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**Criticisms of Normalized Marketing Strategies: An In-Depth Analysis of Inherent Racism
and Gender Conformity in the World of RuPaul's Drag Race**

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A Major Research Paper

presented to Ryerson University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Professional Communication

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Abstract

This paper showcases how inherent racism and gender conformity are enforced by the *RuPaul's Drag Race* franchise via promotional material, episode content, types of queens featured and judges' commentary between the first and ninth season of the television series. The research aims to understand how the shift from a once LGBTQ+ specific market to a mainstream audience has further perpetuated the idealized forms of beauty and femininity. The content analysis of the first and ninth season showcases how RPDR is seeking to fit a pre-constructed stereotype created by the 'imagined' heteronormative/cisgender audience since becoming mainstream. Viewers are comfortable with consuming content that exists in their current environment or in which they can relate to, which makes it difficult to celebrate queens that deviate from heteronormativity at the franchise level. With the shift from Logo TV to VH1, LGBTQ+ focused companies are losing opportunities for sponsorship and marketing directly to their intended niche audience. Overall, the television series is supposed to be put in place to celebrate LGBTQ+ culture and to be a progressive step in which minorities are being showcased in mainstream media, but they are not being conveyed in an accurate or justified manner. Queens such as Shea Couleé, Peppermint and Valentina are essentially robbed of their chance to win RPDR due to their race, and in Peppermint's case specifically, her transness.

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This paper examines *RuPaul's Drag Race's* (RPDR) initial target audience and how the shift from a niche market to a mainstream or larger audience influences their marketing strategies. Specifically, this paper looks to the series and its publicity to analyze how advertising and/or marketing practices may change when the initial audience is niche then extends to a mainstream market. Niche markets are small groups within a larger consuming audience – for this paper I treat the LGBTQ+ audience as a niche market, while the ‘imagined’ mainstream market will be defined as heteronormative and cisgender publics. A focused case study of the RPDR franchise explores the shift from a LGBTQ+ target audience to include what is imagined as a mainstream, heterosexual, cisgender audience in recent years. Overall, this paper showcases how inherent racism and gender normativity are enforced by the RPDR franchise via promotional material, episode content, types of queens featured and judges’ commentary between the first and ninth season of the television series. The paper as a whole seeks to understand how the RPDR franchise is seen to be a progressive step for LGBTQ+ visibility in mainstream media but does not provide accurate representation for all members of the LGBTQ+ spectrum.

In addition, my research highlights the heteronormative tendencies that exist in modern advertising strategies. These normalized advertising approaches further perpetuate the notion of the ‘imagined’ mainstream audience fitting within a heterosexual, cisgender demographic, since they exist to adhere to the believed majority consuming audience. Throughout this paper, comparison will be made to Adrian Shaw’s study regarding video game culture and how “games have to be situated within the cultures in which they are found”, which in turn leads to a largely heterosexual, cisgender, male target demographic (2009, 232). Shaw’s findings speak to how if a product, in this case video games, are being produced by heterosexual, cisgender men, then said

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product will be most successful within the same demographic. Products tend to be a direct representation of the culture in which they are created in, thus allowing for them to be relatable and familiar for the consumer (Shaw, 2009). To better understand how marketing practices and/or strategies shift from a niche market (LGBTQ+) focus to a newfound, culturally constructed mainstream (heterosexual/cisgender) landscape comes to fruition, I apply an intersectional framework and the ideology of gaystreaming. Intersectionality is a framework for addressing overlapping systems of oppression, which causes multiple levels of social injustice (Crenshaw, 2016). According to law theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw, an example of intersectionality is a black woman who identifies with the LGBTQ+ community (2016). Gaystreaming is the strategy to sell ‘gay culture’ to a mixed audience of gay men and heterosexual women, coined by Logo TV – the founding network of RPDR (Goldmark, 2015). Shaw (2009) argues, “video games are a standardized entity by which they are direct products of the culture that surrounds them” (232), which links to the findings of how RPDR is a direct result of the culture in which it is currently identifying with – either a niche market or within the larger, ‘imagined’ heteronormative market. It is fair to say the product or service being marketed to a specific group of people will adapt to suit the demographic’s interests, ideologies, values, etc.

Moreover, my research seeks to assess how drag culture shifts from a LGBTQ+ specific market to a mainstream market allowing the possibility of being submerged in the heteronormative media world that has existed for many years. The RPDR franchise is a major contributor to the popularization/mainstreaming of drag culture, especially with its recent release onto both American and Canadian *Netflix*. This is an interesting topic to explore because the LGBTQ+ community is a niche market in themselves, but drag culture is a sub-culture within that minority. It is worth exploring how a sub-culture within an existing minority is gaining so

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much buzz from a reality-TV show series. The notion of group identity is relevant to this idea of categorizing oneself within a sub-culture, much like the LGBTQ+ community, which is defined as a collection of individuals with shared social characteristics, such as world view, language, values, etc. that evolve from membership in a group (Butler, 1990). Another concept worth noting is how the franchise creates an ideology surrounding an 'imagined' heteronormative and cisgender audience and what they are willing to consume. RPDR creates the very notion of what an 'imagined' heterosexual audience is and what they are seeking via advertisements, episode content, promotional material and so on. This 'imagined' audience construction reaffirms the concept of heteronormativity and how it is ever-present in modern society (Tsai, 2010). Ex-nomination is a partner term associated with group identity meaning certain characteristics and/or identifiers are simply implied or "go without saying" – a comparison is made to sexuality and how people are deemed to be heterosexual unless otherwise stated, which thus creates the illusions of cultural normativity (Tsai, 2010). The construction of the 'imagined' heteronormative, cisgender audience is defined mainly off the cultural norms of heterosexuality and people identifying within the gender binary being the standard within society.

In the case of RPDR, when the show first started in 2009, it aired on Logo TV, which is an LGBTQ+ exclusive network that adheres to a niche market. In 2012, Logo TV announced its move 'beyond labels' as a sign of members of LGBTQ+ increasing their integration into the 'imagined' mainstream (heteronormative/cisgender) culture and their desire for shows that appeal to multiple interests (Goldmark, 2015, 504). Logo describes its viewers as the cultural elite, a mixture of social, savvy audience of gay trendsetters and a "straight audience that wants to be ahead of the curve" (Goldmark, 2015, 504). In 2017, the show changed providers and is now exclusively on VH1 (also, available on iTunes and YouTube for download) and is gaining a

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lot more attention in the ‘imagined’ heterosexual/cisgender market from this network move (Villarreal, 2017). Through Shaw’s analysis, she argues “wherever power is centralized, is where culture is being defined, and that is quite clear within video game culture” (2009, 276). If said centralized power is found within the ‘imagined’ mainstream market, this demographic is defining what culture is and characteristics of the groups that identify within it.

However, the RPDR franchise is receiving a great deal of criticism for the lack of diversity within its winners, mainly in terms of racial representation – especially for the *All Stars* spin-off series (Villarreal, 2017). It is worth exploring how a mainstream market is willing to accept a LGBTQ+ specific show but are not ready for racial diversity on top of queer representation. Matt Richardson puts forth the concept of how “the black becomes the aporia between sex and gender such that the two never meet in any fashion that would satisfy the dictates of normative heterosexuality” (2016, 136). Intersectional frameworks reveal how one axis of oppression can be represented within mainstream culture but that the media fails to represent the intersections between gender and race together. Intersectionality is often referred to as ‘injustice squared’ (Crenshaw, 2016) offering a framework for understanding how an individual is impacted by multiple forces but experiences isolation from their surrounding environment to fend for themselves. This also speaks to a level of ‘acceptance’ of homosexuality in a mainstream setting, where it may fine to be included, but only if the ones included are white – if racial diversity is present in partnership with LGBTQ+ representation, it becomes too much of a deviation from heteronormativity and only adheres to a designated niche market (Tsai, 2010).

Ironically, the art of drag exists to mock the current social construction of femininity and political landscape, which makes it worth exploring how RPDR plans to adjust to a newfound

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‘imagined’ heterosexual audience. The art of drag performance is experiencing a major shift within the last decade or so to adhere to a strong feminine construct put forth by the culture in which the queens perform (Villarreal, 2017). Judith Butler, a critical feminist theorist, discusses how gender is merely a performance of the culture in which an individual is a part of – the common identifiers that are associated with the gender binary of male or female are culturally constructed, meaning there is no set of regulations distinguishing one from the other, but a matter of how the surrounding environment defines them (1990, 4). When discussing the performance of drag, Butler brings forward the idea that “drag performance enacts an ‘imitation of an imitation of gender’, and in the case of drag queens, feminine gender” (2003, 219). According to gender psychologist O’Connell “masculinity is defined in society based on what the same culture does not categorize as feminine” (1980, 84). O’Connell discusses how society is quick to define what a feminine quality is and how women ideally present themselves, which in turn defines what masculine attributes are appropriate in contrast to the already defined feminine (1980, 85). The ideology of defining something based on what its counterpart is not aligns with the notion that RPDR is outlining what an ‘imagined’ mainstream, heteronormative, cisgender audience is – RPDR initially markets towards the LGBTQ+ niche consumer and clearly defines the audience’s expectations and tactics to use based on the distinct market’s identifiable qualities: with the integration in to mainstream media, RPDR is defining the cisgender/heterosexual audience based on qualities that do not define/align with the LGBTQ+ market.

My research will compare RPDR season one, which aired on Logo TV, and season nine, which aired on VH1 to seek similarities and differences between the episode content, season promotion/advertisements and overall layout of the season. The first season of the franchise focuses more on drag itself and the LGBTQ+ community, while the ninth season seeks to fulfill

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a stereotype of what the mainstream audience thinks LGBTQ+ culture is (i.e. worshipping Lady Gaga). These stereotypes are essentialist in the sense that they reduce a culture to certain characteristics that outsiders assume are essential to its nature and present in everyone who is a member of a category/culture (Butler, 1990). In a way, the RPDR contributes to and reinforces the essentialization of LGBTQ+ culture and the 'imagined' mainstream audience's perception of how this minority presents themselves.

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Literature Review

With the differing target audiences for both Logo TV and VH1, analysis of the marketing strategies while promoting both the first and ninth season of the franchise are beneficial for understanding how to address competing markets. RPDR is relatively new to both Canadian and American Netflix, which allows for many people to engage with the franchise in a much more convenient way. Theories pertaining to social acceptance, heteronormativity and racism are present throughout the following literature review with alignment specifically to LGBTQ+ culture as a niche market. The following review provides insight into some of the factors that prevent the RPDR franchise from celebrating queens of colour or accept homosexual representations that differ from the type of men featured in popular media.

Popular culture seeks to define and mass-produce representations of a culture, which in turn perpetuates the ideology of stereotypes (Taylor, 2004). Cordelia Fine brings forward the ideology of thinking of our brain as a series of inputs and outputs, where media is a representative of an impact on our brain and we can think of representations in the media as inputs (2010). If the representations of gender in the media are skewed, then the input that our brain receives can change the way we view gender and can also change the way we behave (Fine, 2010). For example, news outlets feature people of colour as criminals, gay people celebrating pride with rainbows and glitter everywhere, while a wide range of white, cisgender, heterosexual representation exists (Taylor, 2004). In fact, the available data regarding studies focusing on LGBTQ+ representation find that for it to be deemed acceptable by the mainstream consumer, homosexuality needs to adhere to a level of comfort that is previously understood via past representations (Tsai, 2010). There is a slight shift from a dominant stereotype of gay men where they were once only showcased as flamboyant and ultra-feminine, but have since

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transformed into the “taste gay”, which includes the judgmental, but honest characteristics often portrayed (Tsai, 2010). Tsai provides an example of the show *Queer Eye* and how the show is able to be successful due to the relatable nature of the “gay best friend” where you are seeking an opinion on clothing, furniture, hair, etc. and that is what gay men are commonly stereotyped to be known for (2010).

People are uncomfortable with the unknown or with something that is outside of their current environment, which leads to fear of the ‘normalized minority member’ in which a member of a minority group can integrate themselves into mainstream culture without being flagged as such (Tsai, 2010). Media theorist Gross brings forward the discussion of audiences being able to consume content in which they are familiar with and is in turn created within their immediate environment (1991, 27). He details how “mass media stereotypes selectively feature and reinforce some of the available roles and images for minorities, but they operate under constraints imposed by the audience’s immediate environment” (1991, 27). Gross essentially states that with the absence of adequate information and/or representation within your given environment, most people, gay or straight, have little to no choice other than to accept the narrow and negative stereotypes being presented within the mass media realm (1991, 27). Ex-nomination is brought forward here, where certain qualities and/or characteristics (i.e. whiteness and heterosexuality) go without saying unless otherwise indicated (Butler, 1990). If certain identifiers are omitted in popular culture, it is on the individual to seek out further representation of a minority group if they wish to understand a culture fully, rather than what is disseminated via mass media.

To bring forward the theme of racism and its attachments to masculine and feminine attributes, many theorists discuss how women of colour are seen to be presented in more

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masculine ways than white women (Ziegler, 2016). Sut Jhally, a communications theorist with specific interest in gender and race representation in advertisements, provides a detailed framework for assessing popular ads via his documentary *Code of Gender (2010)*. Jhally discusses how people of colour will be presented either beneath their white counterpart, smaller in size, or they will be shown laying by the side of the prominent and strong Caucasian figure (2010). Jhally explains how this portrayal of dominance provides insight to the systemic racism that still very much exists in today's political climate (2010). Jhally details how people of colour tend to be presented in a slave-like manner as well, with example of hands behind their back to indicate being tied up or submissive to the outside audience (2010). Jhally's framework provides insight to how inherent racism can be presented in a plethora of avenues without being outright with the discrimination. Kortney Ziegler, a critical queer theorist, explains how women of colour "have always been perceived as embodying 'masculine' qualities due to discourses of white racism that have positioned them as aggressive, dominant, overbearing, sexually promiscuous while at the same time sexually undesirable" (2016, 197). An example of Gladys Bentley is given – a Harlem performer – where she showcases her sexuality and non-feminine attributes for all to see without a care in the world, but how she begins to disown her lesbian identity and embraced heterosexuality to remain relevant in the entertainment industry (2016, 198). This example of Gladys Bentley is useful when comparing queens of colour competing on RPDR. This example provides insight as to how an individual may change the way they are to fit a societal mold, which is known as disidentification.

To briefly summarize, disidentification is a concept that I use throughout this paper when assessing LGBTQ+ marketing practices/promotions and how there is a shift in said identity when adhering to a new 'imagined' mainstream audience. Utilizing the example of Gladys Bentley,

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she begins to disidentify with her queerness and masculinity to prosper in a heteronormative entertainment industry (Ziegler, 2016). Theorist Jose Munoz brings forward the notion of disidentification and how people can be robbed of their identity or self-expression because they are trying to fit a societal stereotype (1999, 163). Essentially, a person who identifies a certain way (i.e. homosexual and black) decides to not use these qualities as identifiable attributes about themselves if it does not match a dominant societal discourse (1999, 162). Munoz brings forward the example of how minority groups take part in disidentification quite often to fit a societal construct, not only to fit in, but to solely survive (1999, 164). Munoz also speaks to the amount of psychological damage this may have on an individual who disidentifies, since they are forcing themselves to strip a part of their personal essence in order to fit in with the rest (1999, 164). When shifting from advertising to LGBTQ+ audiences to an ‘imagined’ heterosexual/cisgender audiences, it will be interesting to analyze how disidentification takes place within the contestants and/or premise of the franchise. Munoz discusses how an individual taking part in disidentification may not be cognizant of the process, but tend to be aware on a psychological level that they are in fact disowning a part of their identity (1999, 168).

The RPDR franchise provides an opportunity for queer visibility within the ‘imagined’ heteronormative mainstream market. In fact, Daems (2014) argues that RPDR is progressive in the sense that it provides visibility and engagement with some important issues faced by its LGBTQ+ audience and its allies (6). However, in Daems’ view, the franchise is falling into a “mini-me” crisis where they are creating RuPaul clones in a sense of being capitalist sell-outs that exist to merely sell products (7). The queens are being policed and manufactured in a way that reflects the RuPaul brand, but it is a merely a ploy to gain mainstream attention (Daems, 8). Daems raises the observation that product placement is very prevalent within RPDR episodes

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and has shifted from LGBTQ+ specific products and/or services to a more mainstream and heteronormative landscape to adhere to the newfound mainstream consuming audience (9). The franchise once allowed for LGBTQ+ specific companies to thrive and provide the prizes for the challenges, but now has become a sell-out in a sense where mainstream companies are able to advertise and thrive in once a niche setting (Daems, 9). Adhering to a standardized sponsorship takes away from the uniqueness that the franchise once possessed in terms of shining light on to marginalized and under-represented companies.

The idea of fixating on one type of identity (i.e. RuPaul) and allowing for that to be the mold of greatness, beauty and star-quality in mainstream media essentializes the LGBTQ+ community, but more specifically drag culture. RuPaul being a household name due to her integration in to mainstream media creates the element of comparison for other queens. Drag queens around the world are held to the defining attributes in which RuPaul possesses because that is what mainstream culture depicts as a drag queen (Villarreal, 2017). Notions of ideal beauty and the standardization of femininity has been seen and done before several times, but a topical comparison is Barbie. Barbie has received backlash over the years for perpetuating unrealistic beauty standards in terms of the wacky proportions (ranging from waist to bust), legs that are long and nowhere close to touching, thus creating the ultimate thigh-gap and blonde hair that never fades or frays (Yaqin, 181). The Barbie brand reinforces systemic racism via the whiteness of Barbie and how it is the epitome of idealized beauty in the modern era and years to follow (Yaqin, 180). Also, Barbie's sexuality or gender expression is never a topic of discussion, which speaks to heteronormative ideals, but she is the poster-child for white greatness (Yaqin, 180).

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After receiving years and years of complaints about how Barbie perpetuates the idea of whiteness equating beauty, the brand recently launches a variety of dolls of colour and with various background stories (Yaqin, 180). In recent years, Mattel launches a Muslim lifestyle doll known as Razanne, being marketed online as a role-model for Islamic girls growing up in the Western world (Yaqin, 179). In contrast to Barbie, Razanne's sexuality is downplayed and she dresses with a traditional headscarf (hijab) to display orthodox Muslim practices (Yaqin, 180). The doll participates in the creation of a normative visual stereotype of the Muslim, which emerges both out of Western stereotypes of Muslims, and the self-stereotyping that occurs amongst Muslims living in Western contexts (Yaqin, 181). While Razanne may be a progressive step for the *Barbie* brand with incorporation of non-white and indigenous peoples, it further perpetuates western stereotypes of Islamic culture and seeks to commodify these stereotypes (Yaqin, 184). This furthers the notion brought forward by Gross (1991) that consumers are only able to comfortably consume content, items, products, etc. that they are familiar with that falls within their immediate environment (30). It is difficult for a consumer to relate to content or a product if they are unfamiliar with it, which is why audiences rely on media depictions of concepts to help guide their focus.

Gross goes on to explain how common stereotypes and generalizations are at the forefront of media coverage when it comes to the AIDS epidemic – the two major mass media 'roles' of homosexuals is integrated into the limelight by defining them as either "victims" or "villains" (1991, 30). This is a prime example of how an epidemic such as this, that creates such an impact on the LGBTQ+ community specifically, can be taken on by mass media to create an alternative narrative to further their own notions. Many mainstream reports, if not all, focus on the agony of the friends and family members of the members of the LGBTQ+ diagnosed with

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HIV/AIDS (1991, 30). The mass media is seen to be progressing with their representation of LGBTQ+ people in the early 70's but reverts back to their old tendencies and stereotypes once the AIDS epidemic sweeps news outlets everywhere (Gross, 31). Gross (1991) outlines how early television representation of the LGBTQ+ community seeks to fit the flamboyant and limp-wrist stereotype, if they are included at all (31). Gross details the shift in the late 60's pertaining to more inclusion of members of the LGBTQ+ with a focus on presenting them in a less stereotypically flamboyant manner (1991, 32). He specifically notes the media coverage of the Stonewall Riots of 1969 and the importance of the mainstream news coverage for the community itself (1991, 34). Once the AIDS epidemic made headline news, the focus from justified LGBTQ+ representation shifts to how the heterosexual family counterparts of those affected become more newsworthy. Progression within media representations seems to be ideal and enlightening, but through discussion of the AIDS epidemic, it is clear that mainstream stereotypes can quickly revert back to old tendencies.

Common representations and stereotypes of homosexual men within the mainstream media world tend to fixate on classics such as the 'gay best friend' (Caboksy, 2017). Cabosky argues that portrayals of LGBTQ+ community members cease to change over time due to the heteronormative landscape and their lack of acceptance to humanize the marginalized group (2017). He details the norm within the mainstream advertising culture and how it is common to utilize the sex sells mentality, however, the mainstream consumer is not ready or accepting of LGBTQ+ intimacy (Caboksy, 2017). A discussion of shows such as *Modern Family* provides insight as to how these programs may be acceptable within the mainstream market, but how the gay or lesbian characters lack a sense of intimacy that tends to be present in their heterosexual counterparts (Cabosky, 2017). Similarly, throughout history, there has been a need to make the

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gay character fit a comedic stereotype, so they are seen as nonthreatening and a subject of laughter rather than fear (Tsai, 2010). There is still a need to create a comedic presence when introducing a LGBTQ+ character, whether that is creating a masculine acting woman portraying a “butch” lesbian stereotype or an overly flamboyant male portraying a feminine gay stereotype (Cabosky, 2017).

Heteronormativity obviously encompasses the relations between a heterosexual couple to be the societal norm, but it also includes the defining masculine and feminine attributes for the respective genders. Jhally outlines how femininity is quickly defined by their masculine counterpart in ads and how the feminine being tends to be presented in a fragile and submissive manner (2010). Men tend to be shown strong and in charge of the situation with their hands firmly grabbing an item or by their sides, while the feminine counterpart tends to be engaging in self-touching and/or their body is off balance to be vulnerable to potential attackers (Jhally, 2010). Cabosky brings forward the notion that heterosexual men are more accepting of homosexual content if they are portrayed as comedic and/or fitting a flamboyant stereotype because it helps them maintain their own masculinity (2017). This speaks to the heteronormative media landscape and how societal definitions/expectations of femininity and masculinity are present in mass media. Cabosky details how certain advertisements utilize the mainstream ignorance to LGBTQ+ culture and create a “gay window” where a sub-culture is sublimely positioned in the content for niche markets to latch on to (2017). The gay window refers to specific images, language, metaphors, etc. that may be used in advertising that would speak directly to a member of the LGBTQ+ community (Cabosky, 2017). He also discusses tactics through which niche markets such as the LGBTQ+ community are advertised to in relevant outlets, such as gay specific magazines (2017). The likes of RPDR require strong advertising

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techniques and tactics in order to reach their marginalized audience, which in turn provides opportunity for creative maneuvers to emerge. This paper will focus on the promotional photographs both season one and season nine use, but will not focus specifically on the tactics in which the franchises uses to reach their intended audience.

In its previous seasons, RPDR adheres to a niche market and specifically addresses a LGBTQ+ specific audience while utilizing such tactics outlined by Caboksy. However, Daems has noticed a shift in the diversity of contestants since the show has become more popular and adhering to a variety of demographics, rather than the niche market of the LGBTQ+ community (2014, 3). There is a shift from a variety of queens with all different styles of drag to “fishy” queens, which means resembling women or what society deciphers a woman to look like (Daems, 5). This shift speaks to heteronormative culture and how the mainstream market is able to accept an outlier if it is still something in which they are able to comprehend. Drag is subversive when it mocks or pokes fun at the societal discourse of femininity and speak to how insane the definitions of what a woman should look like are, but with the transition to more “fishy queens” being showcased on RPDR, this furthers mainstream notions and definitions of how femininity should be displayed. Utilizing cultural definitions of femininity and masculinity, according to Tseelon, “a sissy is a male who receives pleasure by being put in women’s clothing or underwear” (2016, 200). The goal of a sissy is to replicate femininity with limp wrists, feet together, stooping instead of bending and sitting with legs crossed at knees (2016, 200). Quite often in the RPDR franchise, the queens are complimented for the feminine mannerisms and how they ‘maintain the fantasy’ of being a woman while being critiqued by the judges – this can vary from standing prim and proper with feet crossed and hand on their hip, to crossing their legs at the knee when seated. Sissies are trained to be submissive, the irony involved in the sissy

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scenario is that the cross-dressing boy-girl ultimately triumphs, since “underneath his frilly apron, there is the unmistakable sign of manhood” (2016, 200). According to RuPaul herself, “the art of drag is a big F-U to masculine culture because our current culture is so obsessed with masculinity” (Wagmeister, 2018). It is ironic that RuPaul speaks to obsession with masculinity, when it seems that the RPDR franchise celebrates and encourages “fishy” queens to participate – why is drag culture so obsessed with femininity?

Considering the LGBTQ+ community is already a marginalized grouping within society, it is hard to believe that the level of acceptance for racial minorities is abysmal (Blair, 2016). Correspondingly, Daems discusses racial representation and depictions within the *Drag Race* franchise and it mirrors the current relationship between mainstream gay culture and queer marginalized racial group’s masculinities (2014). Um (2014) brings forward the ideology that mainstream culture is potentially open to LGBTQ+ representation within ads, movies and other forms of media, but it is only the white and attractive group that are accepted and somewhat celebrated (812). Much like the RPDR franchise, Caucasian contestants have a better track record with winning seasons or at least taking up a majority of the queens to make it far in their respective seasons (Villarreal, 2017). This is especially true in the *All Stars* spin-off where the first three winners are white and the show has been called out numerous times via social media for its lack of racial diversity in the “Hall of Fame” (Villarreal, 2017). The official gay neighborhood among the Chicago streets, known as ‘Boystown’, accurately represents the lack of acceptance to racial diversity within the LGBTQ+ spectrum all within its city limits (Blair, 2016). Blair brings forward the discussion of a hate crime that takes place within the neighborhood parameters in 2009, which causes the tenants to create a walk patrol to ensure the safety of the neighborhood (2016). While the walk patrol consists of members of the

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neighborhood's population, a large amount of the committee is white, homosexual, cisgender males, with minimal outliers (Blair, 2016). During the safety walks, members of the group approach people of colour walking in the streets and tell them that they need to "keep walking" or "go back to their own neighborhood", which furthers the inherent racism within the LGBTQ+ community itself (Blair, 2016). If people of colour that identify within the LGBTQ+ spectrum cannot be accepted within the likes of Boystown, we cannot expect mainstream society and/or neighborhoods to treat them in a way that makes them feel as if they belong.

In addition, Nolke (2018) speaks to how a double niche audience (i.e. a black member of the LGBTQ+ community) is essentially a marketer's nightmare unless it is a thriving audience that will constantly consume. It is hard enough to adhere to a niche audience, but to have to directly relate to a marginalized member within it creates difficulties and furthers heteronormativity (Nolke, 2018). Intersectionality is defined in the academic world and ceases to exist in the court of law – when there is no name, you are not able to see a problem, which means it cannot be solved (Crenshaw, 2016). The issue at hand is addressing intersectional frameworks, making it a known term and thus being able to potentially avoid it. Crenshaw explains intersectionality as an issue with framing, meaning that "without frames that are large enough to address all the ways that disadvantages and burdens play out for all members of a particular group, the efforts to mobilize resources to address a social problem will be partial and exclusionary" (2016). Continuing with this idea of issues with the frame of discrimination not being big enough, Crenshaw provides an example of Emma DeGraffenreid, a black woman who tries suing a manufacturing company for not hiring her based on her gender and her race. She brings her case forward to a judge claiming that this company did not hire her based on her gender and race, but the case is dismissed due to the fact that the employer in question hires both

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people of colour and women, both historically and present day (Crenshaw, 2016). The important thing to note here is that the judge is overlooking that the people of colour being hired are men and the women being hired to work for the company are white (Crenshaw, 2016). This brings forward the notion of intersectionality, since Emma is quite literally standing at the intersection of race and gender, while traffic (or in this case job opportunities, legal support, etc.) is passing by.



A visual representation of intersectionality

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Research Questions

- 1) How has *RuPaul's Drag Race* shifted from a LGBTQ+ focused audience to construct a mainstream (heteronormative/cisgender) audience? How has the construction of the heteronormative market impacted the franchise's content and promotional material?
- 2) How does the lack of diversity among the queens presented on the later seasons of *RuPaul's Drag Race* perpetuate mainstream standards of beauty and femininity? Do people who identify with more than one attribute that classifies them as marginalized (i.e. a person of colour within the LGBTQ+ community) consider themselves to be a further outlier due to this lack of representation?

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Methodology

The following is a content analysis of RPDR season one and season nine. In terms of the seasons, I narrow my focus on promotional material (the initial photo the franchise releases of the queens competing in the respective season), episode content (i.e. types of challenges and judges' critiques), types of queens competing and lastly, the range of prizes for challenge winners. For the purposes of this study, focusing on the first and ninth season of the franchise is critical due to the network in which they are originally broadcast on: season one on Logo TV and season nine on VH1 – this difference in network showcases the shift from a niche specific network (Logo TV) to a more mainstream counterpart (VH1). Logo TV describes its viewers as the cultural elite, a mixture of social, savvy audience of gay trendsetters and a “straight audience that wants to be ahead of the curve” (Goldmark, 2015, 504). While VH1 acts as a sister provider to MTV adhering to “Gen Mix” in which they define them as those in between Millennials and Gen Xers (2019) with no particular distinction of sexual or gender identity. Analyzing the promotional material is vital to understand the shift in marketing strategies because it provides great insight into the consuming audience in which RPDR is interested in marketing towards. The promotional material/photoshoot for each season tends to represent the queens competing in that specific season and allows for them to showcase who they are as queens. Each season has a theme or colour scheme in which the queens execute a look worth showcasing that fits within the given parameters.

The episode content is one of the most important components for analyzing the shift between a niche and a mainstream marketing audience – this is the literal content/product which the producer (RPDR) believes the target consuming audience is interested in. Focus is given to the types of challenges the queens participate in, the way in which the judges critique the queens

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for their looks/mannerisms to allow for the potential insight to the changes the franchise experiences over the years and changing to VH1. Tying in with episode content are the types of prizes which the queens are competing for on a challenge to challenge basis – these prizes also represent the direct sponsors of the television franchise. This will showcase if the companies that are sponsoring the television series focus on a LGBTQ+ specific audience or if they are more mainstream adhering to an ‘imagined’ cisgender/heterosexual consumer base.

Lastly, analysis of the variety of queens competing in their respective season is essential for understanding the audience in which the franchise is looking to market their competition show towards. The types of queens will speak to the intended consuming audience due to the relatable nature in which television series, especially competition based, seek when casting their respective contestants (Villarreal, 2017). While casting directors sift through submissions for the show, it is vital to have characters or competitors in which people are able to relate to or at least see an admirable quality in them creating a fanbase behind them – this creates an investment within the consumer audience and people tune in to watch their favourites compete (Taylor, 2004). The types of queens competing also are suggestive of the potential shift from a variety of queens genre to a hyper-feminine queen archetype.

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Findings/Discussion

While analyzing the promotional photos for season one and nine of the RPDR franchise, Sut Jhally's documentary *The Codes of Gender (2010)* acts as a framework for understanding what each photo is expressing in terms of race, gender and sexuality. Sut Jhally explains how advertising is a sense of commercial realism, in the sense that ads tend to be a direct representation of what is widely accepted and/or known within a given culture (Jhally, 2010). He explains how the human body is a text in which it is able to communicate significant meaning about cultural norms of gender, race and sexuality (Jhally, 2010). Some of his main findings include how female hands are presented in popular ads, self-touching being equated to femininity, laying down being an act of submission and head tilts or the body being off balance exuding uncertainty and shame (Jhally, 2010). Jhally also explains how the body being off balance represents vulnerability, especially towards potential attackers since the individual is not firmly planted on the ground, and in turn showcases the potential to be taken advantage of/dominated (2010). These findings help explain the promotional photographs for each season of RPDR where underlying racism, sexism and heteronormativity are present while utilizing these defining attributes.

Each season the television franchise releases a photo spread that features the queens competing for the first time representing the RPDR brand (Villarreal, 2017). The first season takes the theme for their promotional photoshoot of "best drag". The promotional ad features the queens in their best drag which creates a celebration of them as queer artists and allows for them to express themselves in a way in which they want to be viewed by the consuming audience. The season one contestants are able to clearly identify how they define their drag and who they are as queer artists by presenting their best drag looks to the consuming audience. With the opportunity

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for interpretation with the theme, the queens are also able to exercise their creativity and further their drag persona and can distinguish themselves as a front-runner in the upcoming competition. This also gives queens the opportunity to express their heritage, much like BeBe Zahara Benet, pictured second from the left – the wig she features in the promotional look is tied into several of her African heritage looks that she features throughout the season, thus informing her culture with the simple addition of said wig in the promotional look.

With respect to Jhally's framework, it is worth noting that Nina Flowers, pictured second from the right, is the only queen to be holding her hands together in a strong and assertive manner, which according to Jhally's findings is associated with masculinity (2010). Nina is known for her gender-bending drag archetype and she is able to display a strong, masculine energy with her hand gestures, while she is standing leaning on one leg, which exudes uncertainty and a lack of power. When a masculine counterpart is featured, they tend to be upright and proud of their "essence", rather than the feminine counterpart who is submissive and seen as less than in comparison (Jhally, 2010). The rest of the queens featured in this promotion are either engaging in self-touching or have their hands in a way that is not in control, which a masculine counterpart would partake in (Jhally, 2010). For instance, Victoria "Porkchop" Parker, pictured first on the left, has her hands above her head and is leaning her weight onto one leg, which creates the essence of vulnerability and not able to defend oneself from an attacker since they are left defenseless with hands away from body and both feet not solid on the ground directly linked to femininity in the eyes of Jhally (2010).

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Figure 1: Best Drag themed promotion (season one)

BeBe Zahara Benet, pictured second to the left, has her hands behind her back and out of frame, which resembles being tied behind her back and can be equated to submissive behaviour (Jhally, 2010). This speaks to her blackness and how she is a subordinate in comparison to the other queens pictured – there is a slave-like aspect to her hands being tied behind her back (Jhally, 2010). Also, her legs are off-balance, which creates a further notion of submissiveness and weakness in comparison to not only the outside viewer, but to the other queens that do not possess the same blackness as her (Jhally, 2010). Hands behind the back or out of frame resembles as sense of sexual energy as well according to Jhally, which he further discusses is quite common with women of colour who are featured in popular advertisements (2010). Ongina, pictured third from the left, is the only queen to not be making direct eye contact with the camera, which according to Jhally, creates a disconnect from the outside consuming audience and exudes self-doubt and uncertainty (2010). Ongina is a queen of Asian descent and according to Jhally, the lack of direct eye contact shows the disconnect to the outside, white power-driven consuming market (2010).

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Figure 2: Monochromatic themed promotion (Season 9)

Season nine's promotional look features the theme of "monochromatic" meaning wearing separate articles of clothing that are the same colour. The queens' looks, featured in figure two, are an elevated and modern execution of drag compared to the first season. The queens' looks are hyper-feminine and provide a wide range of colour to catch the consuming audience's eyes. This attention-grabbing promotional look allows for the photo to stand out and to highlight the now more well-known RPDR name. While the looks featured in the season nine promotional photoshoot are fierce, it is hard to not notice that the queens represent the colours of the pride flag. It is unclear if this is done intentionally or not, since the theme is clearly labelled on all forums as "monochromatic" with no specification of "rainbow" or "pride". However, it is convenient that the first season in which the franchise moves over to a mainstream network, that it further perpetuates the direct relation between members of the LGBTQ+ and the rainbow colour scheme. While previous seasons did stick to a colour scheme that complimented each other (i.e. season six using black and white as their colour scheme), this is the widest range of colours incorporated into a promotional photoshoot, that just so happens to fit the colours of the rainbow (Villarreal, 2017). While the pride flag may be seen as a generalized marketing strategy

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to affiliate a company with the LGBTQ+ community, it can also act as a sign of safety for people who identify within the LGBTQ+ spectrum. A semiotic analysis conducted by Jennifer Wolowic (2016) reveals that young people use the rainbow to construct meanings related to affiliation and positive feelings about themselves, different communities and their futures (568). The decision to use the rainbow colour scheme may potentially be linked to the connotations it possesses to the members of the LGBTQ+ community to present oneself as an ally or safe space (Wolowic, 565). Featured in figure three is a visual representation of the queens with their respective colour groupings to resemble the pride flag.



Figure 3: Monochromatic promotional photo in rainbow layout

Drawing from Jhally's popular advertisement framework, the queens pictured are all standing off balance, again, which exudes feminine energy and the queens are all either participating in self-touching or dainty/fragile hand gestures (2010). Two focal points of the image above are the two queens laying down in the front of the rest, Valentina on the left and Nina Bo'nina Brown on the right. Both are queens of colour, Valentina being Latinx and Nina being black, and according to Jhally laying down is directly associated with submitting to a higher power or surrounding audience (2010). In the initial promotional photo, figure two, the

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two queens are directly placed in-front of white queens, which emphasizes the submissive attribute which visual minorities associate with white people in mainstream culture (Jhally, 2010). A major difference between the season one and season nine promotional photos is the way in which they feature the respective season androgynous queen – Sasha Velour, pictured on the far left in the above photo, is much more stereotypically feminine in comparison to how Nina Flowers is featured in the season one promotion. Sasha is off-balance, hands to her side, but are placed out and defenseless, with her toes pointed in, thus equating an easy takeover for a masculine counterpart (Jhally, 2010).

Utilizing Gross' (1991) theory of “audiences consume within their immediate environment” this furthers the stereotype of how LGBTQ+ focused content must include the rainbow and/or pride flag to be identified as such. To put theory into practice, companies change their logos to rainbow during pride month in June to showcase their support for the LGBTQ+ community – this is very similar in the sense that upon first glance, you are able to identify the image(s) with the LGBTQ+ community and essentially know what to expect in that sense. Since they are drag queens, it should be quite obvious that it will have something to do with LGBTQ+ culture, but the addition of the rainbow colour scheme allows for cisgender/heterosexual culture to firmly know that the franchise falls within the LGBTQ+ culture. Yaqin (2007) also brings forward the notion of how Babrie's release of the Razanne doll further perpetuates western stereotypes of Islamic culture, this is very true with the release of the promotional material for RPDR season nine. Adding the rainbow colour scheme demonstrates that this is one of the main ways to identify as a LGBTQ+ type of program and then furthers the stereotype that is created in the mainstream culture. Much like pink-washing, which refers to the way companies add the breast cancer awareness pink ribbon to products, promotions, etc. to show their support for the

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cause (Lieber, 2018), but do not usually do anything more than just create awareness via the addition of the ribbon on their packaging (i.e. do not contribute proceeds to research or change their packaging to help the environment) many companies are taking part in rainbow-washing. They simply add a rainbow colour scheme to their logos/packaging during Pride month and do nothing else to actually help fund LGBTQ+ charities or anything closely related. In this way, one could say that RPDR is adhering to a heteronormative, capitalist marketing strategy to further their relevance in the newfound mainstream audience.

One of the main critiques of pink-washing is the pink ribbon is deemed to be the “bully of the ribbons” and tends to outshine other ribbons bringing attention to other causes (i.e. Lupus) and creates a separation between causes (Lieber, 2018). This is relevant to the idea of rainbow-washing and how the rainbow flag is ultimately the flag/colour scheme that corporations chose to include in their pride marketing strategies, while there are flags that represent bisexuality, transgender people, pansexuality, asexuality and others within the LGBTQ+ spectrum. The rainbow flag acts as an all-encompassing pride representation in mainstream media, when in fact it is solely the representation for gay people – much like how the pink ribbon is often seen as a representation for cause marketing, where in fact it is only bringing forward awareness for breast cancer specifically (Lieber, 2018). This speaks to a much larger issue of how a certain symbol can represent a cause or association to a topic, much like how the rainbow flag is seen to represent pride as a whole, but is neglecting to represent several other groups that identify within the LGBTQ+ community, thus making the rainbow flag the “bully of the flags”.

In regard to the promotional material, it is important to analyze the types of queens that are being featured in both season one and season nine. There are many parallels between the two seasons with the types of contestants featured, but more importantly with the particular queens

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being celebrated. For instance, arguably the front-runners for the season one crown are BeBe Zahara Benet - a queen of colour that is known for serving looks and maintaining the feminine fantasy – and Nina Flowers – a queen known for her androgynous looks and outside of the conventional drag box thinking. Both queens dominate their season and are able to set themselves apart from the rest of the contestants countless times, which is why they are awarded the final two spots competing for the crown, which is decided by a final lip sync. Ultimately, BeBe Zahara Benet is victorious, but both queens prove that either of them could win the crown and represent the RPDR name with honour and dignity. Both queens being people of colour, Nina from Puerto Rico and BeBe hailing from Cameroon, prove that beauty and success are not defined by whiteness, which allows for viewers to either see themselves in the contestants and deem themselves as beautiful or at least become aware of an alternative to the mass media depictions of beauty and the whiteness that was often associated with it.



Figure 4: Nina Flowers



Figure 5: BeBe Zahara Benet

Much like season one, season nine has two front-runners that resemble Nina Flowers and BeBe Zahara Benet: Shea Couleé and Sasha Velour. Shea Couleé is a queen of colour, much like BeBe who embodies black excellence, poise, attention to detail and all-around solid drag, while

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Sasha Velour prides herself on her genderbending drag aesthetic and her intellectual, outside of the box thinking. Mirroring a very similar storyline to the first season, season nine's Shea Couleé and Sasha Velour as two of the strongest competitors of their season, having two team main challenge wins together, but are also constantly celebrated as individual contestants. Specifically, Shea Couleé has four main challenge wins, which has only been attained two previous times by Sharon Needles and Alaska Thunderfuck (Villarreal, 2017). However, Sasha Velour is the winner of the ninth season the RPDR franchise. Sharon Needles and Alaska Thunderfuck both won their respective season in which they win four main challenges, but Shea Couleé is not as fortunate with her attempt for the crown. Sharon and Alaska are both white, cisgender queens, while Shea is unapologetically a queen of colour. Sharon and Alaska also both compete on the television series while it streams on Logo TV, while Shea competes on the ninth season that has since shifted to VH1 - this is where intersectional framework comes into fruition. Shea is constantly compared to her fellow season nine contestant, Nina Bo'Nina Brown, with the production team seeking to push a storyline by either bring the two queens of colour together or pitting them against each other. The two queens have opposite drag aesthetics, but some how are being categorized as like queens due to their reluctant behavior to separate themselves from their blackness. They both present themselves as proud people of colour within the LGBTQ+ spectrum, thus production takes it upon themselves to place them in the same category and push a storyline in which RuPaul and judges alike make comparisons. Shea goes as far to say in episode nine, "If you liked my performance, my name is Shea Couleé and if you hated it, my name is Nina Bo'Nina Brown" which is Shea's way of creating comedy from the ongoing comparison between the two queens of colour.

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As a viewing audience, consumers tend to root for contestants in which they see themselves connecting to or can relate to the way in which they carry themselves and want them to be celebrated (Villarreal, 2017). Minority groups tend to fixate on mass media representations of themselves to help mold who they are or who they think they are able to become (Shimizu, 1386). Mass media representations of said minority group also allows for an individual consuming the content to understand how the mass culture sees them, which may lead to either positive or negative outcomes based on the type of representation (Shimizu, 1386). Cordelia Fine brings forward the ideology of thinking of our brain as a series of inputs and outputs, where media is a representative of an impact on our brain and we can think of representations in the media as inputs (2010). If the representations of gender in the media are skewed, then the input that our brain receives can change the way we view gender and can also change the way we behave (Fine, 2010). For example, if a young black gay man tunes in to RPDR and sees a queen like Shea being highly celebrated and awarded throughout the series, but unable to win the crown in the end, they can potentially see themselves as not enough in the end due to the notion that people tend to accept the unjustified representation rather than challenging it.



Figure 6: Sasha Velour

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While Sasha did in fact prove to be a strong competitor for the crown, Shea proves herself time and time again that she is deserving of the top spot. Arguably, one could say that Shea Couleé could never win the crown after the shift to VH1, but could have won while being streamed on Logo TV. The mainstream is becoming more and more accepting of queerness and the LGBTQ+ community, but according to Crenshaw (2016) intersectionality creates multiple barriers in which people of oppression squared are able to thrive. Since Shea is a queen that identifies within the LGBTQ+ community and is a person of colour (POC), it would be too much too quickly for the mainstream market to accept her as the face of the already marginalized brand of RPDR. Shasha is a safe bet in terms of being accepted as the winner of the ninth season, while she does serve gender-bending looks, she is white and the mainstream market is much more accepting to one axis of oppression (identifying within LGBTQ+), rather than multiple intersections.



Figure 7: Shea Couleé

Tsai's (2010) commentary on how homosexual representation must adhere to a level of comfort, Sasha is a comfortable choice in which the mainstream audience is more accepting of, thus allowing for the television series to thrive in a heteronormative market. Also utilizing Um's

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(2014) theory of mainstream advertising and how when members of the LGBTQ+ community are included in ads, they are predominately white and subjectively attractive. He goes on to explain how modern media only celebrates the exceptionally attractive and white members of LGBTQ+ and use them as a representation of what LGBTQ+ culture is, neglecting the members that do not exclusively fall in to these defining traits (Um, 2014). This furthers the intersectional framework that Shea Couleé experiences when she is unsuccessful with her journey for the RPDR top spot – she is unable to be a representation of the LGBTQ+ culture in which the mainstream market would be willing to accept and celebrate, due to her blackness. The cultural gaze of the audience perpetuates the racist and racialized sociocultural construction of black masculinity and the circulation of stereotypes ever-present in cultural imagery (Tinsley, 135). Shea is the first queen in season nine to reach three main challenge wins, including consecutive ones, making her a clear front-runner in the competition (Villarreal, 2017). Shea is also tied with season five winner, Jinkx Monsoon, for the third best pre-finale track record on a season behind season six winner, Bianca Del Rio and season two's runner-up, Nina Flowers (Villarreal, 2017). Blair's analysis of Boystown is a prime example of how racial minorities are othered within the LGBTQ+ community, thus not even being accepted within their own marginalized community, let alone within the mainstream.

Continuing on the notion of how intersectional framework plays a role in determining the winner of the ninth season of RPDR, the contestant Peppermint provides great insight as to how intersectional framework acts as a deterrent. Peppermint might not be seen as a front-runner in the earlier parts of the season, but proves herself to be a “lip sync assassin” (a strong lip syncing queen that eliminates many competitors) throughout the season (Villarreal, 2017). With the final twist of having a lip sync tournament for the crown, she is seen as a heavy favourite for the

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crown, as well (Villarreal, 2017). Like Shea Couleé, Peppermint is a queen of colour, which allows for the axis of oppression discussed with Shea to translate to the justification as to why Peppermint would be unable to win the crown over Sasha Velour – however, in addition to her blackness, Peppermint identifies as a transgender woman, thus adding another axis of oppression. Peggy Orenstein brings forward the example of clear distinction between feminine and masculinize qualities with how Caitlyn Jenner presents herself to the public after transitioning from male to female (2016, 14). Further discussing Caitlyn’s cover of *Vanity Fair* magazine, Orenstein discusses how as a man “he uses his body and as a woman, she displays it”, which speaks to a larger illustration of femininity and masculinity: women are objectified and men are celebrated (2016, 14).

While Peppermint claims the runner-up position in the season, she proves her lip sync abilities time and time again where many viewers think she has a great chance at claiming the top spot for the season. However, the consuming audience neglects to take into account the mainstream shift of the franchise and how a black trans woman would not be a place of comfort for many within the cisgender/heteronormative landscape. Utilizing Gross’ (1991) theory pertaining to audiences being able to consume within their immediate environment, people from areas in which they are not exposed to queer people of colour may see queens such as Peppermint to represent too much of a deviation from heteronormativity. With a consuming audience is not able to relate to something, they have a much harder time finding comfort within the subject at hand (Gross, 1991). This furthers the notion of essentialism and how certain characteristics are assumed to exist and essential to its nature and present in everyone who is a member of said category (Butler, 1990).

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Figure 8: Peppermint

Furthermore, no queen has yet entered as an openly trans competitor before entering the competition, while some have come out as trans on the television series (Villarreal, 2017). No queen at the time of season nine has been openly trans upon entering (Villarreal, 2017). The RPDR franchise has received backlash for its erasure of trans women and people of colour with the queens they feature in terms of gender expression (Villarreal, 2017). While many queens have come out as trans, non-binary, etc. post production, but say they did not feel as if it was a safe place to express their gender identity within production of the television series (Villarreal, 2017). According to Tom Sandercock, the “cisgender gaze” integrates itself in mass media and creates a distinctive attitude towards transness being present (2015). Much like a level of comfort with the subject at hand, the cisgender gaze creates a relationship with trans people presented in media that is sympathetic, rather than celebratory – since trans people fall out of the cisgender identity, they are thus seen as less than in comparison (Sandercock, 2015). RuPaul has infamously tweeted “you can take performance enhancing drugs and still be an athlete, just not be in the Olympics” in reference to transgender queens competing on the self-proclaimed

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“Olympics of drag” television series (Villarreal, 2017). Peppermint comes out as trans to her fellow contestants as well as production in the sixth episode of the ninth season.

Peppermint in a way is forced to partake in disidentification, meaning she is required to suppress her gender expression to adhere to the heteronormative landscape in which RPDR has enforced. While she does talk openly about her transness, it is for a minute at most and is never a topic of conversation again throughout the season. Disidentification essentially means that people can be robbed of self-expression because they are trying to fit a societal stereotype (Munoz, 1999) and I firmly believe that Peppermint forces herself to forget her transness while competing due to the lack of acceptance for transgender queens. She openly discusses how there is confusion of how a trans woman can be seen as a drag queen and how there is a lack of acceptance within the drag community for transgender queens, which leads me to believe that in order for her to succeed on the television series, she does not focus on her transness and makes it a backburner identity or disidentifies.

Daems (2014) highlights the shift in terms of variety of the types of queens that are selected to compete in the competition television series – once an open call for all types of queens to thrive is now becoming mostly a group of queens that all fit the feminine ideals of a heteronormative culture. The first season of RPDR showcases a large range of queens from androgynous to hyper-feminine, from slim to plus-sized and from a variety of races. Season nine has some diversity in terms of race, but seems to almost have a certain type of queen in which they are looking to profile: fishy queens, meaning queens that resemble the heteronormative ideals of what femininity and constructs of what being a woman visually is (Villarreal, 2017). Valentina is a prime example of this fishy identity and is seen as an amateur in comparison to the other queens, since she has only been doing drag for 10-months prior to the filming of the show

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(Villarreal, 2017). Valentina is often ridiculed and judged by her fellow contestants for being so new to the drag scene and being given the opportunity to compete in such a highly respected drag competition (Villarreal, 2017). Other contestants get frustrated with the judges' commentary towards her that usually pertains to how gorgeous or feminine she is.

Tseelon (2016) identifies a "sissy-male" as someone who is constantly presenting themselves in terms of body language as feminine and/or fragile. Aja, another contestant on the ninth season, infamously said "she [Valentina] could walk out there in a fucking diaper and they'll be like 'Valentina! Your smile is beautiful'", which showcases her frustration with the judges solely focusing on Valentina's appearance, rather than talent. Sasha Velour also jokes about Valentina's progression throughout the competition with, "a queen who combines all the excitement of smiling with the thrill of just standing there" while introducing Valentina to a live audience. This introduction allows for people to focus on Valentina's looks first, rather than what she has to say, which is what Dames (2014) argues is the shift for the types of queens that are being featured in the RPDR franchise. Valentina receives many comments pertaining to how she "maintains the fantasy of a woman" while on stage and receiving feedback from the judges. Valentina often keeps her arms prim and proper, presented in figure nine, while she is receiving feedback for the challenge at hand, and the judges often comment on how she always maintains the feminine qualities and stature, which "takes them to where they need to be" when seeing a drag queen, meaning they are here to see a female impersonator, so act in the culturally defined way a woman is seen to present themselves.

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Figure 9: Valentina

Valentina is the show's first first-generation Mexican queen to participate in the competition-based series, which brings forward the potential for the infamous "Latin-edit" that the show tends to give Latinx queens. The "Latin-edit" is a term derived from the fan discourse that consists of highlighting the language-barrier (if present) or fixating on moments when it becomes obvious that their cultural ideals do not line up with the show's American standards (Villarreal, 2017). This edit is included to make Latinx queens cognizant of their separation from the franchise's American heritage and subjects them to potential ridicule due to their outlier attributes. Towards the beginning of the series, there are attempts to give Valentina the "Latin-edit" where she openly discusses how she prays to a Virgen de Guadalupe candle when she is feeling stress or seeks guidance – she also expresses that she deems Virgen de Guadalupe as her drag mother, someone that helps new queens come to fruition or acts as a staple of guidance for queens, in a way because she does not have a physical drag mother. Shimizu brings forward the ideology of going beyond understanding minorities who are presented in popular culture as

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simply complicit with the white male authors of popular culture (2004, 1388). Trinity Taylor, another contestant on season nine, openly comments on the interaction, “you crazy, bitch! That’s some crazy shit”, which allowed for Valentina to experience the outsider experience since it did not line up with the franchise’s American ideals/practices.

Villarreal (2017) brings forward the concept that “Valentina is required to be extra-fluent in the show’s American pop culture references, but the show and its viewers do not have to be accepting of even aware of hers”. This is evident with the choices of Valentina’s outfits for both challenges and for the main stage runway – she often states that her looks have Latinx inspiration, mostly paying homage to the legendary Selena. In season one, Nina Flowers is often encouraged to provide looks that are rooted in her Latinx heritage, which allows for her to present her identity as a proud Latinx queen, but since the shift to a mainstream network, there is now a different approach given to feedback on looks. With Valentina often referencing her looks to Selena, a famous pop Mexican-American singer in the 90’s, people often comment on how she is full of herself and delusional (Villarreal, 2017). Villarreal provides a refreshing take on how this comparison to Selena is important, “Valentina was commenting on the scarcity and rarity of Mexican-American and Latinx-centered representation in the media” (2017). Valentina is forced to identify with such a high-profile name because there are no other recognizable names in which she would be able to identify with or pay homage to without having to explain who they are.

According to Villarreal, Valentina’s run on the show reveals the show’s double-standard concerning who gets to define themselves as exceptional (2017). Valentina is given a “winners-edit” rather than a “Latin-edit” meaning she is shown mainly in a positive light, where she is dominating challenges, runways and receiving nothing but encouraging feedback from the

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judging panel (Villarreal, 2017). Throughout the season, it is clear that Valentina is a front-runner due to her high placement in challenges and never gracing the bottom three in any challenge, until when she landed in the bottom two (Villarreal, 2017). Queens tend to be safe on their first bottom two placement, especially when they are lip syncing against someone who has been in the bottom several times and when queens such as Valentina are dominating the competition (Villarreal, 2017). However, Valentina is sent home after her first-time lip syncing even though she receives a very positive edit throughout the season. Fans speculate this is because of her Latinx identity and how she is not willing to disidentify with it in order to gain popularity and acceptance within the heteronormative landscape (Villarreal, 2017). Shimizu brings forward the idea that mass media needs to do a better job of humanizing members of minority groups to not only allow for accurate representation, but to create relationships with the consuming audience that are beneficial and allow for growth (2004, 1387). Much like Shea Couleé and Peppermint, Valentina would not be as widely accepted in the new-found mainstream market as the likes of Sasha Velour would be.

In terms of episode content, there are some major changes to how the show is formatted from season one to season nine. When the queens receive their new challenge for the week, they receive “She mail” paying homage to *America’s Next Top Model’s* “Tyra Mail” outlining what will take place that day in competition (Villarreal, 2017). This is seen as offensive language to the transgender community in specific and not inclusive commentary, so the challenges are no longer presented in this way (Villarreal, 2017). Another major change in the formatting of the television series is the inclusion of the “Pit Crew”, who are men in their underwear, with varying brands from season to season due to sponsorship deals with the franchise. They deliver certain items that the queens will need for that week’s challenge or are there to assist with mini-

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challenges. An example of a way the Pit Crew is incorporated into mini-challenges during previous seasons is playing match-maker with their underwear: the queens are asked to identify and match identical underwear between 20 Pit Crew members that are asked to remove their pants when the queens ask. Season nine largely dissociates with the inclusion of the Pit Crew and this is due to the lack of comfort with sexualizing members of the LGBTQ+.

The mainstream market relies on a sex-sells advertising strategy, in which heterosexual couples are displayed in intimate settings and/or positions. However, Caboksy argues that the mainstream market is uncomfortable with including members of the LGBTQ+ community in ads due to the potential of displayed intimacy (2017). Caboksy argues that members of LGBTQ+ may be included in ads, but the mainstream audience is not ready to experience LGBTQ+ intimacy or the sexualization of homosexuals (2017). This is clearly evident in season nine with the minimal usage of the Pit Crew – these men are primarily there for the eye-candy aspect in their underwear to provide assistance, but also to be simply hot men in underwear to look at for the once LGBTQ+ specific market. The men also tend to have very defined and muscular body types, which fits the idealized beauty standards of the heteronormative media world, but potentially takes away from heterosexual men's masculinity (Caboksy, 2017). Caboksy argues that men are able to comprehend and deal with LGBTQ+ representation in media when they fit the flamboyant and/or comedic stereotype because it either heightens their own masculinity or does not make them question their masculinity whatsoever (2017). In the first season of RPDR, there are two members of the Pit Crew that are very well-built, black men that are not easily labelled as flamboyant and would be passable in heteronormative culture. The show has since gathered new members of the Pit Crew that fit a more stereotypical homosexual, where they are sometimes wearing makeup, provide sassy banter or talk about their sexuality openly, where as

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on season one they were solely incorporated for the purposes of being visually pleasing. The once racially diverse Pit Crew has also been white-washed over the years of production, adhering to societal ideals and acceptance of white homosexuals.

The types of challenges are also another way in which the franchise has changed drastically from season one to season nine. During season one, the challenges were focused on drag and the craftiness it takes to be a successful drag queen and this is shown in the very first challenge where the queens are required to use items from the dollar store to create a runway ready look to present to the judges. Throughout the first season, the queens are forced to constantly challenge themselves and to showcase their varying skills in terms of make-up, hair and fashion. The variety of challenges portrayed within the first season showcases the everyday life of a drag queen where they may be forced to be crafty, think on their feet with improv skills and execute looks that will make people talk. However, season nine takes a much different approach when coming up with their types of challenges, meaning the franchise is looking to adhere to a heteronormative stereotype of LGBTQ+ culture. The challenge types vary from showcasing their favourite Lady Gage looks to creating a 90210 spin-off series, which represents a generalized depiction of what the mainstream market potentially stereotypes members of the LGBTQ+ to be interested in. While the season still does highlight the queen's craftiness, makeup skills and fashion taste, it does it in a way that is trying to fit a mold of which the franchise believes the 'imagined' heteronormative market stereotypes members of the LGBTQ+ to be interested in. Shaw brings forward the question: "if it is not broken, why try and fix it?" (2009, 232), which allows insight to how mainstream culture operates – if people are willing to consume certain content in the way it is being presented, why try and change it? In a way, RPDR constructs the idealized version of which the mainstream market views members of the LGBTQ+

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and in turn constructs the identity of what the mainstream market is seeking to consume via gay culture.

A staple in RPDR is the “ball challenge” in which the queens are given an overarching theme with sub-categories in which their runway looks must adhere to – this is paying homage to the cult-classic *Paris is Burning*. Season one queens took part in the “Absolut Drag Ball” in which they are given an Absolut Vodka flavor in which they are required to design their looks around this colour scheme and incorporate the physical fruit featured into their final garment. Absolut Vodka is an ongoing sponsor of the RPDR franchise and is deemed to be “the gay vodka” according to Tsai (2010) in the way that the market to members of the LGBTQ+ community as well as the mainstream market. However, in marketing to the LGBTQ+ they are seen as the gay vodka brand and they have utilized this association to their advantage with opportunities such as RPDR (Tsai, 2010). Comparatively, the season nine queens participate in the “Gayest Ball Ever” in which they have a look that is inspired by the pride flag, a unicorn themed look and a look inspired by one of the members of the Village People. The looks all adhere to a generalized stereotype of the rainbow and fitting the typecasts that are discussed when assessing the promotional material of the ninth season. The ball episode tends to be one of the more celebrated episodes of the season, but the ninth season received a lot of backlash for quite literally just calling it the “Gayest Ball Ever” and perpetuating dominant stereotypes of the LGBTQ+ community (Villarreal, 2017). During this episode as well, RuPaul introduces Michelle Visage, a judge on the panel, as “trapped in the body of a female, my gay best friend, Michelle Visage”. This is specifically problematic because Peppermint, an openly transgender contestant, is competing in this challenge and is dismissed for the sake of an inappropriate joke/introduction. This idea of “gay best friend” also heightens Tsai’s commentary revolving

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around levels of comfort with LGBTQ+ members and the mainstream market (2010), meaning the “gay best friend” is a sense of comfort for the heteronormative/cisgender ‘imagined’ audience.

Lastly, it is important to focus on the shift with the types of prizes that are featured for the queens to win each challenge. During season one, the queens compete for LGBTQ+ specific prize packs (i.e. a vacation package with AI+Chuck Travel) where these types of companies are able to reach their intended niche audience in a much more direct way via a television series, where a lot of LGBTQ+ specific companies are not featured throughout mainstream networking. For the newer seasons, AI+Chuck Travel is no longer a feature sponsor for travel packages/prizes, however, RPDR now features prize packs donated from the likes of Air Transat. It is important to note that AI+Chuck Travel is out of business as of 2017 and coincidentally that is the same year that RPDR makes the change to VH1. The franchise was once a safe place for LGBTQ+ specific companies to thrive and to market directly to their niche audience, but since the mainstream shift, conventional marketing/companies reign supreme.

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Conclusions

The content analysis of RPDR season one and season nine provides insight into how the franchise is shifting from a LGBTQ+ specific market to adhere to an ‘imagined’ heteronormative and mainstream audience. As a niche market focused franchise, the series highlights so many things that are important to LGBTQ+ culture and allows for LGBTQ+ specific brands to thrive and advertise where they were not widely accepted in mainstream media. My analysis compares the types of queens that compete in the first and ninth seasons of this franchise and showcases the shift towards fishy queens, where hyper-feminine queens are celebrated more than the once diverse drag scene that used to be showcased. There is great discussion about how race plays a major factor in the types of queens that are able to win the competition, and this is directly tied in to intersectional frameworks. The mainstream market may be ready to celebrate LGBTQ+ people, but more specifically, they are ready to celebrate white members of the community.

The RPDR franchise is a way in which LGBTQ+ culture is able to be featured in an ‘imagined’ mainstream market, but through analysis of promotional material, episode content and the types of queens featured within the franchise, it is evident that the series is seeking to fit a preconstructed stereotype created by the imagined heteronormative/cisgender audience. Through the act of defining the ‘imagined’ mainstream audience, RPDR is essentially defining a market based on what they are not, much like how masculinity tends to be defined in modern culture. Utilizing the findings of O’Connell, femininity is easily defined within a cultural landscape, thus in turn defining what masculinity is based on what femininity is not – much like this, the LGBTQ+ market is easy to identify and label as to what they want or expect when being marketed to, thus in turn the ‘imagined’ mainstream/heteronormative consumer is defined on what is not identifiable with the LGBTQ+ community. The promotional photos included for both

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season one and season nine showcase racism and tensions with sexuality, but more importantly speak to society's obsession with hyper-femininity – consumers are able to understand that someone is trying to resemble a woman or express femininity if it adheres to already existing characteristics of submissiveness, fragility and uncertainty as mentioned by Jhally.

The ninth season of the series rainbow-washes its content wherever it can to fit the common stereotype of LGBTQ+ people and the ongoing debate of corporations solely putting a rainbow on their logo to show their support for LGBTQ+, but nothing else that actually adds to societal progression. For example, the rise in numbers of black trans women that are dying and the lack of media reporting it perpetuates the cisgender gaze that currently dominates the mass media realm (Taylor, 2004). The switch from Logo TV to VH1 creates a sense of identity crisis where RPDR use to adhere mainly to LGBTQ+ audiences and allows for celebration within the marginalized community, but now is adhering to a much larger 'imagined' cisgender/heterosexual audience that needs reassurance that they are being marketed to as well. This shift has allowed for the types of prizes that the show gives away as challenge win prize packs to differ from a once LGBTQ+ focused to a more mainstream and dominant corporation focus, thus leading to the closure of many LGBTQ+ companies, namely AI+Chuck Travels.

Overall, the television series is supposed to be put in place to celebrate LGBTQ+ culture and to be a progressive step in which minorities are being showcased in mainstream media, but they are not being conveyed in an accurate or justified manner. Queens such as Shea Couleé, Peppermint and Valentina are essentially robbed of their chance to win RPDR due to their race, and in Peppermint's case specifically, her transness. Speaking to intersectional framework yet again, the mainstream market may be able to handle or celebrate members of the LGBTQ+ community, but only if they are white – the axis of oppression is too much for the 'imagined'

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heteronormative/cisgender audience to handle. Reverting back to the idea that members of the mainstream market are only able to consume content in which they are comfortable consuming, thus having too many factors working against you is not relatable and/or familiar with the mainstream market, creating a lack of consumer culture in which minority squared is able to thrive (Gross, 1991)

This research can be furthered in the future to have a more in-depth discussion pertaining to trans queens partaking in the world of drag and truly being welcomed and/or celebrated. Peppermint brings it up briefly in the ninth season when she comes out to the other contestants and production, but there is much more potential in terms of the discussion around gender identification in the world of drag that is worth investigating. Since season nine, there has been a spin-off of *All Stars 4* where a contestant enters production being an openly trans woman, Gia Gunn, so it would be worth while looking into her journey on the spin-off and seeing how her journey panned out given the circumstances. Also, with *All Stars 4*, there is a double crowning of winners where a white queen and a black queen are named victorious, so I think it could be interesting to look in to the dynamic of how a queen of colour is finally able to be successful in the *All Stars* spin-off, but only with her white counterpart there to share the throne.

The RPDR franchise is a small, but important part of a much bigger issue with the LGBTQ+ community and not fitting in to the heteronormative mainstream landscape. In a way the franchise is seen to be progressive and shine light on to man issues that affect LGBTQ+ people, which is true. On the other hand, the show is not an accurate representation of all queer culture, where only certain types of members of LGBTQ+ are being accurately represented or given the opportunity to showcase their talents/livelihood. There is a much larger issue at hand where companies are taking advantage of gay culture when it benefits them (i.e. pride

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campaigns) where they are not being called out for changing their ways of marketing to actually benefit members of the LGBTQ+ community. Instead, companies insist on rainbow-washing their logo and creating the image as if they are allies. It would be worthwhile investigating how many companies are truly LGBTQ+ allies and support the community year-round rather than when it is convenient for branding and to incorporate good looking, white models into a variety of campaigns.

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