

**'Assume the position: two queens stand before me': RuPaul as Ultimate Queen**

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## **'Assume the position: two queens stand before me': RuPaul as Ultimate Queen**

### **Abstract**

Season 10 marked a decade of Drag Race, with RuPaul and other celebrities framing the show as a worldwide phenomenon promoting love, inclusivity, acceptance and Drag. This aspect of RuPaul's Drag Race is foregrounded in much of the existing scholarship on the reality show which considers the inclusivity and visibility that it offers (Edgar, 2011; Goldmark, 2015). Although Drag Race brings an area of gay culture and history into the mainstream (i.e. RuPaul seasons and Werk the World Tour), we argue that the only Queen and Herstory that is promoted and unquestionably validated is RuPaul Herself. Within the show, contestants often refer to RuPaul as 'Mama Ru', in direct reference to historical drag family relationships. In this article, we argue that RuPaul is positioned as the Ultimate Queen rather than Drag Mother, reflecting the more transactional relationship between head judge and contestants that we argue is constructed in the show. RuPaul as Ultimate Queen is achieved through strategically using the themes of history and authenticity to support a commodification of RuPaul which reinforces celebrity, cultural capital and authority. From Queens lip-syncing to RuPaul's back catalogue to the central place RuPaul places herself as drag pioneer; we explore 'RuPaul as commodity' and the possible implications on the presentation and marketability of gay / drag culture through the format of *Drag Race* and RuPaul as ultimate Queen. All queens assume the position behind her. The paper draws upon data collected through textual analysis of seasons 1 to 11, focusing primarily on themes that arose throughout the seasons, but particularly focusing on the following episodes: season opening, snatch game, makeover, finale. We will be exploring the themes history and self-commemoration, and authenticity, and commodification.

*Key words: Reality Television, Celebrity, RuPaul's Drag Race, Authenticity, History, Commodification, Drag Culture*

## Introduction

*RuPaul's Drag Race* (*RPDR*, Logo TV, 2009-2016; VH1, 2017-present) has gained substantial academic attention in recent years, with a wealth of work emerging in response to the phenomenon. This academic work is diverse in focus, taking in questions of gender, ethnicity, identity, the drag community, mainstreaming, authenticity and commodification to name but a few. While there is an increasing body of work on *RPDR*, the figure of RuPaul is often peripheral to these academic discussions. Despite her looming celebrity presence in the show, discussion instead gathers around the presentation and format of the show and the experiences and behaviours of the drag contestants. Season 10 marked a decade of *RPDR*, with RuPaul and other celebrities framing the show as a worldwide phenomenon promoting love, inclusivity, acceptance and drag. This aspect of *RPDR* is foregrounded in much of the existing scholarship on the reality show which considers the inclusivity and visibility that it offers (Edgar, 2011; Goldmark, 2015).

In this article we have drawn upon data collected through emergent and repeated themes arising from a textual analysis of Seasons 1-11. What interests us is that academically absent figure of RuPaul and how the performer positions herself as the central commodity of the show and 'Ultimate Queen'. The role of the drag mother has been significant in drag history, where drag mothers create drag families to fulfil the emotional support which might otherwise be missing in drag queen's lives. Drag mothers also enable the fame and success of their drag daughters within their own micro-cultural contexts. Within the show, contestants often refer to RuPaul as 'Mama Ru', in direct reference to this drag family relationship. We have used the term Ultimate Queen rather than Drag Mother in this piece to reflect a more transactional (rather than emotional) relationship. RuPaul as Ultimate Queen is achieved through strategically using the themes of history and authenticity to support a commodification of RuPaul which reinforces celebrity, cultural capital and authority. At the heart of *RPDR* lies a tension between hierarchies of celebrity, in which an established celebrity (RuPaul) oversees and uses the programme's competition format to also extend their own celebrity status. We argue that RuPaul uses the programme to establish an overlap of both achieved and attributed celebrity (Rojek, 2001:18), using it as

a vehicle to promote and extend a back catalogue of work which establishes her previous achievements. The show may purport to find 'America's next drag superstar' but is structured to ultimately support RuPaul as 'America's preeminent drag superstar'.

### **The Search for America's Next Drag Superstar: Discussions of Format and Celebrity**

The reality television genre is often criticised as a mainstream and conservative genre. It is academically viewed as one in which artifice and manufacture is key (Berns, 2014) and in which only emotion provides authenticity (Grindstaff and Murray, 2015). *RPDR*, however, is seen by some to occupy a more complex position as a reality format.

Existing work positions *RPDR* as belonging to both the mainstream of reality TV and the subversive world of drag and the tensions which arise from this in relation to issues of authenticity (Brennan, 2018; Edgar 2011). Brennan and Edgar, for example, both point to the way that reality TV generally, and *RPDR* particularly, can maintain authenticity through the legitimacy of relationships established between audience and performer (Brennan, 2018: 32). Both authors attribute this relationship to the programme's production network. Logo TV is a queer network and through its legitimate and knowing interaction with queer audiences *RPDR* is granted legitimacy. However, with the programme's presence on the Netflix platform for several years and its move to the more commercially mainstream broadcaster VH1 in 2017 these assumptions begin to erode.

Aspects of the relationship between reality television, celebrity and authenticity are sometimes explored, but not often at the same time. Hannah Hamad indicates how the increasing prominence of reality television as a form of media has been significant in enabling formations of contemporary celebrity to flourish in the contemporary media environment (Hamad, 2018). The relationship between celebrity and authenticity is better understood. While avoiding a detailed definition of the term, Lionel Trilling suggests that authenticity involves finding and expressing the true inner self and evaluating relationships in terms of it. Trilling suggests that when authenticity is invoked, it usually refers to an object with a defined history and story of origin (Trilling, 1972). Discussion of celebrity includes strong connections made between perceived authenticity, private lives

and self-branding of micro-celebrities (Jerslev, 2014; Khamis, Ang and Welling, 2017) and the production and sustenance of celebrity through exposure and disclosure (Marshall, 2010). This type of discussion assumes that reality celebrities are 'ordinary' people thrust into the world of celebrity (Turner, 2006; Collins, 2008; Curnutt, 2009; Bell, 2010), often emphasising celebrity as a question of manufacture rather than achievement or merit. While recognising the role of reality television in the creation of celebrity, Marwick and boyd explore the shift in traditional understanding of what they call 'celebrity management' and suggest that the perception of authenticity is essential to achieve intimacy between participant and follower in contemporary celebrity (Marwick and boyd, 2011). *RPDR* belongs to a smaller subset of reality television which offers a platform to existing celebrities to rekindle their career. The role and significance of authenticity in this rekindling is less clearly explored in existing literature on celebrity, reality formats and the interplay between them.

Questions around subversive potential and authenticity in the mainstream are important in relation to commodification. Alyxandra Vesey speaks of the 'tethering' of success in *RPDR* to pop music performance and personal branding (Vesey, 2017). Pop music is inherently linked to mass consumption and commodification. It is often associated with young female and LGBTQ+ audiences, positioned as 'less authentic' than other, more explicitly 'masculine' forms of music (Coates, 1997; Whiteley, 2000). What we see in *RPDR* is a layering up of inauthenticity and artifice; a reality format, combined with drag, combined with pop music. Against these expected areas of commodification, the programme also commodifies and trivialises the political significance of other aspects of drag/LGBTQ+ cultures, including race (Strings and Bui, 2014), HIV (Hargraves, 2011) and histories (Parsemain, 2019).

Much of the work outlined here focuses on narrow examples, participants and their interaction with the host without making explicit RuPaul's changing role over the course of the series. However, ultimately its key commodity is RuPaul herself through advertising images, the name and her celebrity. The foregrounding of RuPaul's experience and persona as central to the programme and the authority that is conferred upon her by judges and

contestants alike (the consumer's representatives within the programme) positions her as the Ultimate Queen and trades upon her capital.

### **(Re)Making HERStory: The Importance of History and Self-Commemoration**

Perhaps more than any other similar show, *RPDR* develops to promote the history of the show itself. The role of history is significant in drawing together wider LGBTQ+ histories with RuPaul's own positioning as a legitimate and central figure to those events within the context of the show and wider popular culture. History is manipulated as the format of the show matures and begins to engage with a more mainstream audience. This raises important questions about RuPaul as the filter for interpretation of those narratives, her own place within them and her motivation for doing so.

The relationship between celebrity and reality television has been given significant attention in terms of 'ordinary' people who achieve fame (Turner, 2006; Collins, 2008), or what Rojek would call 'celetoids' (2001: 20). Although reality television has a history of giving existing celebrities a platform from which to revitalise and expand their persona in a variety of national settings, this intersection of such celebrity and reality television is given less attention. Ensemble reality shows such as *Strictly Come Dancing* (BBC, 2004-present) and *I'm A Celebrity: Get Me Out of Here* (ITV1, 2002-present) among many others, offer an opportunity for minor celebrities or those with a waning public profile to remind fans of their existence, rekindle those relationships and create new ones. Other reality shows which focus on particular celebrities offer a similar platform to extend market share to established celebrities, such as *The Osbornes* (MTV, 2002-2005) and *Rock of Love with Bret Michaels* (VH1, 2007-2009). *RPDR* can be read as part of the same tradition, as the format of the show repackaged RuPaul for a new generation of viewers and, through its move from Logo TV (an LGBT channel) to VH1 and availability on Netflix, to a mainstream non-LGBTQ+ audience.

One of the ways that celebrity reality formats allow celebrities to do this is through the reiteration of individual's histories which imbues them with legitimacy as real celebrities in

a world populated by celestoids who lack this credibility. In their discussion of history on television, Erin Bell and Ann Gray use Hayden White's (1973) work on interpretation to highlight how historical events may be manipulated through representation and narration. They point to the significance of this for a television audience who may not have access to other versions of history which gives them importance as an authoritative narrative (Bell and Gray, 2007: 116). The political and cultural implications of this power to select and pre-interpret historical narratives are obvious when thought of through the lens of what is available to the viewing public. Although Bell and Gray's focus is on the traditional historical documentary, the significance of this selection and presentation is also present in the case of *RPDR*, a programme which is credited with increasing the visibility of drag culture (Brennan and Gudelunas, 2017).

In her discussion of Series 1, Eir-Anne Edgar suggests that RuPaul uses her successful history as a drag performer to position herself as the quintessential drag spokesperson and that references to historically situated drag cultures and icons gives the show queer legitimacy (Edgar, 2011:135). Edgar argues that these references hail queer viewers in such a way that allows interpellation of both the legitimated positions of the show as well as themselves as audience members. These references to the history of drag and its place in the LGBTQ+ story continue throughout the show, during contestant's work room conversation, while they make up, in the background given to challenges and in judges critiques. Josh Morrison picks up this elision in his own discussion of camp and homonormative politics, arguing that 'Part of the larger project of homonormative politics is rewriting the history of queer activism to fit a civil rights narrative of "things were bad, then we resisted, we were misunderstood, but now we've nearly reached the systemic equality we deserve."' (Morrison, 2014:136). He proposes that this narrative strips queer histories of their radical politics and allows only limited queer subjects access to the capital and political privilege which visibility allows.

Woven through this is RuPaul's own role in these histories, creating a narrative which chimes well with Morrison's concerns about the limited queer subjectivities which are allowed access to such capital and privilege. In her consideration of RuPaul's connections

with Foucauldian work on transformations and discursive change, Megan Metzger surveys RuPaul's professional history, making connections between her pre- and post-*RPDR* professional persona. For Metzger, the show, and RuPaul's own history, offers an insight into how visibility relies upon the political background of a particular time which allows people to engage with marginalised cultures (Metzger, 2016). However, this presentation of RuPaul's history fulfils another purpose, which is to provide the head judge with the authority to pass judgement on different forms of drag that are commercially suitable. This questions the extent to which *RPDR* offers a radical queer space.

Throughout the seasons RuPaul makes professional connections between her own working life and the wider history of drag and LGBTQ+ cultures. Particular moments and causes form the basis of challenges, which RuPaul ties into her own history and branding. In Season 1, Episode 4 the contestants were required to create a commercial for Mac's Viva Glam makeup which would inform the public of Viva Glam's help for those living with HIV. RuPaul presents the challenge to the contestants, stating "I was fortunate enough to be the first face of MAC cosmetics Viva Glam. See it there?" At this point the Werk Room floor is dominated by the original Viva Glam poster featuring RuPaul, making a strong statement that she was there at the beginning of a campaign linked to HIV (Hargraves 2011). On other occasions this collision of histories occurs at a personal level. In Season 5's Snatch Game (Episode 5) during RuPaul's walk through of the Werk Room, Alaska tells him that she will be impersonating Lady Bunny, a significant figure in the US drag scene. RuPaul's response is 'Bunny is hilar...I think she is actually the funniest person I've ever met'. While seemingly innocuous, the comment suggests that RuPaul has a familiarity with this legend ('Bunny' rather than Lady Bunny). In doing so, RuPaul aligns himself with this icon, reminding Alaska and the audience of RuPaul's longevity and status in the field. During judge's critiques, too, RuPaul frequently uses personal experience to frame criticism of attitudes and performance. This foregrounds RuPaul's experience and age.

The contestants are typically significantly younger than RuPaul. While they can talk about the history of drag and LGBTQ+ rights, they do not have the same direct personal experience that RuPaul has. Older queens such as Porkchop, Vivacious, Charlie Hides and

Tempest DuJour “wear” their age and experience as knowledge (Straw, 1997), taking the opportunity to educate younger queens during their werk room transformations. In Season 9, Episode 3 Charlie Hides speaks emotively of the AIDS crisis of the 80s and 90s, “None of my friends were playing safe. I buried all of my best friends.” The younger queens respond positively, with Cynthia Fontaine and Sasha Velour confirming the importance of remembering what happened. On other occasions this knowledge is presented as a power flex to younger queens. In Season 6, Episode 3, for example, Trinity K. Bonet and Vivacious have a Werk Room conversation about Vivacious’ drag style. Vivacious namechecks a ‘club kids Leigh Bowery style of drag’. When Trinity asks Vivacious if she feels the need to revamp her style, Vivacious responds to camera, “The newer generation only know of the fishy look. But when I walk into a club all eyes are on me. *You’re* still that little girl in the corner trying to look like a lady’. Although the significance of history is indicated through the inclusion of contestants who can open up and address its past, to have directly participated in this past is not enough. These older queens occupy a fragile space and are typically eliminated within the first few episodes, often criticised for their ‘datedness’ and inability to move beyond their comfort zones. This is the critique that follows Vivacious’ style defence. In comparison, RuPaul has cemented her position in the history of drag but, through adaptability and the cultural capital which this offers, is also the future of drag. Even though RuPaul’s style of drag could be argued as belonging to a particular time, RuPaul is in a position where she can never be eliminated.

Alongside this manipulation of wider LGBTQ+ history the show also begins to portray its own history. By Season 5, the format is well established. The competing queens enter the competition with an expectation of certain challenges. At this point of the series’ development, the history of the show is apparent in the queen’s discussions and pieces to camera. In Season 6 Episode 5, Ben De La Crème speaks to camera about The Snatch Game, noting it as ‘a really important challenge. It’s one that everyone knows is coming and everyone’s kind of waiting all season to see what you’re gonna pull out’. From Season 7 when Max impersonates Season 4 winner Sharon Needles and Violet Chachki performs as Season 5 contestant Alyssa Edwards, previous season’s queens also become a staple

impersonation of the challenge and the history of the show is reprised, or commemorated, by contestants.

As the series matures the historical element of *RPDR* involves commemoration of the show through production and editorial choices. The first episode of Season 8, for example, opens with a one-minute montage celebrating its 100<sup>th</sup> episode. This montage of key moments is accompanied by an episode clock which flicks through episodes to 100. The key moments are ones that regular viewers will recognise, and newer viewers might be familiar with some of them through social media. Moments such as RuPaul's admonishment 'drag is not a contact sport' to Mimi Infurst (Season 3), Latrice Royale's 'Get those nuts away from my face' (Season 4) and Bianca Del Rio's 'Not today Satan' (Season 6) are all included. While avoiding discussion of the reality genre, in her work on televisual memory Amy Holdsworth uses analysis of montage sequences from a variety of television shows as evidence of 'televisual memory'. She argues that these montage sequences act as commemoration texts, designed of televisual commemoration and reflection. When television memorialises itself in this way, it makes a statement about its position and status (Holdsworth, 2010). This montage sequence from Season 8 serves to make a statement about the show's longevity and significance to popular culture and drag visibility, drawing attention to key pop culture moments that have arisen in the show. RuPaul is central to the programme and is implicitly included in this statement regarding position and status.

The first episode of Season 10 undertakes commemoration in a different way. To celebrate ten years of *RPDR*, at the outset RuPaul announces 'Let's start with a mini challenge that's been a decade in the making. And ladies...I expect tens, tens, tens across the board'. The challenge involves a catwalk runway for each competing queen, and RuPaul is aided in her judging by numerous queens from previous seasons. The main challenge in this episode comprises a re-run of the dime store challenge, the very first challenge that the Season 1 queens undertook. This commemoration continues throughout the season as previous queens appear in each episode to help mentor contestants through the challenges. Bianca Del Rio (Season 6) accompanies RP on her pre-Snatch Game work room walk through to talk contestants through their performance. Alyssa Edwards (Season 5) coaches the queens

through their performances for the PharmaRusical challenge. This serves not only to remind us of the history of the show, but also its significant role in molding and giving a platform to drag queens who have gone on to have successful and lucrative careers, implicitly tying their success into RuPaul. This subtle weaving of RuPaul's own experience into both drag history (through experience stories) and contemporary memory (through *RPDR* and its self-memorialisation) places her centrally to those wider historical narratives. Through her knowledge and experience of these histories she places herself as the Ultimate Queen in the context of the show and in the history of LGBTQ+ struggles, as the other queens do not have this capital to trade on. Through the commemoration of the show, RuPaul again positions herself as Ultimate Queen in a contemporary setting by placing *RPDR* as a significant part of the recent history.

### ***You Better Work!: Commodification, Brand and Exposure***

Commodity culture links with branding and marketability to ensure the longevity of a brand, company or institution. Alyxandra Vesey (2016) and José Esteban Muñoz (1999) both criticise RuPaul in relation to the commodification of gay culture and RuPaul's celebrity being far removed from queer radical politics. The maintenance of fame and success is continually negotiated by and through templates. These templates are set by RuPaul within the context of community culture, celebrity and pop stardom, and are measured by success, as well as the challenges presented by queens, as key milestones. Within these templates of success, queens often compromise their own drag styles to satisfy standards which are marketable to a wider, non-queer audience. For Vesey the template for pop stardom is something queens must adhere to for success, which means that queens 'must distance themselves from these origins to comply with pop music's and reality television's prizing of individual achievement and marketable cultural difference' (2016:591). The maintenance of fame relies upon queens being part of RuPaul's Herstory, which coincides with the mediated re-telling of gay history discussed earlier. Commodification, therefore, has implications for how success is articulated and embodied, as well what histories and struggles are included to validate fame, authenticity and history.

The longevity of the RuPaul brand is reinforced by its commercial appeal and quality. For Khamis, Ang and Welling, 'brand signifies a certain quality or idea associated with a commodity which ostensibly simplifies the consumer's decision-making. Ideally, a brand must be seen to possess strong, favourable, unique and relevant mental associations (Keller 2007), which helps differentiate the brand in an otherwise crowded and cacophonous market' (2017:192). Queens often talk about certain points in the series which they feel are milestones, which are part of the expected format of *RPDR* as set by RuPaul herself. These key milestones include the Snatch Game, the final five and the final three. Exposure is a central strategy for all queens on *RPDR*, whether they sashay away during the first episode or make it to the final three. However, the format of the reality game show offers different levels of exposure dependent on success in the show. The further a queen progresses through the competition, the closer their perceived association with RuPaul which provides a greater level of exposure and validity as a contender. This is perhaps most acutely apparent in the final competitive episode of each season where the three remaining queens perform in RuPaul's next music video. The music video has been a feature of *RPDR* since its inception, when the final three queens (BeBe Zahara Benet, Nina Flowers and Rebecca Glasscock) recorded a verse for and performed in the video for *Cover Girl (Put the Bass in Your Walk)*. Featuring in the video is a signifier of success and a stepping-stone to possible superstardom. The release of the video on social media platforms outlasts the broadcast life of the show and commemorates their relationship with RuPaul, cementing their association with the ultimate queen. For queens who make it that far the video becomes a platform for maintaining fame. *RPDR* frames success and achievement as marketable, with pop stardom and reality television elevating the value of the show, the queens and RuPaul as ultimate queen. This includes endorsing products, and the promotion of RuPaul's back catalogue.

However, it is not only the contestants who benefit from this association. The show exists as a machine that works to promote a version of RuPaul through the efforts of the contestants both in the show *and* its afterlife. The music video acts as another form of promotion for RuPaul's own professional output and exposure. For RuPaul the videos become part of a back catalogue that can be promoted in future series, via name dropping

or direct inclusion (e.g. *Cover Girl*, 2009) in catwalks. In the Season 10 finale, a selection of queens from all seasons sang along to a RuPaul medley of songs from all 10 seasons. Most significantly the video ensures that Ru does not have to tour or undertake other traditional marketing activities to promote her own records. Instead she has an ever-expanding team of queens who lip-sync her songs in venues around the world on her behalf. Through their inclusion in the video and the work they must undertake after the show to maintain their celebrity, the queens are constantly performing labour that also creates value for RuPaul.

Exposure links to the wider contexts of celebrity culture, where it is essential for gaining followers and fans. This is particularly pertinent in relation to social media use and promotion through social media channels, fan interaction and endorsement. Anne Jerslev (2014) discusses the growing interest the media has in the private lives of celebrities which means that celebrities must be aware of how they 'do' celebrity and the work they need to undertake to perform a 'marketable' persona. P. David Marshall discusses the climate surrounding celebrity which encourages celebrities to 'expose their lives further in order to gain a following and audience' (2010:41). The level of perceived disclosure over eleven seasons and the exposure of RuPaul as ultimate queen is a clever PR strategy for RuPaul's continued success and maintenance of fame. Maintenance of fame, therefore, relies upon celebrity being viewed as a 'media cultural practice, whereby the celebrity is commodity, commodity produced at one and the same time' (Jerslev, 2014:174). For Jerslev, 'doing celebrity is strategic work. Practicing celebrity is performing a marketable persona, which has to be unique and irreplaceable' (2014: 174). This work can be found directly in the format of *RPDR* and the strategies employed to elevate and maintain the cultural/commodity value of RuPaul as Ultimate Queen through the television show, tour and associated media texts. This includes the queens themselves, RuPaul's music videos, *RPDR* brand endorsements, memes, and so on.

There are different levels of maintaining fame for the queens, with the audience being reminded of the final three transitions from normal queen (e.g. their entrance in episode one) to possible drag superstardom. For example, in Season 3, Episode 15 (grand finale) there is a mini presentation of the final three queens and their journey to the finale. This reinforces the value of embodying charisma, uniqueness, nerve and talent as a means of

success through the show and on to the RuPaul tour. In the same episode RuPaul reminds queens that they are already stars, reinforcing success as commodity form through the format of the show and RuPaul as ultimate queen. RuPaul's assumed position gives her the legitimacy to affirm their stardom. Success through commodification is found through past queens talking about their achievements post-show, such as Detox who appears in Season 5, Episode 14 where she tells RuPaul and the audience about touring the world, including Dubai. Past contestants are framed as RuPaul's girls and part of the *RPDR* family. The 'family' operates to show solidarity as a collective as well as enabling RuPaul to be positioned front and centre, frequently referred to as Mama Ru. Individual queens sustain the *RPDR* experience and RuPaul's notoriety as being the Ultimate Queen through queen's name dropping RuPaul on tours (both RuPaul affiliated tours and solo tours, etc.) and *RPDR* appears in various queens' biographies on their professional websites (such as Bianca Del Rio, Jinkx Monsoon, Bob the Drag Queen and so on).

As the show format has matured, the machine which surrounds it has expanded to create additional connected texts and events, including spin-off shows (*RPDR All Stars*, VH1; *RPDR UK*, BBC3) and tours. In its current form, the show exists as part of the promotion of the tour and the RuPaul experience. The show's finale has become a stepping stone towards the tour, as well as an event in itself, where an audience watches queens in an opulent theatre. Earlier seasons did not have an audience and the finale was conducted in-house, contained within the series structure and within a studio setting. The finale experience has developed from that to a theatre space welcoming back previous queens and celebrity guest judges, as well as including an audience. The finale offers other touring and programme opportunities, not just for the queens but also for the portability of RuPaul's own fame, cultural capital and superiority.

### **If You Can't Love Yourself, How in the Hell You Gonna Love Somebody Else?: Illusion, Authenticity and Disclosure**

So far, we have considered how the RuPaul brand appropriates wider drag histories and commodifies the brands of other queens. Here we turn our attention to authenticity

through disclosure, which is another way in which the labour of others is used to further the RuPaul brand. Whilst 'authenticity' can refer to discussions of the self, we instead apply authenticity in our exploration of RuPaul as Ultimate Queen through the lens of self-promotion, celebrity and consumer capital. Authenticity has a dual meaning on the show, established within the contexts of RuPaul's brand and aligned with 'realness'. As gender illusionists, the queens often describe their catwalk looks as 'realness' to indicate that their feminine looks are authentic. However, the programme also seeks to promote 'realness' to connect audiences with cast members through their authentic, emotional disclosure (Grindstaff and Murray, 2015). The show's narrative encourages this authentic disclosure and aligns it with success. For example, Bianca Del Rio (special guest in Season 10, Episode 7) gives advice to Aquaria on authenticity stating that, 'the thing is, when you watch *Drag Race*, the realest people are really the ones you gravitate to. When you take a Latrice, everybody's like 'I love her!' Adore [Delano] is another one. It's these people that are really their true selves. But you just need to trust your own instincts.' Celebrity culture, commodities and industrial capitalism position authenticity as something to consume, perform and embody as means to obtain success. Although commodity culture engages with critiques of taste (what is 'non' authentic versus the authentic), we are more interested in the strategies employed to illustrate RuPaul's celebrity and status as the authentically Ultimate Queen.

Academic discussions centring on the production of celebrity consider how it has, as Marshall argues, 'taught generations how to engage and use celebrity culture to 'make' oneself' (2010:36). The transformational narratives promoted by neoliberalism and its connections with consumer culture (the commodities used and selected by individuals to express their 'true self'), reinforce the need to continually work on identity/brand/self. Transformational narratives are used in the show as a promotional strategy for RuPaul as Ultimate Queen, and for contestants to validate their presence on the show. Here authenticity is a project encouraged by RuPaul where contestants' work can demonstrate charisma, uniqueness, nerve and talent, all of which correlate to the production of self (see Marshall 2010, but also Franssen 2019 on the star being real and genuine). The perceived success of this performance of authenticity is always within RuPaul's judgement.

Authenticity and serenity are valued as a central feature of celebrity culture, which individuals strive to achieve (see Dyer, 1991; Franssen, 2019) through image control, staged authenticity and audiences seeing queens grow in authenticity as they disclose the personal. This connects to discussions on self-branding, self-improvement and unique selling points of micro-celebrities developing a distinct identity and personal brand (Khamis, Ang and Welling 2017).

Disclosure is carefully placed in episodes and across seasons to allow audiences to get to know the queens and for queens to stand-out as identifiable amid other contestants. Disclosure connoting an authentic self is reserved for certain segments in each episode, with different spaces and segments in the show offering opportunities to disclose in different modes. During RuPaul's werk room walk through he pushes queens to authentically disclose to him and to the audiences. The segment where the queens make themselves up is a key space for this personal disclosure to the other queens. Inserts of queens talking directly to camera is the space where queens disclose directly to the audience. During judge's critiques, disclosure incorporates RuPaul, other queens and the audience. As the season progresses and the number of contestants is whittled down, remaining queens are prompted to give life advice to photographs of themselves as children and to reveal their true selves to RuPaul over a Tic-Tac lunch. Alongside the 'commodification of the self, individuals are locked into a mode of constant promotion' (Khamis, Ang and Welling 2017:201), and in the foregrounding of the importance of authenticity we can see that disclosure operates as a means of self-branding. Being identifiable is important for queens to demonstrate an authentic self, which is further clarified through how stories are told, the place these stories occupy within the format of RPDR and the portability of these affective moments beyond the programme into popular culture.

In the context of micro-celebrity and self-branding through social media, Khamis, Ang and Welling (2017:196) argue that celebrity disclosure potentially attracts 'audiences for a multitude of reasons – they could be inspirational, relatable, instructive, cautionary, and so on'. Realness also connects to celebrity public self and values, with RuPaul positioning herself as a mentor to help queens succeed. To perform effectively as a queen is not enough

to maintain celebrity. Disclosure of their true selves out of drag is also a requirement. Not all queens see RuPaul as performing the mentor role with former contestants, such as Pearl, commenting on RuPaul only performing the mentor role when the cameras rolling (Jezebel, 2018). However, more often this opportunity is recognised and worked upon in the show. In Season 4, Episode 5 following a push from the judges to show emotion, the previously emotionless Willam cries on stage. The other queens view this as a cynical push for authenticity, which demonstrates their understanding that this is expected. As the format matures, this understanding develops further. In Season 9 Eureka O'Hara performs emotional disclosure in the first episode when she meets her idol Lady Gaga, tearfully thanking her for the role that she has played in her life struggles and ultimate wellbeing. When she returns in Season 10, Eureka reminds the other queens of the importance of being strategic, smart and playing the game: 'RuPaul has mentioned that he wants to see us pushing strategy, making decisions that push us to the frontline'. Mentoring plays a part in this drive, specifically in the later seasons where queens are aware of the opportunities being on Drag Race can bring. In turn, by mentoring queens over eleven seasons RuPaul reminds viewers of her (brand) authenticity and acts as a tool for maintaining her image as a professional. On one level, being your authentic self is one of the expected generic conventions of reality TV, with the format relying on authentic stories and disclosure (coming out stories, rejection, HIV status). On a deeper level disclosure is mined within the format of *RPDR* not only for viewer pleasure, but to promote and reinforce RuPaul's status as community ambassador, expert and a caring Drag Mother.

Disclosure is not always prompted by RuPaul's presence with queens. The format and longevity of the show has enabled queens to learn the importance of disclosure and to mobilise it at strategic moments. It has become a trope of the show that the queens reiterate how important *RPDR* is for identification and belonging. This disclosure often operates in the absence of RuPaul, but is framed by the head judge's expectations and the wider narrative she creates around love, acceptance and her own place within that narrative. For example, in Season 7, Episode 8 Tempest DuJour discusses the importance of tolerance with Drag Race enabling queens to tell struggling audience members that they are not alone. She states that 'being able to talk about our personal issues and talk about

our disastrous upbringings gives us an opportunity to show those kids who are struggling themselves that there is someone who can emphasise (with) what you are going through.'

Placement also connects to self-branding, specifically as queens in later seasons utilise their introductions as 'pitches' in the first moments of each season. In Season 5, Episode 10 we see the queens make-over veterans, and emotions are heightened when Detox discloses a story about being involved in a car crash resulting in reconstructive plastic surgery. Detox, the Plastic Queen, explained that *Drag Race* helped her recovery, a familiar story for other queens too. Disclosure acts as a reminder of the importance of *RPDR* and RuPaul herself as enabling space to showcase realness and authenticity. Identification is equally important for audiences who want to follow specific queens on social media and to see certain queens live on Drag Race tours. There is commercial gain for both queens and RuPaul alike, although being connected or in reference to the RuPaul brand further builds RuPaul's cultural capital. Private experiences shared between queens, and then distributed through consuming the programme builds and heightens the intimacy felt between celebrity and audience (Marshall 2010; Marwick and boyd, 2011). This affective connection is built over time, with narratives carefully constructed to fit the format. Consumption and distribution of affective connections includes memes and audience interaction during the programme through hashtags. This active interaction highlights that online media is both a 'consumer-centric space' (Khamis, Ang and Welling 2017:194) and a space where the performance of authenticity transcends the confines of the show/format.

The queens on *RPDR* are always in the position of seeking stardom, whilst RuPaul is established. Authenticity is also about embodying the successful attributes of a star (charisma, uniqueness, nerve and talent), but also using an established name (appearing on *RPDR* and becoming one of RuPaul's 'girls') and online platforms, such as Twitter and Instagram, as a means of maintaining/cultivating/building a career and fan base in and beyond the gay community. In the context of cultural workers, Karen Patel's (2017) critique of expertise, relational labour, competence and signalling expertise can be applied here in relation to queens from the show and RuPaul. For Patel, cultural workers' social media activity is more than self-promotion and self-branding due to artists being invested with other artists within their communities through collaboration and mutual aid. Patel

states that 'while of course the artists in my sample are performing expertise for their own benefit, they are often raising the profile of other artists at the same time,' (2007:172). To build on this, RuPaul is a powerhouse and does not need to raise her profile, however mutual endorsement, praise and even criticism continues her visibility in popular culture, through social media and within *RPDR* activities.

RuPaul's Herstory is an ongoing subtext within the series, such as references to her back catalogue and professional life. Unlike the contestants RuPaul can choose what she reveals, enabling her to maintain her professional self. While RuPaul pushes the contestants hard to perform their authentic selves through disclosure at various points in the series, she discloses little. There has never been a RuPaul-based 'money shot' (Grindstaff, 2002) in the way that disclosure and emotional breakdown has formed the focus of contestants' narratives (such as Rebecca Glasscock, Yara Sofia and Roxxxxy Andrews). This is interesting in the context of celebrity, where disclosure's role in maintaining intimacy between celebrity and audience has been highlighted (Marwick and boyd, 2011). There are moments where Ru's personal life is allowed to break the façade, but this is always highly controlled and well-guarded. For example, in the introduction to the lip-sync for your life in Season 2 Episode 5, RuPaul breaks from form to explain the significance of Martha Wash's *Carry On* in her life after the death of her mother. However, this disclosure is delivered without the emotional outpouring which is expected of the contestants. By performing the minimum of disclosure herself against a backdrop of the importance of authenticity, RuPaul creates the impression of 'realness' beyond gender illusion. RuPaul uses her role as Ultimate Queen to trade upon contestant's performances of disclosure and authenticity. In encouraging their own disclosure, RuPaul manages to align herself with authenticity without engaging in it herself.

### **She Owns Everything: Concluding Thoughts**

Through an analysis of RuPaul's Drag Race (Seasons 1 to 11) we identified three key recurring themes: history, authenticity and commodification. We have established that these three themes are important in identifying RuPaul herself as the central commodity and Ultimate Queen, through strategically using *RPDR*, Herstory and success as ways to

reinforce celebrity, cultural capital and authority. Although the queens on *RPDR* achieve different levels of success and exposure through their appearance, achieving certain milestones and becoming part of the *RPDR* Family; the real winner will always be RuPaul's drag empire. Success and visibility are always mediated by and through the format of *RPDR* and association with RuPaul's celebrity and the attributes she judges to equal superstardom. Superstardom, however, is harder for queens to achieve because they are either standing before (when being judged) or behind (on the finale stage) RuPaul. We have outlined that although there are various academic discussions engaging with *RPDR*, what is absent is an analysis of the figure of RuPaul herself as a central commodity and Ultimate Queen. RuPaul as a central commodity and Ultimate Queen is carefully achieved through embodying charisma, uniqueness, nerve and talent, the weaving of drag history according to Ru through the show, how the show celebrates its own success, and how the queens owe their success to the space RuPaul has created

Through exploring history, we have argued that the weaving of RuPaul's own experience and authority enables her to place herself within wider historical narratives. This is significant as the show has become mainstream and framed as a significant aspect of pop culture. In this context, the value and importance of *RPDR* is not just about celebrating diversity but also how the success of this phenomenon is down to RuPaul herself. This is achieved through commemoration (e.g. celebrating 10 years of *RPDR*) but also through RuPaul embodying authenticity and success. Authenticity is about showing charisma, uniqueness, nerve and talent as decided by RuPaul and the key milestones some queens achieve. Exposure depends on how far queens make it but addressing all queens as daughters and family ensures that routes to success come by, through and because of Ru. Success is also measured and calculated by the commodification of success through the value placed on RuPaul's next musical release and each series acting as an advertising strategy for the tour.

*RPDR* is indeed a phenomenon and should be celebrated in terms of its success on the global stage. However, this article positions itself as a key intervention in the debates of *RPDR* through turning the critical lens on to RuPaul herself as both subject and object of

study. The critical turn of the article and its spotlight on RuPaul herself brings RuPaul out of the periphery of arguments and into the centre. The blending of a cultural studies approach to the analysis of RuPaul as commodity is essential in exploring further implications of her celebrity through how she uses history, authenticity and commodification.

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