

Hashtag #dragqueenUSA: The Transforming Meaning of Beauty through Digital Activism

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ABSTRACT

This research aims at understanding how #dragqueenUSA challenges the concept of beauty and examining how #dragqueenUSA offers the plurality of beauty. This research focuses on how the 15 self-portraits posted in the hashtag take into account the theory of myth of beauty and performativity act. The examination looks at the flexibility of beauty, the importance of makeup changes, and the relationship between the body and creativity. As a result, the Instagram hashtag #dragqueenUSA presents a fresh interpretation of beauty that eventually gives rise to posthumanism. Thus, the definition of beauty has expanded to include attributes other than just feminine beauty.

1. INTRODUCTION

A drag queen is commonly understood as a performer who adopts exaggerated feminine appearances, often through female impersonation. Traditionally, drag queens have frequently been described as men who perform femininity; however, their identities cannot be reduced to fixed categories such as transgender or transvestite. Through the lens of gender as a performative act, drag performance illustrates that gender is not an innate inner reality, but a construction shaped by repeated actions, appearance, and expression. Rather than reinforcing rigid gender classifications, drag queens emphasize the constructed identity of their characters to challenge and resist dominant gender stereotypes. In doing so, drag queens symbolize the multiplicity of gender within a single body and can be seen as agents of gender transformation within society.

Approximately 772,000 Americans tuned in to watch “Grand Finale,” the final episode of Season 13 of RuPaul’s Drag Race. The US franchise currently spans 13 seasons, has won nine Emmy Awards, and has generated several spin-off series, with the Season 13 finale airing in April 2021. Alongside this mainstream success, social media has played a crucial role in enabling drag queens to maintain cultural visibility and relevance. As Feldman and Hakim (2020) argue, drag performance on social media functions as a form of professional self-branding, positioning digital participation as a strategic extension of drag practice.

With the advancement of technology, digital media has become an integral part of everyday life, enabling individuals to construct and perform online identities through platforms such as Instagram (Serafenalli, 2018). Beyond self-presentation, social media now plays a significant role in shaping social and political engagement. Activists increasingly use digital platforms to organize movements, disseminate information, mobilize supporters, and build collective awareness through information and communication technologies—practices commonly referred to as digital activism.

Importantly, the use of social media by drag performers does not emerge in isolation. Historically, drag queens have played visible roles in gender and sexual rights activism through offline spaces such as pride marches, ballroom culture, cabaret performance, and street protests, particularly during and after the AIDS crisis in the United States. These embodied and performative forms of resistance laid the groundwork for contemporary digital expressions of gender activism. In this sense, digital platforms function not as replacements for earlier activism, but as extensions that amplify drag performers’ longstanding engagement with gender politics.

Eny Ratnasari's (2021) study on digital activism further demonstrates the effectiveness of social media in advancing gender-related causes. Her research shows that online platforms were instrumental in the success of the "Awes KBGO!" (Beware of OGBV!) campaign by facilitating both internal coordination and external public engagement. Similarly, Instagram enables drag queens to revitalize earlier activist practices by transforming visual self-representation into a form of digitally mediated resistance.

This study focuses on the concept of beauty as articulated by drag queens through the Instagram hashtag #dragqueenUSA. Hashtags function as tools for tracing digital activity and have increasingly been used to mobilize collective expression, connect dispersed participants, and transform individual posts into networked forms of resistance. Through hashtag-led interaction, personal visual narratives can evolve into broader social commentary that challenges dominant cultural norms.

Drag queens are particularly relevant as key agents in this discussion because drag performance is inherently rooted in the deliberate construction, exaggeration, and subversion of gendered and aesthetic norms. Beyond male-to-female impersonation, drag queens often occupy marginalized social positions related to gender nonconformity, queerness, and performative identity, which situates them at the intersection of art, activism, and cultural critique. Their embodied practice of transforming the body through makeup, costume, and performance allows them to critically engage with socially imposed ideals of beauty and femininity. By utilizing the hashtag #dragqueenUSA, drag performers extend this longstanding practice of aesthetic and gender subversion into the digital sphere, using visual self-representation as a means to question fixed definitions of beauty. Accordingly, this study employs the hashtag as a site for examining how drag queens leverage digital platforms to negotiate, challenge, and expand contemporary beauty discourse.

This study aims to fill a specific vacuum by investigating the cultural significance of the hashtag #dragqueenUSA. It focuses on what they stand for and how their image is perceived. The work of Roland Barthes on myth construction is crucial to this perspective. Furthermore, the majority of past research relies on direct interviews for data. As a result, this study will concentrate on content analysis to discover the concept of beauty conveyed by the self-portraits submitted with the hashtag #dragqueenUSA.

2. METHOD

Using qualitative research, this research focuses to observe the meanings, concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, symbols, and descriptions of things. Qualitative research properly seeks answers to questions by examining various social settings. This method will help to understand the reality of the people.

The Instagram hashtag #dragqueenUSA was used as the source of data for this study. This study makes use of both primary and secondary data. The first step in collecting the data is to look for the keywords #dragqueen. By using the keywords, this research found that the hashtag is too general as it consists of 9 million pictures and it involves the idea of drag queens around the world. However, considering the focus on observing drag queens in the United States of America, the next step is to look for another keyword that represents the idea of drag queens in the USA by using the hashtag #dragqueenUSA. This hashtag consists of 683 pictures of drag queens.

The next step of the data collection is to make an observation of the pictures posted to find out the type of content created by the activists. The observation is conducted in order to find out the pattern of each activist's content. Considering the amount of visual content posted on the platform, it was decided to limit the visual data collection from 1 December 2021 - 1 July 2022 for 15 pieces of visual data. The visual data collection took place on a computer screen. The photo sharing data collection is focused principally on the self-portraits which represent the notion of makeup, costumes, and additional ornaments. The performers' photos were captured through screenshots, saved, and stored.

Through their self-portraits posted with the hashtag #dragqueenUSA, researchers can understand the message constructed by drag queens in creating the concept of beauty. In visual content analysis, according to Van Leeuwen & Jewett (2001), as an empirical (observational) and objective procedure, it quantifies visual representations using reliable defined categories of semiotic studies.

The data that has been collected is classified into several groups and is examined thoroughly. Moreover, the collected data is identified based on the represented sign symbols that may refer to the concept of beauty. After that is the process of signifying each of the symbols to understand the meaning of beauty presented by the drag performer in the self-portrait by interpreting it in the perspective of the beauty myth and cultural code. After that, the data is contextualized.

This study is situated within the field of American Studies, which emphasizes the examination of cultural phenomena through interdisciplinary and critical perspectives. By focusing on digital activism and visual self-representation, the research explores how drag queens in the United States negotiate and reconstruct the concept of beauty within contemporary American culture. Through internet-based activism, this study examines how drag performers articulate alternative beauty narratives that challenge dominant norms. The analysis draws on several theoretical frameworks, including gender performativity and the beauty myth, to understand how aesthetic

practices are constructed, contested, and redefined. In addition, Roland Barthes' theory of myth is employed to analyze Instagram visuals as cultural texts that convey socially embedded meanings.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In this discussion, the researcher addresses how the hashtag #dragqueenUSA articulates alternative concepts of beauty through visual self-representation. The self-portraits posted on Instagram by drag queens challenge conventional ideals of feminine beauty by deliberately disrupting normative associations between gender, the body, and aesthetic value. Drawing on the theory of gender performativity, these visual performances are understood as repeated, stylized acts through which beauty is not merely expressed but actively constructed and reconfigured.

The categorization of the data is further informed by the concept of the beauty myth, which frames dominant beauty standards as culturally produced norms that regulate bodies and identities. By identifying visual elements that deviate from these norms—such as the incorporation of non-human, masculine, or grotesque features—the researcher groups the data according to recurring aesthetic strategies used to resist or reinterpret traditional beauty ideals. Based on these theoretical perspectives, the discussion is organized into five categories of beauty: (1) animal-looking beauty, (2) masculine-looking beauty, (3) devil-looking beauty, (4) zombie-looking beauty, and (5) alien-looking beauty. Each category reflects a distinct mode through which drag performers challenge the limitations of conventional femininity and expand the meaning of beauty beyond normative human and gendered forms.



Figure 3.1.A. A drag performer uses makeup to transform herself into a cat



Figure 3.1.B. The appearance of a cat

Drag queen allows the concept of beauty to cross the line of femininity. By adopting several animal features, the drag queen tries to create a message to her audience. The figure would like to demonstrate that beauty is no longer a single concept of which the notion of femininity has established, and goes beyond the concept of the natural human body, in this case, the animal cat.

Another concept of beauty is the masculine-looking beauty. In this concept, Figure 3.2.A promotes a new sense of beauty that incorporates masculinity in the drag performer character. Officiallyovxn, the account owner, offers a look that combines both the masculinity through her hair and the femininity through her makeup.

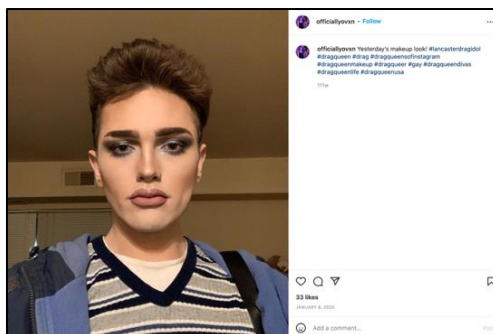


Figure 3.2.A. A drag performer shows her makeup look that signifies particular traits of masculinity

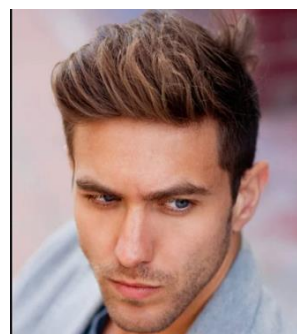


Figure 3.2.B. A man with a masculine haircut

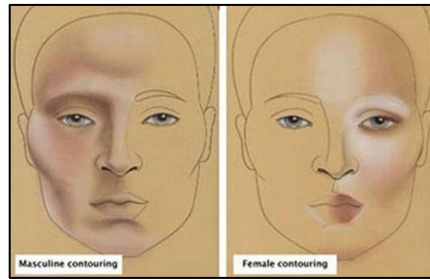


Figure 3.2.C. Two figures in a side by side position to show the different use of contour in feminine and masculine face

Another concept of beauty presented through the self-portrait is the devil-looking beauty. In offering the concept of beauty, the symbol is introduced in the front part of the dress of Figure 3.3.A., which plays a significant role in constructing the message addressed to the figure's audience. The character in the dress's front part has a similar cultural code to a devil within society. As shown in Figure 3.3.B, both the figure and the symbol represent the same concept that the cultural myth signifies as the devil.

Through the self-portrait, the drag performer shows that the concept of beauty is no longer all about femininity. The concept of beauty here goes beyond the concept of the human itself. Humans are no longer becoming the main subject of beauty. With that being said, the concept of beauty that drag would like to deliver also represents the concept of post-humanism. This concept allows the sense of inter-connection between the drag performer and others, where it includes the non-human or 'earth' others, by removing the obstacle of self-centred individualism.



Figure 3.3.A. A drag performer with head ornaments, make up, blue hair, a combination of pink and red dress, blue gloves



Figure 3.3.B. A figure of a devil

The next new concept of beauty presented by a drag performer is the zombie-looking beauty. In the self-portrait posted by Figure 3.4.A, the figure reveals her makeup looks along with several ornaments attached to her face. In this self-portrait, the drag figure presents herself by putting on dark eyebrows around and under her eyes. She doesn't use any brown contour in this self-portrait. Instead, she draws a line with black colour on her cheekbone. She also uses black lipstick to give colour to her lips. Moreover, in this self-portrait, the figure uses a black shirt as her costume.

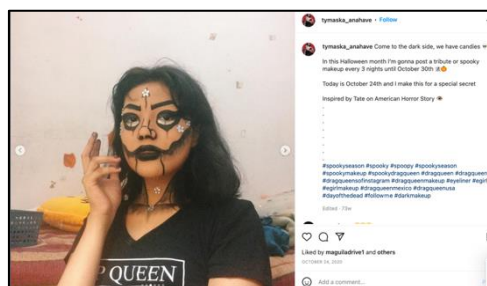


Figure 3.4.A. A drag performer with black lipstick, contour, eyebrow, and eyeshadow



Figure 3.4.B. The appearance of a zombie

The next concept of beauty challenged by drag queen is the existence of the fictional monster character. In Figure 3.5.A, the drag performer presents her makeup look where she applies the eyeshadow far away from the eyes using blue eyeshadow. She also puts black eyeshadow as a combination. This black eyeshadow is applied perpendicularly to the blue eyeshadow's position through the eyes' natural shape. In this makeup look, a particular combination of eyeshadow is applied to produce the picture of an evil horn appearing on her face. Therefore, this eyeshadow application delivers a supporting effect to create a particular look known as a clown monster.

This clown monster can be seen in Figure 3.5.B by writing the keyword "clown monster" in Google search. A particular figure is shown with the same characteristics as well as looks with the makeup presented by Figure 3.4.A. The way in which the myth speaks about the character of a monster clown can be seen from the smile and the form of the eyes themselves. Both of these makeup applications signified the concept of the clown and the monster within society.

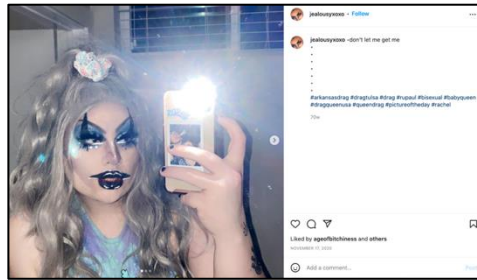


Figure 3.5.A. A concept of beauty where it shows half-human and half-clown-monster look



Figure 3.5.B. The look of a clown monster

The last concept of beauty that appeared in the hashtag is the alien concept of beauty. In Figure 3.6.A, the figure presents herself where she shows her makeup. In this makeup look, she presents her skin in a white skin tone. She also paints her face, creating a particular pattern, with a blue colour. In this look, she also puts some shining ornaments on her face, her forehead, her eyebrows, and also her body. In this figure, she also puts eyelashes in her eye. By presenting a skin tone that entirely contradicts her natural skin, the drag performer intentionally challenges the concept of feminine beauty within society and the idea of the human look itself.

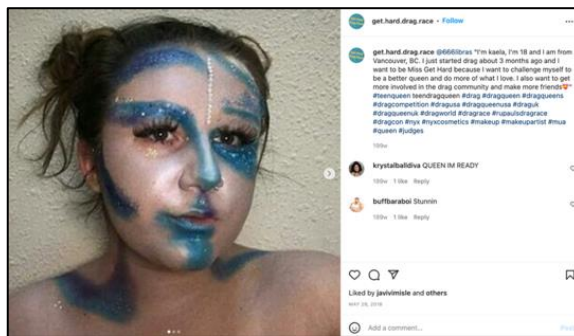


Figure 3.6.A. A drag with a blue and white makeup look



Figure 3.6.B. The concept of alien beauty

The drag queen's show focuses on the use of make-up to accentuate femininity. Makeup is used to highlight the facial features in the context to make them look more feminine. It is associated with disguising the male's facial features within the drag performer. However, the self-portraits posted using the hashtag #dragqueenUSA translates how drag performers use make-up to transform themselves. New concept of beauty associated with looks that closely resemble a cultural code of masculinity, animal, devil, zombie, monster, and alien looks.

As shown in Figure 3.1.A self-portrait, the application of eyeshadow, eyeliner, and eyebrow, provides the sense of beauty where it is not solely targeted at demonstrating the feminine aspect of a drag performer. Makeup is vital in this case since it creates a wound effect on the drag's face. This effect is portrayed by the scars on her lips and the scrapes on her face. The figure can successfully embody the concept of cat traits on her face by applying makeup products to create a certain impact on the drag's face. As a result, with the application of make-up, the figure's look can be transformed to produce a specific portrayal of an animal.

Makeup has been successfully used in drag's sense of beauty. One of the most prominent roles of drag make-up is how it can modify their appearance, embodying the image of masculinity. Figure 3.2.A shows how make-up, particularly contour, is used to enhance the masculine facial features inside the figure itself. As a result, while the earlier use of makeup was employed to transform one's look in order to change the concept of femininity, the use of make-up here also shifts its focus to changing the concept of masculinity.

Makeup has played a larger part in helping drag performers transcend the concept of human biological features. For example, in Figure 3.6.A, the false white skin tone is successfully portrayed to her audience through the use of makeup. As a result, make-up application plays a vital role in changing one's skin tone into an artificial one through this self-portrait. Makeup assists the figure in transforming herself into the concept of beauty that she wants to create. In this scenario, the concept of beauty extends beyond the natural physical features, specifically the skin.

In the context of a drag performer, makeup contributes to supporting the concept of post-humanity. Each figure rests on the ethics of becoming. Makeup becomes an important instrument to transform one's appearance into any kind of character they would like to adopt. Makeup, therefore, is no longer going in the direction of the feminine and human body. The use of makeup in relation to drag's concept of beauty has transcended its interest. Posthumanism is less impressed with the singularity of the human and more interested in similarities and crossovers among people, animals, and machines.

Drag queens deliver an idea of beauty that goes beyond its contemporary notion of beauty. In constructing the concept of beauty of posthumanism, drag queens' concept involves the notion of creativity within the community itself. The social media platform Instagram and the self-portraits posted on the drag queens' social media accounts are part of this communication. The male gaze mostly leads to depicting and portraying stereotypical feminine roles. Through their artistic self-expression of post-humanist looks, they have changed their self-image of being drag queens.

The concept of feminine beauty as portrayed by drag queens has long been linked to the concept of the male gaze. The concept of the male gaze is mostly used to showcase and convey conventional feminine roles (Wigmore, 1996). It permits the drag performer to become the object of the gaze within the notion. Furthermore, the gaze has always relied on the power differential between man and woman. Women and their feminine representation are the victims in this instance. In that way, they are oppressed by patriarchal culture's authority. Drag queens, on the other hand, have complete authority in constructing their identity and providing the new concept of beauty by using their Instagram platform and sharing self-portraits with varied artistic make-up that are not conventionally beautiful.

Drag queens' self-portraits can be frightening since they adopt non-human appearances. Drag queens create make-up methods inspired by pictures of monsters or animals. Looking at the face with horror makeup provides an unmistakably unconventional aesthetic. The complexity of makeup applications creates a sensation of dread. Drag queens use this method to negotiate the concept of beauty. They use make-up, costumes, and other body decorations to challenge the masculine gaze's perspective. Drag performers let their bodies change to any character they want to portray, influenced by non-human pictures.

Gender as a performative act has allowed each drag artist to experiment with the contemporary understanding of gender. Drag queens offer the concept of beauty by blurring the lines between femininity and masculinity in one's body. In this regard, drag queen performers can create a unique beauty identity that mixes masculine and feminine in one body. According to Newton (1979), who cites Butler, drag is a twofold inversion, stating that "appearance is an illusion," and that "my 'outer' appearance is feminine, but my essence 'within' [the body] is masculine." By adding this concept of beauty, it has encouraged drag queens to experiment with masculinity and femininity within their bodies, resulting in confusion.

Drag queens, influenced by the concept of gender fluidity, serve as a vehicle for challenging the modern notion of beauty. In terms of beauty, drag queens underline how gender fluidity allows them to question the notion of the beauty myth, which has historically been associated with feminine beauty. The drag performer has successfully embodied the fluidity of beauty with the use of makeup, clothes, and additional ornaments, as previously described. In this regard, there has never been a unified concept of beauty throughout the drag community. Instead, it communicates through self-images that they provide more varied concepts of beauty.

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The concept of beauty is altered and stretched to a broader meaning within the hashtag #dragqueenUSA. The hashtag's definition of beauty incorporates the concept of fluidity. It is no longer a single concept that most likely symbolizes women's femininity. Drag queens, through their self-images or a depiction of their physical look, help shape the concept of beauty diversity. It emits the concept of beauty by combining the makeup, costumes, and other ornaments provided in drag's picture, where it adapts the masculine-looking beauty, animal-looking beauty, devil-looking beauty, alien-looking beauty, and monster-looking beauty.

Drag performers' distinctive visions of beauty challenge conventional definitions by disrupting gender binaries as well as human-centered aesthetic norms. Through the combination of multiple, often contradictory traits within a single body, drag queens transcend traditional notions of feminine beauty. These embodied performances make visible what is typically considered incompatible, such as masculinity and femininity, or human and non-human elements, thereby transforming perceived impossibilities into legitimate expressions of beauty.

Drag queens have contributed to the transformation of the established and normalized notion inside the beauty myth by challenging the contemporary notion of beauty. This enables drag performers to turn the importance of makeup in a drag performer's feminine identity into a multiplicity of beauty. For example, with the drag performer, makeup is employed to hide the male's body. However, the application of makeup has the opposite effect, enhancing their masculine traits. Furthermore, the significance of makeup is used to change a drag performer into whatever posthuman feature she wishes to show to her audience, such as the devil. Drag performer creates confusion with the presence of a feminine body, reaffirming whether femininity within one's body, or merely the appearance of a human body, is still vital and relevant.

Drag queens in the movement of offering the plurality of beauty have also contributed to transforming the oppressive notion within the beauty myth into freedom and liberation. Within the myth of beauty, the construction of women's bodies reflects the imbalanced power instituted by the men's institution. However, with the fluidity of beauty lies the notion of creativity for its subject. It allows the drag performer to become the active subject and the meaning maker of the body. Therefore, in offering the plurality of beauty, drag performers have transformed the gaze of the body into the gaze of creativity. It frees the notion of oppressive beauty into self-expression and freedom.

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