these films utilize images of hyperfemininity and other racialized, gendered, and sexual stereotypes, specifically to create humor for audiences. The films emphasized the ways in which drag queens define themselves through terminology, their actions, movements, and comportment. Finally, I found that that the films commonly depict conflict within the lives of drag queens, and this is often accompanied by resolution. These films do not represent the full complexity of drag queen's lived experiences, but as movies only give us approximately two hours of any one person's experience, they do not necessarily fail at interpreting these lives.

There *is* potential within these films for norms to be challenged, yet much as some researchers state (Schacht, 2002) they also reinforce gendered norms and stereotypes about drag queens. A look into an introductory sociology book tells us that "stereotypes are oversimplified ideas about groups of people" (Openstax). Stereotypes form the basis for prejudice, which in turn is used to justify discrimination and attitudes. They can be positive as well as negative" (Crossman, 2016). They are generalizations that are harmful even when we consider them to be positive stereotypes as they do not fully encompass an individual's self, much less an entire group's characteristics. Stereotypes ignore variations in individuals and lead viewers to see the characters as homogenous and standardized. We do not learn of the uniqueness of the individual or group when we see only one side of them. The first impression that most people in the

general population receive about drag queens is from television and movies. The films in this analysis were found to have extensive use of stereotypical drag queen depictions to create humor. There are implications to the use of any sort of media, even more so in a day when it is highly accessible and is used frequently. Using humor can be both positive and negative for groups. In one sense, using humor can encourage people to look at something they have never looked at before, but on the other hand, it can create a situation where groups are made fun of, taunted, or even bullied. Drag queens are often depicted as hyperfeminine, even outside the drag persona, and this hyperfemininity is given a comedic role. This popular culture representation can give the impression that drag queens' experiences are to be laughed at. These films also portray many of the drag queens in very similar ways. Seeing drag queens in films as both a source of comedy and as all very similar can harm drag queen identity as it opens a space for viewers to "other" drag queens, further ignoring the complexities of their lived experiences. While in some instances these stereotypes may be "true" (for example, camp style drag is meant to be funny), they are all devices used to bring movie goers out to see the film and do not capture the entirety of the drag queen persona. On the other hand, not all drag queens depicted here were hyperfeminine or even feminine at all times. Some never altered their deep voices to sound more feminine and others only wore feminine clothing while in drag and on stage. Furthermore, racist stereotypes found their way into the films.

Although stereotypes hold a large role in the films, drag queens do in fact vary, and writers, directors, and producers often leave this to the drag queens themselves to explain. Drag queens' descriptions of themselves are highly diverse and constitute a wide array of definitions and actions. Just as drag queens in research are unique and diverse, so

are the descriptions that drag queens in film give us. Allowing expression of drag queen variety gives audiences a fair shot at judging who drag queens are as people rather than the oversimplified stereotypical versions of them. Because of this expression, viewers learn that drag queens constitute a great deal more than “drag queen.” As drag queens are currently experiencing a significant popular culture moment through these films and television shows such as *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, it would be beneficial to individuals that are “real-life” drag queens for these films to be true to their real life experiences. As expressed above, the depictions of drag queens do not balance entirely on hyperfeminine and stereotypical images. The characters in these films construct for viewers a much more complex image of drag queens, and we learn from each individual exactly what it means to be a drag queen.

Through the conflict that we see drag queens experience in these movies, we get a glimpse into their lives. In some ways, this counteracts the stereotypical campy drag performer. And while not all drag queens live the fairy tale ending of a positive resolution, at least some of the conflicts that they experience are unveiled for the audience. Yes, there are a number of performers that participate in camp, but their lives outside of the bar or club in which they perform is much more complex than a simple formula for drag queen, and these films do exhibit these complexities through the conflicts they traverse and the resolutions that are made with people in their lives. In doing so, audiences witness these drag queens’ lived experiences as both happy and painful. To the queens in these movies, drag is an evolution, it *is* transvestism and it is *not* transvestism, it is high drag and it is camp, it is lonely and it is exciting, it is entertainment and a career. It is complex, multifaceted, complicated, and dense. Both the

conflict and the resolutions displayed for audience members gives insight into some of the complexities of drag queen's lives.

Other than *Torch Song Trilogy*, I found little evidence that actual drag queens had any say in how they were depicted in the films, and although drag queens played a few roles of other drag queens, a majority of the actors were cisgender, straight males. In giving life to characters, it is important to hear from those being depicted, to get their input, and to let them have a say in the creation of such characters. As such, an exploration of how drag queens see these films and whether they held any creative positions in the creation of their characters would greatly enhance this research. Furthermore, there are many similarities within the structure and character makeup of these films. For example, *Priscilla* (an Australian film) and *To Wong Foo* (an American film) are both films about three drag queens traveling cross country by motorized vehicle. And in *Victor Victoria* and *Connie and Carla*, the title characters are all woman pretending to be men that perform as drag queens both for some benefit to the women. Therefore, future research should also comparatively examine characters within the films and the structures of the plotlines.

Drag queens make up a unique portion of the queer community, and they are long held as spokespersons, role models, and champions to others and the community. It would be an injustice to find that drag queens are depicted *only* in stereotypical ways, both to drag queens and those who look up to them. As history has shown us, the LGBTQIA community and anyone outside the gender binary have dealt with harassment and verbal and physical abuse from others because of misunderstanding. To portray one of the most visible aspects of the community through a negative lens can only continue to

feed the ideology that leads to such behavior. Therefore, it is important to continue to depict drag queens and others from the LGBTQIA community in a way that shows us who they are as people as well as their drag performing selves. Through this project, I have found themes that reinforce our gendered and sexual norms, but I have also found that these norms can be challenged by the drag queens in these films. There is no clear cut definition of drag queen in movies or in reality, and this is a promising thought for those who have never met nor seen drag queens on the big screen.

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