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Queering the Classroom: The Lived Experiences of Drag Queens in a Public Educational Space

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Abstract: Drag performance, while often seen as entertainment, serves as a transformative and political act within academic settings. This study investigates the lived experiences of drag queens in a public university, focusing on the socio-educational effects of their visibility. Grounded in Queer Theory, the research explores how drag intersects with identity formation, resistance against institutional norms, political expression, and the need for community and institutional support. Utilizing a qualitative descriptive-phenomenological method and online written interviews, four major themes emerged: engaging in drag for personal development, challenging restrictive academic structures, using drag for cultural and political advocacy, and seeking peer and institutional support. Drag is more than performance as it is a tool for empowerment, activism, and educational inclusion. This research highlights the need for academic institutions to move more than just symbolic gestures toward genuine structural change. When drag is embraced within educational institution, it transforms schools into inclusive spaces that affirm gender diversity and challenge oppressive norms.The literature to date offers a start, but strong evidence is required for a full understanding. This research gap calls for an in-depth study to fill the absence of empirical data and the population gap in this field. The specific lives of drag queens demand in-depth research to appreciate their challenges and contributions to society properly.

Keywords: drag; identity; resistance; queer theory; inclusion

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1. Introduction

Drag performance and queer representation are essential in gender, sociology, and media studies because they challenge gender stereotypes and increase LGBTQ+ visibility (Hancock 2017). Drag has served as a political statement as well as a kind of entertainment, and it has been very important to LGBTQ+ activism, especially during the Stonewall riots (Taylor and Rupp 2008). RuPaul's Drag Race shows are prime examples of how it has evolved over time from underground venues to mainstream media platforms, impacting public conceptions of gender and identity (Brennan 2017; Kavka 2018). Performers are able to traverse and reinvent gender barriers through drag, which promotes self-expression and empowerment (Morris 2022). It serves as a political tool, raising awareness of issues such as discrimination, HIV/AIDS, and queer rights (Taylor and Rupp 2008). Beyond entertainment, drag builds strong community networks that offer support and advocacy for marginalized groups (Hancock 2017). Its presence in media and digital platforms amplifies LGBTQ+ voices, influencing cultural narratives and policies (Brennan 2017). Drag intersects with race, class, and cultural identity, reflecting broader social struggles and resistance (Morris 2022). Studying drag provides insights into the complexities of gender performance and its impact on society (LeMaster 2022). It highlights how artistic expression can challenge oppression and foster inclusivity (Pritchard 2016). Drag's historical and contemporary significance makes it a crucial subject for understanding the evolving landscape of gender and sexuality (Taylor and Rupp 2008). Recognizing its role in activism, identity, and media representation enriches discussions on diversity and social change (Hancock 2017).

Research on drag queens primarily focuses on private spaces like bars and nightclubs, which lack perspective and impact in other settings, particularly schools. Research indicates that there is a significant population gap. Some of these subpopulations remain unexplored and under-researched, despite their importance in understanding the life experiences of drag queens. Its investigation will provide insights into a new population in different settings (Miles 2017). Existing studies often overemphasize white, adult drag queens, limiting the scope of knowledge. There is a

lack of research exploring drag queens' navigation of educational environments and the formation of queer identities within these spaces. Lesser-known sites, such as schools where queer bodies create varied gender and sexual subjectivities, need to be explored to understand how queer people attain a distinctive comprehension of their gender identity (Ladera 2024).

The current literature overlooks the connecting point of drag with criteria including gender, racial background, and income bracket, restricting a broad understanding of their lives. While some studies tackle aging drag queens and drag queens in the media, they lack substantial empirical data, creating another common research gap. It is vital to research the unconventional environments like schools to better understand how queer individuals develop their gender and sexual identities. This study explores how the lived experiences of drag queens' queers education environments through the question 'How do drag queens' practices inform the queering of educational space? This study examines how schools construct gender identities and practices. Particularly, it examines the ways in which drag performance subverts or reinforces traditional gender constructs in academic contexts as part of a larger conceptualization of gendered discourses within institutional environments.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Research Design

As part of a qualitative descriptive design within phenomenological territory, the real-world experiences of gay drag queens were explored and illuminated in this study. The complexity and diversity of the drag queens' world was explored by this qualitative approach, with a particular emphasis on their role in challenging the normalizing processes of educational settings. Using this approach, the researchers have managed to obtain rich and in-depth narratives about the drag queens' experiences which allowed an understanding of the phenomenon from their perspectives and settings (Keenan and Lil Miss 2020).

2.2 Instrument

A semi-structured interview guide developed by the researchers to investigate the experiences and views of drag queens in educational environments was used. It contained open-ended questions to facilitate in-depth and intentional responses given the qualitative context of the study (Toynton 2006). The interview guide had four main sections namely, demographic questions for background information and context about the participants; questions relating to the everyday life of drag queens, such as personal struggles and success stories; questions regarding the impact of drag within educational contexts; and questions to reflect participants on their assumptions and understandings regarding Queer Theory and Symbolic Interactionism. Each section was carefully constructed to incorporate both qualitative accounts and theoretical insights into social interaction and identity. A panel of experts experienced in gender studies and qualitative research reviewed and approved the guide to make sure that the interview questions were suitable, comprehensible, and relevant. It was ensured that the instrument could yield significant rich data commensurate with the objectives of the study.

2.3 Research Informants

Five (5) drag queen informants actively engaged in educational settings from a public university were selected using purposeful sampling. The informants specifically included gay drag queens with two to three years of experience in drag performance. The selection focused on students with direct involvement in academic environments to ensure the relevance of their insights to the research objective, examining the intersection of drag queens' lived experiences and educational contexts.

Table 1. Profile of Respondents.

Drag Name	Gender Identity	Sexual Orientation	Age	Years of Drag Experience
Blanch e Nana	Non-binary	Homosexual	Less than 25	3
Tita Rets	Non-binary	Homosexual	Less than 25	3
Venus Verosika	Non-binary	Homosexual	Less than 25	3
SugarLuxxe	Genderfluid	Homosexual	Less than 25	3
Cete Dan	Non-binary	Homosexual	Less than 25	3

2.4 Data Collection Procedure

Before conducting the interviews, all participants gave their informed consent to the researchers. The goal of the study, the voluntary nature of their involvement, ethical issues particularly the guarantee of anonymity through the use of drag names and the confidentiality of the information shared were explained to them. The researchers carried out a written interview via a Google form. Each interview varied in duration based on the participant's availability and willingness to provide detailed responses. The researchers ensured ongoing communication and followed up with the informants when necessary for clarification or additional insights.

2.5 Data Analysis

This study adopted thematic analysis by (Clarke and Braun 2006) using a six-phase framework. The process involves becoming deeply familiar with the data, assigning codes, developing overarching themes, reviewing those themes for consistency, clearly defining them, and finally presenting the findings. The transcripts were carefully reviewed and manually coded to find common patterns in the participants' stories. Key themes were grouped into four main areas namely, using drag for personal growth and identity exploration; facing the tension between resisting and expressing; using drag for cultural resistance and social-political

advocacy, and seeking community and institutional support. These categories showed the different realities that affected the academic and social experiences of drag performers in schools, and they included subthemes that focused on specific parts of those

3. Findings

Using drag as a medium for personal growth and identity exploration highlights how drag provides a transformative space for performers to explore, affirm, and celebrate their identities. Participants shared how engaging in drag enhanced their self-awareness, built resilience, and deepened their understanding of gender as fluid and performative. Through theatrical expression, performers were able to process emotions, embody different perspectives, and grow more confident in their authentic selves. Drag, therefore, is not just an artistic outlet but a powerful tool for identity formation and personal empowerment. Specifically, this theme is reflected in two building self-awareness and emotional expression, and Affirming gender fluidity and strengthening confidence.

Blanche Nana shared, *"It is transformative because we are keeping the audience entertained and informed."* This highlights the dual function of drag as a medium for both emotional and intellectual engagement.

Tita Rets reflected, *"It helped me see life from a different perspective,"* emphasizing how drag can open one's worldview.

Venus Verosika expressed, *"Through drag in an academic setting, I experienced a transformation that went beyond just performance. It reshaped how I saw myself and how I used my voice. It taught me to be braver, to take up space unapologetically."*

SugarLuxxe noted, *"It pushed me to blur the lines between art, advocacy, and education, showing that learning doesn't always have to look traditional."*

According to Cete Dan, *"Exploring the perspective of various characters that I played gave me a wider point of view, hence impacting my empathy for others."*

Through assuming different characters and interacting with the audience, these stories demonstrated how drag performances allow artists to embrace their identities, address self-doubt, and grow. This theme sets the stage to explore the social obstacles to drag being expressive while at the same time establishing the groundwork for its deeply personal and validating features.

Faced with the contradictions of resistance and expression, it was shown how schools, can create attitudes and policies that restrict full inclusivity while offering channels for LGBT expression. Reluctant administration, conservative policy, and covert forms of resistance such as silence, microaggressions, and a lack of support were all referred to by the participants. These obstacles are an example of the thin line between visibility and control. To be accepted in educational environments, performers typically feel compelled to downplay or justify their expressions. This topic can be viewed as recognizing institutional boundaries of queer expression, and resisting norms with minor acts of defiance.

Blanche Nana replied, *"The school dress code regulations are very strict. It's difficult to fully express myself when some clothing is prohibited."*

Venus Verosika replied, *"Several of my teachers have chastised me regarding my drag character, finding it unacceptable."*

In the words of SugarLuxxe, *"Some people have referred to it as 'performative activism,' calling us out for using drag as a platform for social commentary instead of taking action."*

"The school administration blocked the drag competition in 2022," Cete Dan added, highlighting institutional barriers to drag expression.

Tita Rets, however, replied, *"I don't believe there is any issue,"* indicating that there are some schools or educational environments which allow drag expression without undergoing extreme discrimination.

These encounters show that institutions respond to drag often in contradictory ways. Restrictive rules may coexist with acceptance, and visibility is frequently contingent. Many performers have used their art as a protest in response to these difficulties, which serves as a springboard for the next theme.

Utilizing drag as a cultural resistance and socio-political advocacy demonstrates that, besides performance, drag serves as a socio-political statement that challenges dominant norms and supports LGBTQ+ visibility. Participants portrayed drag as a tool for activism, education, and opposition, particularly in conservative settings. It questions strict binaries, reshapes gender norms, and stimulates crucial discussions about identity, diversity, and representation. In this context, drag disrupts the status quo and serves as a bold critique of cultural and institutional silencing. This theme, therefore, is reflected in disrupting gender norms and sparking queer visibility, and serving as activism resisting institutional silencing.

Blanche Nana asserted, *"Drag is political. We challenge the status quo. We afflict the comfortable and hopefully change their wrong idea of the LGBT community."*

Venus Verosika echoed, *"Drag challenges and exaggerates gender expressions, highlighting that gender is a social construct."*

SugarLuxxe shared, *"My presence in drag isn't just about performing, but reclaiming our rightful space and showing that gender expression doesn't have to fit into rigid, binary molds."*

Tita Rets reflected, *"Yes, drag performances challenge gender norms."*

Cete Dan confirmed, *"Yes, my performances challenge gender norms within the school."*

These statements reveal that drag is more than just entertainment, it is resistance. Through their art, drag queens critique institutional structures, educate audiences, and foster a vision of cultural transformation. Yet this power to challenge and inspire would not be possible without support, an element explored in the final theme.

Seeking the role of community, peer, and institutional support indicated that supportive relationships in academic settings were important for the success of drag performers. Classmates helped with costumes, while faculty provided mentorship and support. This network created a feeling of safety and belonging. Participants noted that even though administrative systems change slowly, support from students and progressive teachers validated their art and gave them the encouragement to keep going and take the lead. This theme is shown in two key ways as providing safety and legitimizing art through support from peers and faculty, and sustaining queer expression through grassroots networking.

Blanche Nana credited Sir T and Sir J, stating, *"They acted as advisors within the drag community. The WVSU Student Council is also supportive of the cause."*

Tita Rets expressed gratitude to *"Drag Queens, Sir T, and Sir J"* for championing drag within the university.

Venus Verosika mentioned, *"Sir R told me I was born to do this. Also, my classmates and best friend helped me."*

SugarLuxxe said, *"Some of my fellow students have been my loudest cheerleaders, and some faculty members genuinely appreciated what drag brought to the table."*

Cete Dan emphasized the impact of *"Mr. J, the most supportive figure who helped us establish the drag community."*

These narratives reveal how supportive formal and informal relationships, are essential in nurturing drag expression. Peers and faculty allies help affirm the value of drag as an art form and identity, and their support ensures that drag performers dare to persist, resist, and thrive within academic spaces. As these stories show, drag is not only an individual pursuit and it flourishes in community.

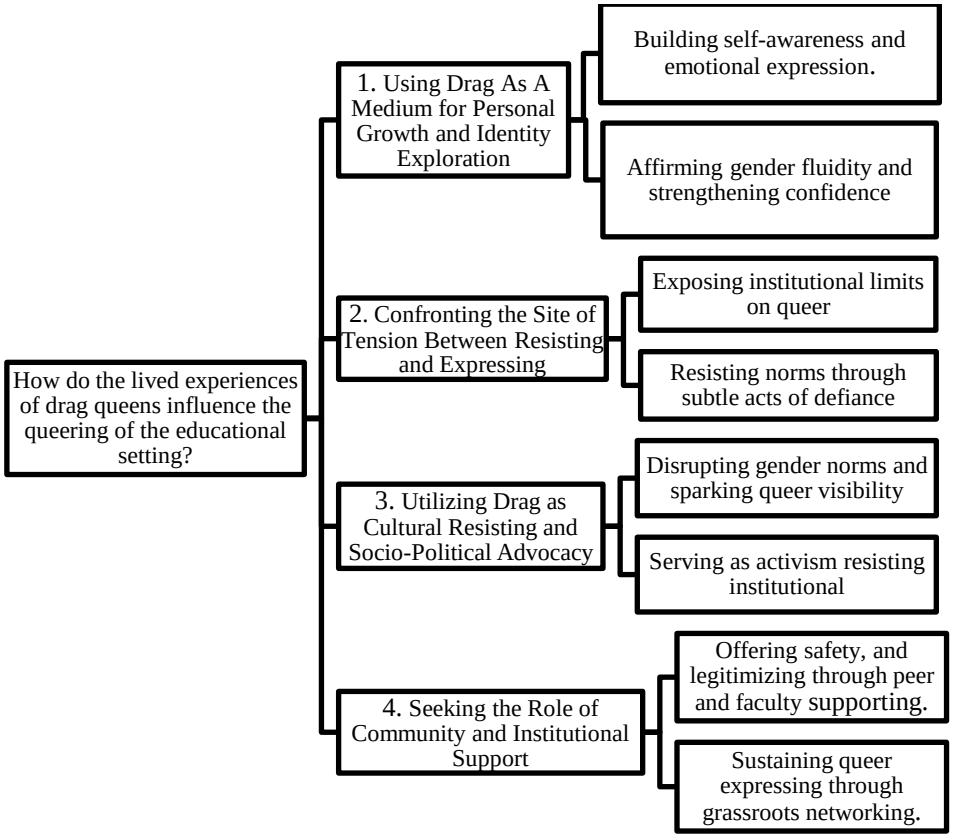

Figure 1. Thematic Map of the Informant's Lived Experiences as a Drag Queen in an Educational Setting.

4. Discussion

This study looked at the experiences of drag queens in a public educational space. It identified four main themes namely, using drag for personal growth and exploring identity; dealing with the tension between resistance and expression; using drag for cultural resistance and socio-political advocacy; and seeking community, peer, and institutional support. These themes show that drag in academia serves not just as a performance but also as a teaching method and a political statement. When examined through the perspective of contemporary Queer Theory, drag emerges as a significant arena where gender, power, and resistance intersect.

Drag plays a significant role in individual development. Through engaging in drag, participants gain a deeper understanding of their identities, cultivate emotional resilience, and enhance their confidence in showcasing their true selves. These experiences align with (Butler 2002) concept of gender as a performance, in which identity is constantly constructed and reformulated through repeated expressions. (Case and Meier 2020) highlight that queer performance in classrooms promotes reflection, identity formation, and emotional maturation. Consequently, drag serves as a transformative process that facilitates healing and self-discovery.

Meanwhile, institutional boundaries routinely hamper the ability to express oneself. Whereas some schools offer some forms of queer representation, others implement rigid policies and traditional norms that diminish diversity. Dress codes, subtle disapproval, and a lack of administrative support were some of the obstacle's participants had to navigate. (McBride 2021) concept of "regulated visibility," wherein LGBTQ+ expression is tolerated only within certain limits, is evident in these situations. (Snapp and Richard J. Watson et al. 2019) discovered that heteronormative norms can continue to prevail even in inclusive educational settings. Queer students continually navigate between visibility and wariness, a state of "double consciousness" as described by (Greteman 2022). These issues highlight the complicated dynamics of drag performance in learning spaces that may not be fully prepared to accept a wide range of gender and identity presentations.

Drag is an avenue to subvert dominant gender norms, raise awareness, and begin dialogue regarding LGBTQ+ representation and rights. This aligns with the concept of "drag pedagogy" as described by (Bailey and Trudell 2021), where performance is used as a platform for activism and teaching. Here, (Muñoz 2019) concept of "disidentification" is useful since individuals use drag to shape dominant culture from within and not merely to conform or resist it. (Kumashiro 2020) states that drag, when viewed as public pedagogy, enables teachers and students to be emboldened to challenge conventional pedagogical practices and envision more inclusive possibilities. Drag thus becomes more than just an art form; it becomes a tool for change.

The study showed that to preserve drag expression in academic settings, support networks were essential. Participants cited peer, instructor, and student group support as being essential to their continued participation in drag. (Kosciw and Caitlin M. Clark et al. 2022) support these findings by noting that LGBTQ+ children thrive in environments where they get affirmation from classmates and teachers. (Craig and Andrew D. Eaton et al. 2021) also note that queer students are more likely to thrive when institutional support is present with visibility. But as (Sears 2023) contends, token acts of solidarity must ultimately result in substantive adjustments to structure and policy. The impact of initiatives to build inclusive places may be restricted in the absence of institutional reform.

Taken together, these themes show that drag functions as a space for empowerment, resistance, education, and solidarity. It allows performers to explore who they are while challenging the systems around them. (Puar 2017) calls "queer world-making," as a strategy for changing institutional and cultural norms in order to promote more inclusive futures. Drag performers are contributing to the transformation of educational settings and the expansion of what is considered significant and acceptable in learning environments by making themselves visible.

While this research gives valuable insight, its scope is limited. The research was conducted on a limited group of drag artists from one university and therefore cannot reflect the experiences of drag artists in other university settings or organizations. An enhanced perspective would be gained by additional research that includes input from administrators, teachers, and students. Employing mixed methods and broadening the study to encompass other performances of gender might increase generalizability and better understandability.

Despite these challenges, this research contributes to ongoing discussions regarding the significance of drag in the classroom. It emphasizes the necessity of understanding drag not only as a spectacle but also as an option for expression, resistance, and learning. Drag performers are challenging to make more open and supportive places in schools where old-school gender stereotypes are still dominant. Their existence requires sustained efforts to turn symbolic support into actual structural change and to envision education as a place where all identities are recognized, affirmed, and loved.

5. Conclusions

Drag is a significant mode of contesting social norms and affirming identities in schools, which ultimately brings about significant change. Drag is more than performance as it is a tool for empowerment, activism, and educational inclusion. It fosters personal growth and sensitizes people about queer individuals, who flourish in accepting environments. These interactions prompt schools to undertake actual structural overhauls instead of superficial changes. Schools become effective environments that esteem, honor, and affirm multiple identities when drag is acknowledged as a means of advocacy along with an art form. Drawing from Queer Theory and symbolic interactionism, this research provides empirical evidence for how educational spaces are resistant to and complicit with drag as a gender performance. This research advances inclusive education practices by contributing to queer literature and creating safer conditions for LGBTQ+ experiences in educational spaces. Further studies should examine the experiences of underrepresented groups within the drag community, focusing on students who are drag queens. This research highlights the need for academic institutions to move more than just symbolic gestures toward genuine structural change. When drag is embraced within educational institution, it transforms schools into inclusive spaces that affirm gender diversity and challenge oppressive norms.

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