15 Seconds of Fame: Rupaul's Drag Race, Camp, and 'Memeability'

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Abstract

In this article, we argue that the campy affectations of contestants of *RuPaul's Drag Race* (*RPDR*) serve as the perfect vehicle through which GIFs and memes can be created and have the potential to go viral online. *RPDR* relies heavily on social media for its success, and we claim that the queens who go on to establish a celebrity persona beyond the show are often the ones who fully exploit this relationship by condensing themselves into self-branded caricatures. These simplified personas, with their distinctive phrases, quirks and idiosyncrasies, can be easily captured and expressed in short GIFs, clips and memes. We argue that memeability – that is, having a persona that lends itself to becoming a meme that in turn acts as a mechanism in the production of stardom – is the online celebrity's equivalent of charisma in the social media age. In this article, by drawing on queens from *RPDR* such as Miss Vanjie and Alyssa Edwards, we assert that virality and memes have become part of the celebrity-making process, as well as a vehicle to enable brand collaborations and capitalization.

Keywords: *RuPaul's Drag Race*; camp; memes; virality; celebrity; Miss Vanjie; MET Gala

Introduction

Episode 1, season 10 of *RuPaul's Drag Race* (*RPDR*) culminated, as usual, with a runway show and elimination of a queen according to a format that had been refined and established over a decade. This however was not to be like other seasons as the first queen to exit the show, Vanessa Vanjie Mateo, better known as Miss Vanjie, was to quickly become one of the most memorable of any of the contestants during the previous decade of programming. In a rare moment when the expression *coup de théâtre* might accurately be applied to a staged event,

Miss Vanjie after failing the lip sync challenge, exited the stage walking backwards, intoning her name 3 times; "Miss Vanjie… Miss Vanjie… Miss Vanjie…"

Almost everything about this incident, lasting a mere 15 seconds, was remarkable; from the camp excess of Vanjie's outfit, festooned with pink and purple silk flowers, further adorned with plastic dolls and fish, her inch long eyelashes and blonde wig that she chose to run her gloved fingers through in a gesture of languorous glamour, to the disparity between the hysterical vision of femininity that she presented to the judges that was underscored by her gravel voiced incantation of her name as she appeared to retreat ghost-like and somnambulant, off stage and into obscurity.

Viewers already understand that being the first queen to be eliminated from *RDPR*, just as being the first contestant to leave any reality TV show, is to be showered with ignominy. Indeed the competitors of such programming are routinely positioned as unready and unfit for celebrity status and therefore supremely forgettable and disposable. However Miss Vanjie's social media afterlife meant that she was not destined to disappear so quickly. In the hours after her departure viral clips of the exit rapidly circulated on Youtube, Facebook and Twitter. [i] A subsequent extract from the following episode showing RuPaul and fellow judge Michele Visage suppressing laughter at the extraordinary exit was to further consolidate the camp hysteria and therefore viral potential of Miss Vanjie. [ii] In the following weeks the clip became one of the most talked about moments from season 10 circulating as a GIF and transformed into an especially popular and pervasive meme. [iii] Such was the success of the Miss Vanjie meme that it has found its place into the Urban Dictionary summed up thus:

> Gay culture is exiting a room backwards and saying "Miss Vanjie.... Miss Vanjie..." [iv]

Vanjie's subsequent rise to fame and victory in the midst of her seeming defeat, ostensibly based on 15 seconds of televised footage appropriated, and circulated as a meme, seemed to shatter the generic conventions of the reality TV

competition show and the trajectory of celebrity that it promulgates. Rather than a therapeutic struggle against adversity to ultimate victory within the televised *RDPR* diegesis, Vanjie instead became the star of season 10 and a fully fledged celebrity in her own right (returning to the show in the following season) due to the viral online success of her televised failure. Whilst Miss Vanjie was exhorted to 'sashay away' at the end of the first episode, the manner (and mannerism) of her exit meant that she became an ever-present absence throughout the season, her departing lines repeated, revised and revisioned by the judges and other contestants alike.

In this essay we suggest that the celebrity of Miss Vanjie tells us something about both the narratives of celebrity in the digital age and the ways in which viral clips, GIFs and internet memes circulated on social media have become imbricated in the construction of a celebrity persona.

Chris Rojek has previously argued that celebrity status belongs to one of 3 orders; ascribed, achieved and attributed. Ascribed meaning born into fame, achieved through talent and attributed through 'the concentrated representation of an individual as noteworthy or exceptional by cultural intermediaries.' (2001, p. 18) Notwithstanding reservations about the rather rigid demarcations that Rojek suggests, almost 20 years later it is possible to see the ways in which celebrity in a reality TV format show like *RDPR* can be constructed as simultaneously existing at the intersection of the axes of these vectors of fame. For instance lineage (specifically matrilineage) is of crucial importance within drag culture and it is established by being adopted by a drag mother as a young queen into her drag family (Hopkins, 2008). Miss Vanjie for instance is the drag daughter of Alexis Mateo who was a contestant in season 3 and part of the line up for season 1 of *RuPaul's Drag Race All Stars*. Queens become contestants through their reputation as skilled drag performers (singers, comedians, hostesses, pageant queens) in their locality gaining fame or a following via Instagram (based on the skills that go into their drag looks and consolidating that fame through media attention via social media) [v]. Consequently we suggest that Rojek's categories of celebrity are blurred in the contemporary media

landscape.

So in this essay we are looking at several related issues; the extent to which the construction of celebrity in *RDPR* (and more generally) relies on social media in the 21st century, the textual qualities and camp affordances of virality, GIFs and memeability that enable the creation of a drag race superstar persona and the extent to which fan investment via the circulation of memes is critical in the construction of contemporary celebrity and the extent to which this resists (or queers) the image management strategy of the entertainment industries.

Notes on Mainstreaming Drag and Camp

At the most quotidian level we need only acknowledge the evolution of the production and distribution history of *RPDR* to make a case for the mainstreaming of drag alongside a concomitant broadening out of camp as a system of meaning making. *RDPR,* since the first season in 2009, has been produced by *World of Wonder*, known for programming (largely reality and documentary formats) that focuses on sexuality and sexual subcultures. As such, their content has a tendency to attract small but dedicated fanbases and to become associated with what might be considered cult television. The channel that first hosted the show, *Logo TV*, further fomented this initial sense of a niche and specific audience. This American channel – one that comes as part of a paid subscription to a specific provider – originally targeted gay and lesbian audiences, showing repeats of shows that have since become 'gay classics' (such as the British sitcom *Absolutely Fabulous*), and commissioning other originals such as *RPDR*. However, as of season 9 that first aired in 2017, the show moved to *VH1*, a sister channel of *MTV*. The demographic for this channel is far broader than that of *Logo TV*, and as of 2016 (the year before it began hosting *RPDR*), the channel was received in over 90 million US households – 40 million more than *Logo TV*. In addition, as of season 11, the streaming site *Netflix* acquired distribution rights of *RPDR* to the UK, meaning the show could become branded a 'Netflix Original'. The easy online accessibility to *RPDR* via *Netflix,* coupled with its dedicated fanbase sharing clips, stills, and quotes on social media, opened the

show to a wider audience. Away from the cameras, many of the most popular queens from across seasons have toured with the *Werq the World* tour, performing to sold-out venues across the USA and Europe. What this demonstrates is an exponential growth in audiences for *RPDR* and a trajectory towards a wider public consciousness. Whereas RuPaul himself may argue that drag will never become mainstream[vi], *Drag Race* seems destined to move in exactly that direction. As such, the camp pleasures that the show offers have become open to, and *made open to*, a far wider constituency than what could be termed the 'LGBTQ+ community'.

Notwithstanding the expanding audience share for *RDPR*, the connections between the mainstreaming of drag performance and a wider investment in camp humor and celebrity culture are already strong. Indeed it's virtually impossible to disentangle any discussion of particular forms of stardom from camp as one of the principle mechanisms for the circulation of celebrity meaning across popular culture. As we will note later on in this essay the potential for a camp reading is part of the ways in which a celebrity persona is constructed more generally and is axiomatic to the construction of a drag persona. Therefore the extent to which RuPaul and the queens of *RPDR* have become enmeshed within, rather than ironically commenting on, celebrity culture deserves some consideration and has been consolidated by the serendipitous circumstance of the 2019 MET Gala.

Since the early 1970s under Diana Vreeland's control, the MET Gala has been regarded as one of the most glamorous of New York social events. In recent years, with a celebrity guest list presided over by Anna Wintour and the staff of *Vogue* and tickets costing $30,000, it is an event synonymous with exclusivity, glamour, extravagance and prestige. Each year the MET Gala is themed to reflect that this lavish spectacle is ostensibly a fundraiser for the Costume Institute of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In 2019 the theme of the MET Gala was 'Camp: Notes on Fashion'.

It was perhaps an inevitability given the international success of *RDPR* and RuPaul's celebrity status and regular appearance on syndicated US TV shows like *Saturday Night Live* (*SNL*) that he would be on the guest list for the MET Gala. We choose the pronoun 'he' advisably here as given the limitless potential for camp excess the event offered, instead RuPaul appeared on the red carpet (albeit in a pink sequined zebra print tuxedo accessorized with a feather boa) as his male self. This choice was to raise some eyebrows and was rationalized, rather tenuously, on the basis that RuPaul never drags up unless he is being paid to do so. [vii] It perhaps makes more sense to think about the choice in terms of the pragmatics of managing a career as a mainstream celebrity and clearly establishing RuPaul Charles' celebrity persona alongside that of Mama Ru who now resides within the controlled *Drag Race* universe. Charles' career ambitions demonstrably exceed the world of drag and he is repeatedly touted as a potential guest host of shows like *SNL.* Whilst on the one hand this might suggest a disavowal of the very subculture that has afforded RuPaul fame, drag is always in one way or another about transformation, becoming, and moving beyond even when that transition is to move past a drag persona.

Perhaps to compensate for RuPaul's sartorial restraint, two queens from *RDPR* also appeared on the MET Gala red carpet. The first being season 10 winner Aquaria, in an outfit inspired by Julie Andrews in *Victor/Victoria* (a camp classic about cross dressing) and season 7 winner Violet Chachki, whose 1950s haute couture references have meant that she is courted by the fashion establishment as a model. [viii] It's notable that none of the more extravagantly camp queens made an appearance. The queens allowed to wear drag on the red carpet at this prestigious event were instead what might be described as fashion queens or 'convincing' female impersonators and their outfits understood as intertextual 'translations' of camp for a mainstream media, referencing the history of Hollywood cinema. That is to say, Aquaria and Violet Chachki's appearance and ensembles at the MET Gala were aligned with a highly polished and visually stunning standard of camp, the camp that Susan Sontag says is 'often decorative art, emphasizing texture, sensuous surface, and style at the expense of content' (2009 [1964], p. 278). In essence both queen become exemplars of Sontag's

summation of camp as being 'a woman walking around in a dress made of three million feathers' (p. 283).

Indeed, what was strikingly absent at the MET Gala (and a similar criticism might be leveled at *RPDR* more broadly) was the version of camp located within the extremes of excess, vulgarity and poor taste. This is a version of camp that Matthew Tinkcom notes has been most vividly represented in cinema, by the director John Waters and drag queen and character actor Divine; Waters, rather surprisingly given the theme, was not invited to the MET Gala and his absence was picked up by media outlets (Waters contends that, despite the MET owning a number of items of his clothing, he has never received an invitation to attend, and that it is not just this year despite the fact that, to many it seems an oversight to have not asked the 'King of Camp')[ix]. Perhaps this exclusion is not so difficult to fathom however as Waters' camp epitomizes what Tinkcom characterizes as a 'trash aesthetic' that takes pleasure in 'mocking many of the most cherished institutions of contemporary life (marriage, domesticity, work, glamour)' (2002, p. 156). We note that the same institutions are reified by *RPDR* in its frequent endorsement of same-sex marriage, its focus on a work/werk ethos, and normative ideals of feminine glamour. Although Waters himself featured in season 7, episode 9 of *RPDR* (entitled 'Divine Inspiration') as a guest judge, even then the more shocking and distasteful elements of his earlier 'trash aesthetic' oeuvre (*Pink Flamingos*, *Female Trouble*) became subsumed into the more polished, straight-friendly camp of *RPDR*. Whereas the MET Gala and *RPDR* have the capacity to host the trashy camp of Waters, a mainstream and fundamentally *palatable* version of camp is proffered instead, ever mindful that while both the MET Gala and *RPDR* enjoy a committed LGBTQ+ audience, there is also a large non-LGBTQ+ audience to cater to. Camp's assimilation into the mainstream of popular culture however is neither new nor is it unproblematic. As Shugart and Waggoner note, camp is often:

> Anchored in conventional notions or "discourses" of gender and sexuality, and […] questions circulate around whether and, if so, how camp may function as a key strategy by which those discourses might be

> renegotiated. […] Perhaps camp's popularity in contemporary culture says more about the ability of dominant media interests, invested in preserving conventional discourses, to appropriate and defuse potentially threatening strategies and sensibilities. (2008, p. 2)

The MET Gala then illustrates celebrity culture deploying a very particular type of camp that can include RuPaul and a carefully selected coterie of his queens but excludes the kitsch and subversive camp of John Waters. Consequently camp in this luxurious and rarified setting loses much of its countercultural bite and instead becomes a style or sensibility or even a marketing strategy to facilitate a celebrity's conspicuous display of wealth; camp as in effect an alibi. On reflection, perhaps the campest thing about the 2019 MET Gala is the choice of camp as a theme at all. Camp in this context is appropriated as what might be described as a perfomative register by celebrities, including RuPaul and his queens. Camp enables a (more or less) ironising distancing of the celebrity from their persona through extravagant display that reminds us of the constructed nature of celebrity at the same time as reifying it's constructedness.

However to argue that camp is evacuated of all of it's subversive power in this context or to suggest that RuPaul and his queens appearing at the MET Gala is little more than an assimilation of queer culture into the mainstream would be too facile. Instead we are suggesting a negotiation that takes place here between mainstream and marginal cultures at such highly publicized and promoted occasions and that this negotiation progressively takes place in the realm of social media.

For example the MET Gala and comparable 'glamorous' events are designed to provide venues for such conspicuous displays of extravagance and luxury that they are frequently susceptible to satirical humor often circulated via social media. [x] This practice has developed pace during the course of the past 20 years. Recent media reportage has reminded us that the online search for photographs of Jennifer Lopez in a revealing Versace gown at the Grammys in 2000 is routinely attributed to the development of Google Images and to the virality of

the striking red carpet appearance. [xi] In 2012 Angelina Jolie's much-mocked Oscar carpet pose with her right leg extended at an unusual angle from her Versace gown was circulated and recycled endlessly in the days that followed. [xii] Publicists are of course increasingly attuned to the PR collateral to be gained on social media from such photo opportunities with some clearly contrived to provoke mockery as in the case of UK reality TV personality Gemma Collins who has claimed the title of 'queen of memes' largely as a result of a 'misjudged' wardrobe decision that was the subject of a subsequent social media campaign.[xiii]

In each of these cases, mediated 'moments' of excessive glamour (or a perceived failure to achieve glamour) which we would caution can easily be read as misogynist in their implicit valorization of idealized models of appropriate femininity, have also opened themselves up to a camp appreciation and re-appropriation. As Shugart and Waggoner note:

> Style of the exaggerated, ostentatious, outrageous sort constitutes camp, rendering it a spectacle. […] Incongruence must be made visible, however, in particular, typically excessive, ways for it to be coded as camp. There is a passionate, exuberant quality to the extravagant aesthetic of camp. (2008, p. 34)

Additionally and fundamentally for our purposes in this essay, the virality that such images achieve and their potential transformation into memes (a process we will describe subsequently) are mechanisms that enable the contestants of *RuPaul's Drag Race* to insert themselves into these new social media driven discourses of celebrity.

A Short History of the Meme

In *The Selfish Gene* (1976) Richard Dawkins defines a meme as the cultural and social equivalent to the biological gene. The distinction made by Dawkins between the two is that genes reproduce by inheritance whereas memes do so

via imitation, and as such memes are forms of knowledge exchange that can become transformed, added to, and enhanced over time through processes of learning. Memes are social phenomena that represent behaviours, ideas and abilities, and they become passed on from person to person and imitated and embellished in the process. Everyday examples of memes that have existed for centuries can include recipes, stories and folklore, songs, and fashion (Burgess, Miller & Moore, 2018). However, with the advent of the internet, digital memes have come to warrant their own definition and cultures separate to those examples that pre-date the online arena (Shifman, 2014a). Patrick Davison argues that an internet meme is '*a piece of culture, typically a joke, which gains influence through online transmission*' (2012, p. 122, original italics). Early examples of internet memes include emoticons, while later examples from the early-to-mid 2010s tended to include photos distinct to their respective meme. These photos often feature an easily-identifiable emotion with varying text – usually typed in Impact font (Brideau and Berret, 2014) – superimposed to communicate a relatable situation or message, often for humorous effect (Davison, 2012). Specific examples include 'Grumpy Cat' [xiv] and 'Success Kid' [xv]. Limor Shifman regards digital memes as sharing common characteristics of form and content; common awareness among those forms and contents; and as being reproduced, transformed and circulated in quick succession via multiple users of the internet (2013). As Paasonen, Jarrett and Light note, 'memes, in general, live off their participatory possibilities of remix and alteration, and their appeal is centrally dependent on their ability to amuse' (2019, p. 80). The humor of memes has a tendency to become ironic, surreal, or offensive (Davison, 2012) and to apply to specific subgroups of people based upon cultural markers such as age, gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity, and occupation (Shifman, 2014a; Juza, 2013). However, as noted by Dobson and Knezevic (2018), the spread of memeable material on social media can often become framed by reductionist readings and reinterpretations of such cultural markers as race, gender, sexuality and social class. This can lead to the production of memes that further stigmatize those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Dobson and Knezevic, 2017). Similarly, a frequent recourse towards memes featuring black people and black celebrities has drawn the criticism that this practice might be regarded as a

form of 'digital blackface' (Jones, 2018). It is important therefore to note that the politics of memes and meme sharing are far from unequivocally progressive. Notwithstanding these reservations, recently the links between memes and celebrity have been discussed in this journal. Using the example of Nicolas Cage (McGowan, 2017), ironic humor and the sharing of memes can be seen as a driver behind the reinterpretation of Cage's resurgent celebrity status for example.

Shifman argues that the speed with which digital memes can become replicated, circulated, and accessed separates them from their offline counterparts (2014a), and this also accounts for the quick turnaround in a meme's shelf life. For instance, recent examples that follow the still-image-with-changeable-text format include the 'Distracted Boyfriend'[xvi] and the 'Is This A Pigeon?'[xvii] meme, but shifts in style (such as the infrequent use of Impact font, a greater reliance on stock photos, and the appropriation of film/television stills) help to differentiate these later memes from those of 5 to 10 years ago, which now appear out-dated to those who circulate them. In addition, increased access to video-recording technology and digital platforms for video sharing sparks the potential for amateur, user-generated content to become memes but also for individuals to contribute to the process by imitating the original (Shifman, 2014a). Shifman frames this through the concept of 'networked individualism' (Wellman, Boase and Chen, 2000), in which users who imitate or edit their own versions of popular memes demonstrate their own creativity and individual wit, while at the same time offering their contribution to the wider network of other memes within that same genre. Digital memes in their broader definition exist as 'enormous groups of texts and images', then (Shifman, 2014b, p. 341).

In discussing the rapid process of circulation afforded by digital technology it is also important when defining terms of reference to note that there are distinctions between memes and digital content that 'goes viral'. Hemsley and Mason define 'going viral' and 'virality' as comprising three main elements: 1) the dispersal of a media text occurs on an individual-to-individual basis, 2) the spread of the media text happens at a high speed, and 3) it spreads across a

number of networks, and is accessed by a broad range of people (2013). Virality then encompasses both the 'viral video' and the 'viral ad'. There are evident similarities between virality and digital memes; speed of transmission and a wide outreach are certainly features of memes that have gained traction within wider popular culture. However, to become the subject of a viral video clip, for example, is not enough. It may provide the necessary foundation to become a meme, but Shifman outlines the additional requirements for that process to happen:

> The main difference between Internet memes and virals thus relates to variability: whereas the viral comprises a single cultural unit (such as a video, photo, or joke) that propagates in many copies, an Internet meme is always a collection of texts. […] A single video is not an Internet meme but part of a meme— one manifestation of a group of texts that together can be described as the meme. (2014a, p. 56)

Memes are the next stage on from virality, then. Burgess, Miller and Moore (2018) note the potential for memes and virality to interact through 'viral challenge memes', where a specified task is set and those who partake regularly nominate others to follow suit. Individual creativity, or the higher-profile celebrity involved, increase the likelihood of virality and subsequent embellishment. [xviii]

Individual digital platforms also provide their own affordances for the creation, recreation, and spread of memes (Shifman, 2014a). For example, Twitter allows users to retweet the memes of others, but they also offer the option to 'retweet with comment', meaning the original tweet (which may include an image or video clip) becomes embedded in a new tweet that users can add their own comments to thus transforming the original and embellishing it with their own content, contributing to the process of becoming-a-meme. In addition, Twitter allowed users to start tweeting GIFs in 2014, and Facebook added the same functions in 2015 for comments and posts, and installed a GIF toolbar for posts

and Messenger in 2017. Dean theorises GIFs as 'animated memes, often consisting of short looped video clips shared for the purposes of conveying emotion or a reaction to an event or an utterance' (2019, p. 258). The use of GIFs is pervasive within online communication: indeed, they are regarded as a form of communication in social media (Jiang, Fiesler and Brubaker, 2018). Jiang et al. outline the ways in which GIFs have become integral to much online communication, used as a means of conveying emotion; of substituting text when a GIF more effectively conveys a situation or feeling; as being able to convey more nuanced feelings than emojis; to start, and sustain, conversations; and to inject humor and personality (2018). These short looped video clips are often taken from television, film or viral videos, with subtitles regularly added, and become widely circulated in open online spaces or in closed online conversations. This commonly leads to a decontextualisation from their original material source that grants GIFs a polysemic quality where interpretations are made differently based upon the audience viewing or receiving it (Miltner and Highfield, 2017). This can regularly lead to a *mis*communication of intent and context of messages when GIFs are shared online (Jiang et al., 2018). However, GIFs that comprise looped footage from television or film are commonly shared among the fanbases of their respective media, which helps to establish fan identities, transform and repurpose narratives, share in-jokes and support arguments or fan fiction (Hautsch, 2018). This is of particular significance to *RuPaul's Drag Race*, where there is an established fanbase largely comprised of LGBTQ+ people or people aware of LGBTQ+ culture regularly making GIFs that go viral and become memes online. These contribute to and sustain the celebrity status and unique identities of the queens while simultaneously decoupling them from their original cultural context and flattening their performances into short repackaged messages, the meanings of which consistently alter and evolve.

'Memeability' and Celebrity Culture

The creation and circulation of GIFs and viral clips that might become memes, predicated on a condition that we describe as 'memeability' is critical to the development of this specific strand of contemporary celebrity culture which

perpetuates itself online. At the most instrumental level this is attributable to the pragmatics of celebrity in the social media age. The queens of *RPDR*, even whilst they might appear in the same promotional venues at points and have been to a greater or lesser degree integrated into celebrity culture, are not direct equivalents of the Hollywood A List who populate the red carpets supported by a highly developed infrastructure of publicity and marketing. Having neither the financial resources nor the social and cultural capital of these stars, instead they are often their own publicity machine and sustain their celebrity statuses online through Instagram, Twitter and associated social media. In this regard the *RDPR* queens are not only contestants on a TV programme; they are simultaneously becoming part of a celebrity culture that exists online. In *Status Update: Celebrity, Publicity, and Branding in the Social Media Age* Alice Marwick describes the particularities of online celebrity:

> Online celebrities are not traditional celebrities, they do not have teams of agents and managers to protect them from the public, and they lack vast sums of money. Moreover, they are working within a different milieu, that of the internet, which idealizes transparency and thus expects a certain amount of exhibitionism. (2013, p. 114)

Whilst we might take issue with the increasingly anachronistic dichotomy that Marwick draws between 'online' and 'traditional' celebrities, in this social media driven environment that we are discussing in this essay virality and memeability become central strategies in the establishment and sustenance of a media profile at the same time as they become markers of celebrity status; in short, a queen's memeability has an analogue in pre-digital discourses of 'star quality' and charisma.

Though virality and memeability are not phenomena that emerge from gay or queer culture and are by no means always camp in intention, they have been enthusiastically adopted because of their rich expressive potential as vehicles for ironic (and thereby camp) positionality. We would argue that many memes are therefore inherently camp due to the ironizing and potentially subversive

strategies that lie at the heart of this form of cultural appropriation and distribution. The meme is always ostensibly an expressive rather than an instructive or directive form of communication. Memes and memeability works on the basis of a facility to summon up a mood, an attitude, or shared cultural sensibility. In this respect we are reminded of Sontag's much quoted (and much criticized) 'Notes on Camp' (1964) and her description of a 'certain mode of aestheticism' and 'what camp taste responds to is "instant character."'

Through their demonstration of memeability the queens of *RDPR* can infiltrate an online discourse of fame populated by a pantheon of celebrities who provide memeable riches unintentionally, such as Mariah Carey, Britney Spears, or Celine Dion.[xix] At least some, if not all, of these celebrities are those associated with what Grindstaff and Murray call 'branded affect':

> Dramatic outbursts of emotional expressivity are "branded" […] as they are taken up, circulated, replayed, and recycled as indexes of a celebrity persona. Consequently, some reality television stars exist not only as the concrete embodiment of heightened emotion on-screen but also as brands in relation to the spectacular emotion or affect they produce/evoke. (2015, p. 111)

This branded affect is promulgated via virality and memeability on social media and celebrities who are associated with it (such as Gemma Collins who we have already mentioned) provide a performative register and blueprint for the self-conscious memeability of a *RDPR* performance that is then duplicated and circulated online.

One of *RuPaul's Drag Race*'s most notable exemplars of memeability is Alyssa Edwards, queen of season 5 and *RuPaul's Drag Race All Stars 2*. Famed for her staccato tongue-pops (a sort of audible exclamation mark), shady reads and put-downs, and her plosive outburst of the word 'beast' to refer to unconvincing drag, Edwards is one of the earliest queens who became easy to caricature and therefore easy to imitate, lending herself towards virality and memeability. GIFs

of Edwards are ubiquitous online, owing to her ability to condense her character into seconds-long catchphrases and reactions, recirculated by others online to demonstrate their own affective relationship to a given situation or event. As such, Edwards might be regarded as the embodiment of Grindstaff and Murray's 'branded affect' (ibid.), and consequently has been able to leverage her own personal brand as a promotional/marketing tool of value to corporations with some degree of success. Recently, for instance, Edwards has collaborated with *Cosmopolitan*[xx]; a 5-minute video produced by the media outlet features Edwards giving advice on how to be petty, replete with tongue-pops, shady "advice", and a large hand-held fan and cosmetic mirror both of which are emblazoned with the word 'Beast'. The video is used as a vehicle for Edwards to promote her eye shadow palette made in collaboration with the make-up brand *Anastasia Beverly Hills* (indelibly linked to *RPDR*, as it offers a lifetime supply of its products to the eventual winner of each season). Other collaborations have seen Edwards star in commercials for *Pepsi* in which she teaches fellow *RPDR* alumnus Plastique Tiara how to tongue-pop[xxi].

In the case of the *Cosmopolitan* video, Edwards's branded affect coupled with her virality and memeability, based on her glamour as a drag queen renowned for her perfected makeup, is capitalized upon by a relationship with the media outlet and with a global makeup brand. The rhetoric of the video is clearly designed with social media in mind, containing a succession of instances in which Edwards performs the recognizable and repeatable aspects of her celebrity persona, perfect for turning into GIFs to be circulated online. In turn, this raises awareness of, and drives traffic to, *Cosmopolitan* and *Anastasia Beverly Hills'* respective publications and products. So, this self-conscious memeability becomes a means through which to expand brand awareness, develop a celebrity profile, and to capitalize upon one's performative register. 'Branded affect' and memeability is evoked through the virality of GIFs and memes of Alyssa Edwards, Gemma Collins, Mariah Carey, and Britney Spears, however the difference between Edwards/Collins and Carey/Spears is that the former's celebrity statuses have developed within the age of memes and virality and have relied upon them for sustenance. The celebrity status of Mariah Carey and

Britney Spears has not. As such, memes and GIFs shared of the latter tend to come from moments that were less self-aware (and certainly less self-referential). We might draw a parallel here with the contentious point that Susan Sontag makes in 'Notes on Camp' about distinctions between camp's naïve or deliberate form (1964).

The meme and memeability in this context work as mechanisms through which the aspiring celebrity can establish their status whilst fans and followers can consolidate their affective relationship with them through repetition and imitation and simultaneously claim ownership of the meaning making potential of celebrity. What is clear at least in the present moment is that memeability is an important contributor to the ability to sustain a career as a *RDPR* superstar[xxii]. Virality and memeability enable the queens to situate themselves into the discourses of online celebrity where Miss Vanjie's notorious exit or Alyssa's tongue-pop are of equal cultural significance to any meme generated from the extravagances or idiosyncrasies of Mariah Carey or Britney Spears.

Conclusion: What Does This Meme?

RuPaul and the most successful queens of *Rupaul's Drag Race* are now assimilated into the patterns and discourses of mainstream celebrity culture. Celebrity in the age of social media is increasingly predicated on, and in fact demands, virality and memeability; a compression, simplification and multiplication of messages and this tendency has become a feature of the discourse of celebrity more broadly. In the particular case of reality television celebrities, a social media profile based around virality is essential and the ability to produce content that might generate memes is key to the maintenance of a celebrity persona. The viral video and memes have become part of celebrity making and indexes of celebrity status. Whilst meme production sits alongside industrialized image management and therefore has the potential to be resistant to or even destabilize the brand identity of an individual celebrity it is progressively being deployed in a more self aware manner, drawing on irony and camp and becoming part of the image making strategy of celebrities. The queens

of *RPDR* are at the vanguard of this new form of image construction as we have illustrated.

As a popular cultural phenomenon *Rupaul's Drag Race* relies on paratextual discourse amongst emotionally invested audiences and especially on a vibrant social media engagement with the programme and its contestants for its success. We have argued here though that most of the queens who ultimately have a sustained success both during their appearance on the programme and afterwards are those who understand and are able to exploit social media and the memeability of their personas. This demands distinctive iconographic characteristics of the queens' drag image that include memorable and humorous catchphrases or gimmicks and performative idiosyncrasies. Whilst a queen may be a talented performer, singer, comedian, this in itself is rarely a sufficient qualification to sustain a career.

Memeability in this context then might be understood as a particular marker of what in the predigital media landscape has been described variously as charisma or star quality. Indeed it is our contention that memeability is the charisma of the social media age; a form of algorithmic charisma that crystalises the intangibility of star quality into compressed, shareable, reproducible, 'GIFable' content.

The extent to which memeability is more than a passing moment in the development of celebrity meaning making in the digital age is of course uncertain. For instance the controversy around article 13 of the 'European Union Directive on Copyright in the Digital Single Market' making online platforms liable for infringements may well curtail the viral spread of copyright material on which many of the *RPDR* memes are based. [xxiii] For now though the meme and memeability represent metaphors for the nature of celebrity in the digital age; a point in celebrity culture when the more truncated the 'message' is the better and where the plasticity of an isolated moment transformed into a meme creates and sustains a celebrity persona. By exiting the runway of *RuPaul's Drag Race* backwards, Miss Vanjie was sashaying towards her new celebrity career.

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Notes

[i] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kHUz0Z_xFXw

[ii] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m5277YS1ptU

[iii] https://www.bustle.com/p/miss-vanjie-memes-have-taken-over-rupauls-drag-race-star-vanessa-vanjie-mateo-isnt-even-mad-8692513

https://www.billboard.com/articles/news/pride/8280564/rupauls-drag-race-miss-vanjie-memes

https://www.gaytimes.co.uk/culture/102979/10-of-the-best-memes-that-show-why-miss-vanjie-is-the-true-drag-race-winner/

https://www.buzzfeed.com/christianzamora/miss-vaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaannnnjie

https://www.pajiba.com/tv_reviews/rupaul-is-obsessed-with-the-miss-vanjie-meme.php

iv https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Miss%20Vanjie

[v] We note that drag queens have been enthusiastic adopters of social media as a mechanism in constructing and maintaining a fanbase at a local level as illustrated by Jessa Lingel and Adam Golub's research in the essay *In Face on Facebook: Brooklyn's Drag Community and Sociotechnical Practices of Online Communication* (2015).

[vi] https://variety.com/2019/tv/news/rupaul-drag-race-emmys-1203336127/

[vii] https://www.wmagazine.com/story/rupaul-met-gala-2019-red-carpet-drag

[viii] https://www.vogue.com/vogueworld/article/violet-chachki-paris-couture-fashion-week-fall-2019-shows-photo-diary

[ix] https://www.papermag.com/john-waters-met-gala-2638357067.html

[x] https://www.cosmopolitan.com/style-beauty/fashion/a9578084/funny-met-gala-memes/

[xi] https://www.businessinsider.com/jennifer-lopezs-grammys-dress-inspired-google-image-search-2015-5?r=US&IR=T

[xii] https://www.marieclaire.co.uk/news/celebrity-news/angelina-jolie-s-leg-takes-over-the-internet-210607

[xiii] https://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-4715668/Gemma-Collins-shows-curves-edgy-outfit.html
https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2017/sep/08/towie-gemma-collins-i-felt-more-beautiful-before-tv-criticism-now

[xiv] https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/grumpy-cat

[xv] https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/success-kid-i-hate-sandcastles

[xvi] https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/distracted-boyfriend

[xvii] https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/is-this-a-pigeon

[xviii] The 'Ice Bucket Challenge' of 2014 is a good example here of a viral clip, associated with a fundraising campaign for *ALS Association* that became a popular meme: http://www.alsa.org/fight-als/ice-bucket-challenge.html

[xix] As we have previously noted not all memeable celebrities are pop divas. The rapper Drake for example is often regarded as the epitome of memeability. https://www.vice.com/en_uk/article/rq5e7r/understanding-drakes-meme-appeal

[xx] https://www.cosmopolitan.com/entertainment/celebs/a28468477/alyssa-edwards-petty-video/

[xxi] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jsXevbn6Cjc We note that Edwards' tongue-pops have been adopted as lingua franca for the queens of *RPDR*. For instance amongst the queens in the first season of *RuPaul's Drag Race UK*, Cheryl Hole has adopted the tongue-pop as her own gestural signature.

[xxiii] https://www.wired.co.uk/article/what-is-article-13-article-11-european-directive-on-copyright-explained-meme-ban